

Cultures of Psychology

by Stanley Richards

One problem with trying to 'integrate' focusing into other modalities is that it is a tactical move with questionable strategic consequences. By this I mean that in attempting this kind of unified view we must realise that we are not only dealing with an operational pragmatism. Therapists belong to movements. They are trained in certain schools of thought and practice; they belong to different 'cultures' and, generally speaking, are tied emotionally to the family in which they were born, trained and raised as therapists. Psychotherapy is not a universal science; it is a cultural movement, which has now diversified into many cultural clans. It triggers in human beings all the vices and virtues of belonging, of loyalty, of us and them. This has been characteristic of psychotherapy movements from the very beginning.

IAFOTS, the International Association of Focusing-Oriented Therapies, speaks of an attempt at an overall unified view, of trying to transcend these cultural allegiances. One consequence of this attempt to integrate focusing into other modalities is that the people who are trained in focusing seem to suffer a sort of ongoing identity crisis. They don't know whether they are a distinct style of therapy or just an attitude.

Psychotherapy, being a diverse collection of cultural clans or 'schools of thought', therapists need to know to which school of thought they belong; and clients need to know with whom they are dealing. If you belong to a school of thought you have a recognisable uniform. One uniform means 'nurse'; another uniform means 'policeman'. A man with a stethoscope hanging round his neck means 'doctor'. You know with whom you are dealing by the uniform.

Most importantly, the clan or culture to which you belong governs the way you think. Most psychotherapists are not philosophical pragmatists – they are idealists who are wedded to certain ideas or images, as one would be to a nation or to a family. The fact is the various modalities in psychotherapy do not think alike. An operational principle like: 'priority must always be given to the person' means precisely that working with dreams does not automatically come first, changing thought patterns or images is not a methodological priority. And to someone belonging to the behavioural clan, persons don't exist, only behaviour. There is no way to escape these clashes of fundamental orientation and it is better to state them boldly so that the debate has the bite of reality.

In the attempt to integrate it into the general field, focusing tends to disappear into the wallpaper and lose its distinctive incisiveness. The same thing has happened with Roger's work. In becoming so influential throughout the general field it has been watered down, losing its very distinctive nature so that now its original incisiveness is hardly recognisable. The Rogerian ethos so ubiquitous that no one notices it. Even Analytical Psychologists have dropped Jung's 'patients' and now have 'clients'. But no one stops to think how remarkable this is or who originated the change.

Gendlin's idea is that all avenues of psychotherapy can be useful. *But the criteria of usefulness are defined by focusing principles*, that is to say, by the movement of the felt-sense and experiential shifts. These very principles are what make the integration of focusing with other modalities theoretically difficult. They have quite different criteria.

It is my view that before any attempt at integrative work a therapist must first be fully experienced in the application of focusing *unmixed* with any other application; and it seems to me this means promulgating focusing as a distinct modality. Experience in the working of focusing in its refined form is necessary for the practitioner to grasp its working exactly. Only then can the therapist afford to loosen up without losing sight of the focusing factor as a continual reference point in the work.

The second half of Gendlin's major work 'Focusing Oriented Psychotherapy' is devoted to what he calls a 'unified view of the field through focusing and the experiential method'. In other words 'the field', the various modalities, are to be viewed and thus unified through our knowledge of focusing.

I would simply like to stress the obvious: that 'the field' is here evaluated *through* focusing and the experiential criteria. This surely places focusing in a unique position *vis-à-vis* 'the field'. It is not just another modality; it claims to be the bottom line. It is that by which we can evaluate what we are doing, no matter what we are doing. It is not just something added on to the modality we are practicing. It is central – the various other modalities are not. This is quite a valid position to take, but in doing so we should not be shy of what it implies. If we are going to operate on that hypothesis then let's not be modest about it.

If you would like to comment on this article, you can email the author at:

strich@paradise.net.nz