Relational Empathy: Beyond Modernist Egocentricism to Postmodern Holistic Contextualism

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Abstract

Considering empathy as both construct and human activity, the chapter contributes to the fast-growing discussion of the limits of the indigenous psychology of the Western world in addressing the relational needs of its members. In particular it examines the limits of Modernist individualism as a paradigm for understanding human experience, and on ways Western psychological descriptions and understandings of empathy in particular — whether Rogerian, psychoanalytic, existential or more generic — have obscured some of the important ways empathy functions in human relationships. Because of its position as a modernist, objectivist discourse, Western psychology has been slow to recognize how its own modes of enquiry and expression have limited our understanding of relational realities. The chapter extends understanding of empathy beyond its present role as the "royal road to understanding" of individuals by approaching it from within somewhat different frames of reference from those traditionally characteristic of psychological discussion. Empathy is then discussed in a more multi-levelled or holistic way as a way of being in, belonging to and knowing the relational contexts in which human beings find ourselves situated. Although the main arguments expand understanding of empathy as a therapeutic process the chapter concludes with a discussion of the social conditions of late twentieth century psychology. As our world undergoes what some consider to be the birth pangs of its first truly "global civilization", in which national, ethnic, religious, gender, class, boundaries are being shifted and erased on unprecedented scales, all of us, whether in formerly tribal or collectivist societies or in Western individualist ones, will need new postmodernist psychologies with which to navigate this new world.

In the beginning was the relationship--Martin Buber

Aims of the chapter

The chapter is intended to contribute to the fast-growing discussion of the limits of the indigenous psychology of the Western world in addressing the relational needs of its members. In particular it will examine the limits of Modernist individualism as a paradigm for understanding human experience, and to bring into focus some of the ways Western psychological understandings of empathy have obscured some of the important ways empathy functions in human relationships. I also intend to show that, because of its position as a modernist, objectivist discourse, Western psychology has been slow to recognize how its modes of enquiry and expression have limited our understanding of relational realities. I want to extend our understanding of empathy beyond its present role as the "royal road to understanding" of individuals by using somewhat different frames of reference from those traditionally characteristic of psychological discussion. Although my main goal will be to expand understanding of empathy as a therapeutic process I hope to reach further. As our world undergoes what some consider to be the birth pangs of its first truly "global civilization", in which national, ethnic, religious, gender, class, boundaries are shifting on unprecedented scales(Anderson, 1990), all of us will need new postmodernist psychologies with which to navigate. The ability to empathize with other individuals and other groups may become the most important interpersonal and even political competence. Increased attention to mutual empathy could lead those of us in Western societies to recover some of our sense of connectedness to each other, our communities and our world, a recovery which, given the West's current disproportionate impact on global realities, may prove vital to future survival.

Western Indigenous Psychology

The Modernist world view.

In recent years a strong case has been made by many scholars that the world-view which frames mainstream Western psychology is culturally and historically situated, representing the interests, investments and experiences of participants in a world dominated by particular ways of thinking and living. (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, & Tipton, 1985; Berman, 1989; Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Levin, 1987a; Shweder & Bourne, 1982; Taylor, 1989). This world view — referred to as modernity— has been shaped by, "the Copernican revolution, Newtonian physics, Cartesian epistemology and metaphysics, humanism and its political revolutions, and the beginning of the technological, industrial and commercial transformations of society." p. 2 (Levin, 1987a). The view of the person at its center also reflects the major philosophical commitments of modernism. The idea that people have something inside called "a" self or "the Self" which contains a deep interiority which is contacted through introspection, self-examination or some other form of "inward vision" would have been incomprehensible to Europeans before St. Augustine It still is to some peoples from non-modern societies untouched by the Western world view.

Western psychology, particularly clinical or applied psychology and psychiatry, is a quintessential modernist enterprise. It is based in modernist views of the nature of human reality which appeared first as scientific rationalist epistemology, and became culturally institutionalized though socializing processes. Its origins were the Italian Renaissance and came of age during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe and North America. See for example [Berman, 1989 #12; Cushman, 1992 #11; Gergen, 1991 #1; Giddens, 1991 #49; Guisinger, 1994 #29; O'Hara, 1984 #13; Showalter, 1985 #9; Shweder, 1982 #8; Smith, 1994 #83; Taylor, 1989 #16]. Participants in the process of psychotherapy in Western societies, whether clients or psychotherapists, perceive and experience themselves in terms of an indigenous Western psychology. They see themselves as distinct, autonomous agents, separated from other individuals by a whole array of boundaries of identity. Whether as the European self, full of

dangerous tensions between aggressive and sexual drives barely contained by the rational will, or as the American self, enthusiastic, achievement-oriented, and transcending its animal baseness through hard work and religious commitment Western modernist society has valorized individual experience and has placed at its center a monadic, decontextualized person who is virtually unencumbered by any a priori external constraints. (Cushman, 1992)

Shweder and Bourne refer to the Western modernist self, at the center of its own world-view as *ego-centric* to suggest its individualistic, abstract and decontextualized paradigm. They contrast this with a quite different psychology found in pre-modern Europe and in non-modernist societies like India and Mexico, which they term *sociocentric*, to describe a frame of reference that sees personhood as deriving from participation in the world holistically, concretely, and contextually. (Shweder & Bourne, 1982) I shall use Shweder and Bourne's language here.

In ego-centric cultures people tend to think of themselves as possessing a self within, which speak of in terms that are "both context-free and abstract." Ideal human relationships are seen as voluntary contractual agreements between two or more individual and autonomous agents. People in America, for instance, where the individual is supraordinate to any social role or obligation, will say that they *have* a family. In sociocentric India the hierarchy of who belongs to what is reversed and people say and feel at the deepest levels that they *belong to* their families.

In ego-centric cultures people take it for granted that there is a split between their inside self and the outside world. The view of the self-as-monad becomes everywhere projected outwards, idealized, and codified. Once institutionalized in parenting habits, in religious, educational and political traditions, or incorporated into art, language and other symbols of consciousness, this monadic self is then re*internalized* . (A very modernist word) It becomes the experienced reality, the master narratives, the automatic social patterns and habits of life in that society. Situated within such an all encompassing milieu, where everything mirrors the conceptual and perceptual effects of modernism, inhabitants of twentieth century Western democracies come to take this mechanistic and ego-centric, atomized world as "the way things

are," and it is very difficult, if not impossible for us to imagine how it could be otherwise. We highly prize such values as the sovereign rights of individuals, celebration of individualism, egalitarianism, glorification of the solitary hero, tolerance for difference, protection of freedom, encouragement of individual creativity and expression, and the idealization of reason and objectivity. At the same time, threats to sovereignty, or demands made upon one solely by dint of birth, social context or other non-chosen circumstances, makes Westerners very uncomfortable. To have ones unique inner subjectivity dismissed, violated, expropriated or, as the French psychoanalyst Henri Wallon says, "confiscated," is experienced as an almost unbearable psychic loss ((Berman, 1989 p. 36)) Some have suggested that this self versus other dichotomy has lead to a chronic vulnerability in the Western psyche, leaving it with an insatiable need for psychic affirmation from significant others, debilitating shame if the object of insult, rejection or abandonment, and an almost inconsolable longing for recognition and connection with significant others. The prevalence of neurotic illness, narcissism, depression, self-disorders, relationship breakdown and addictive disorders has been linked by many authors to this fundamental rupture between selves and their contexts.((Levin, 1987b)

The rise of mechanistic psychiatry

Psychiatry and its descendents became a prominent aspect of Western medicine contemporaneously with the rapid and brutal industrialization of Victorian life. The exponential rise of psychiatry from the mid-eighteen hundreds to the present day can be seen as a response to an epidemic of madness which Victorian psychiatrists believed to be occurring in dark irrational counterpoint to the unprecedented advances in political, scientific and technological achievement. It should not surprise us, then, that at a time when mechanistic thinking was resulting in engineering feats the likes of which the world had never seen, that when medical men— and they were men— turned their attention to psychology, they would see human experience as a matter of *mechanisms*, and would seek "to apply rigorous scientific methods to

the study of insanity rather than rely any longer on ... vague humanitarian sympathies...of their predecessors." (Showalter, 1985 p 104) Henry Maudsley (1835-1918), editor of the *Journal of Mental Science* and founder of the psychiatric Maudsley Hospital in England asserted, "Lunatics and criminals are as much manufactured articles as are steam engines and calico-printing machines....They are neither accidents nor anomalies in the universe, but come by law to testify to causality; and it is the business of science to find out what the causes are and by what laws they work." (Maudsley, 1874)(quoted in Showalter (1985)) With its emphasis on individualism, rationalism, objectivism and instrumentalism, an emphasis which as we shall see continues to the present, modernist Western psychology overwhelmingly views human life from within a mechanistic psychology of individuals. To modernist psychologists the clear identification of boundaries separating classes and categories of nature is vitally important, nowhere more so than in the categories which separate health from disease and rationality from irrationality. To the founders of modern psychiatry the most important therapeutic skills were diagnostic objectivity, analysis and instrumentalism. By contrast subjectivity, sensitivity and compassion were seen as soft, even feminine, placing the doctor at risk of being drawn across the boundaries separating him from his patient.

Even though it might have been "just what the doctor ordered" for people suffering psychic disconnection, empathy had no place in such a psychology. Indeed, there was not even the word "empathy" in English until 1912. The opinion held by the Victorian founders of Western psychology was that it was dangerous for the healer to come too close to the patient, threatening the physician with contamination by those afflicted patients who inhabited the "borderlands" or who had traversed the boundary between sanity and madness.p. 120 (Showalter, 1985)

<u>Empathy in ego-centric psychologies</u>

Empathy, the Oxford English Dictionary tells us, "refers to the power of entering into the experience of or understanding objects or feelings outside oneself." Originally coined as the English equivalent of the German word "einfuhlung," when it first appeared in English, empathy had nothing to do with psychotherapy. Rather it was an epistemology —a way of knowing— and referred to the process by which artists and poets gained access to their subjects. John Keats' empathic ability to merge the boundary between himself and his subject matter is legendary(Rollins, 1958). When first discussed as "the process...which plays the largest part in our understanding of...other people"(Freud, 1920 p. 110, fn.2), a scientifically valid method of observation by which psychiatrists could gain understanding of the inner world of their patients, it was highly suspect.

As Herbert Feigl explained,

> "...We recognize that, especially in the psychology of human motivation, and in psychodynamics generally, empathy is an often helpful and *important heuristic tool*. But we realize also that empathetic judgements can go woefully wrong, no matter how strong their intuitive conviction. Empathy may be a source of knowledge, in that it suggests hypotheses. But it is not self-authenticating. (Feigl, 1959). (emphasis added)

Gradually, however, within the field of clinical, if not experimental psychology, empathy came to be highly valued as a "source of analytic data" (Levy, 1985), a means of learning about the contents of other minds, particularly in client-centered therapy, psychoanalysis and other depth psychologies.

Early conceptions of empathy have a decidedly modernist ego-centric feel. Freud describes empathy as a "mechanism by means of which we are enabled to take up any attitude at all towards another mental life" (Freud, 1920). Of what he called one of the "necessary and sufficient conditions" for personality change in psychotherapy, Carl Rogers states,

> The state of empathy or being empathic, is to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy, and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto, as if one were the other person, but without ever losing the "as if" condition. Thus it means to sense the hurt or the pleasure of another as he senses it, and to perceive the causes thereof as he perceives them, but without ever losing the recognition that it is is as if I were hurt or pleased etc. If this "as if" quality is lost, then the state is one of identification. (Rogers, 1959) p.210-211

At first Rogers was the consummate modernist (O'Hara, 1994). He saw empathy as an instrument. The therapist gained access to the inner meaning world of the client in order to reflect these meanings back to the client for use in reconfiguring his or her authentic sense of self. He believed that empathy, like any other reality existed in some quantity that could be accurately and quantitatively measured. The image of a clearly bounded individual discerning the inner world of another without becoming contaminated by whatever is found there, clearly echoes earlier Victorian nervousness about blurring important boundaries. Truax and Carkuff, students of Rogers, took objectivism even further and developed the widely used scale for quantifying the ability for empathic understanding. The 8-point scale measured how skillful people were in paraphrasing another's statements (Carkuff, 1969; Truax, 1961). More recently client-centered therapists have attempted to take Rogerian empathy beyond formalizable operations to include "emergent modes of empathy." But the frame of reference is still individualistic, and atomistic. Bozarth states that therapists must "develop idiosyncratic empathy modes predicated upon the therapist *as a person,* the client *as a person,* and the *therapist-client interactions*. (emphasis added)"(Bozarth, 1984). Mechanistic metaphors feature prominently. One writer suggests 'the therapist's understanding depends on his sensory perception of the signals the client relays," (Vanaerschot, 1990) Whatever the metaphor, characteristic of early

Rogerian conceptions of empathy is an egocentric image of two separate individuals wherein one —the therapist, attempts to discern something happening within the skin of the other—the client.

It is not only Rogerians who have described empathy in ego-centric terms. In recent years empathy has taken center stage among psychoanalysts, particularly the object relations analysts. Greenson describes "building up of a working model of the patient"(Greenson, 1960), and Buie suggests that "the empathizer compares[...]behavioral cues with one or more referent in his own mind which could be expressed by similar behavior. He then infers that the inner experience of the object qualitatively matches that associated with his referent" (Buie, 1981) The work of Kohut has been particularly influential. At first Kohut too, regarded empathy as a heuristic tool, as a means, along with introspection, of knowing and understanding the inner motivations and intentions of his patients. Empathy, he said, "is the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person," (Kohut, 1984) and more recently Kohutians Rowe and MacIsaacs have defined empathy as the "analyst's attempt to experience as closely as possible what the patient is experiencing." (Rowe & MacIsaacs, 1991) In obvious attempts to avoid charges of being "soft," non-scientific, or non-objective, writers about empathy go to great pains to emphasize that "empathy is neither a mystical, artistic or innate ability" (Levy, 1985), and to distinguish between pathological and healthy forms of therapist-client connection. (Buie, 1981). Concerned with protecting the ability to move into and out of an empathic state, early on Kohut resisted suggestions that empathy should be used to gratify a patient's longing for reconnection to the mother-bond, and emphasized the importance of analytic neutrality(Kohut, 1959). Later in his career, however he conceded that it was "normal" for the analyst to prize the patient the way a mother might prize her infant (Kohut, 1984). As if suspicious of any psychic organization not based upon the modernist ideal of individuation, psychologists from analytic, existential and humanistic traditions have characteristically insisted that empathy be clearly differentiated from the more regressive process which Buie calls "merging".

The pervasive bias in Western modernist psychology in favor of objectivist-materialism and instrumentalism has obscured the extent to which the psyche in ego-centric contexts differs from that of people in sociocentric societies. Such as bias significantly limits access by Westerners to realms of empathic knowing beyond the customary limits of objectivism.

Sociocentric Psychology

Self-assertive and self-transcendent states

There is good evidence that people are not all in the world in the same way and that the way people experience themselves and their phenomenal world has differed historically across time and still differs from context to context. In familial, tribal or communitarian cultures cultures, such as Indian peoples of South America, and Indians from Asia, consciousness of self is more holistic, contextual and concrete(Shweder & Bourne, 1982). Similar observations have been made about women in North America, whose sense of self is more holistic and concrete than American men(Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Clinchy & Belenky, 1987; Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Surrey, 1991). Similar differences have been noted for Africans and for African Americans (Jones, 1991).

Connected consciousness

It is through the work of artists and poets that we can best grasp the differences in consciousness between sociocentric people and Western modern (Romanyshyn, 1982). The yarn paintings made by Huichol Indians of Mexico, the ephemeral sand paintings by North American Navajos and Tibetan buddhist lamas, the arabesques of Islam, the calligraphy of Taoist penmen, and Australian aboriginal art reveal a way of being in nature in which the categories, distinctions and discontinuities common to Western consciousness, are nowhere to be seen.

Such imagery provides us with an inside view of what Shweder and Bourne mean by sociocentric or holistic consciousness, It conveys the organic connections and shifting

interpenetrated realities where boundaries, if they exist at all, are shown as fuzzy, and situational. This is a world where reality is experienced as an emergent process, not a clearly delineated stable product. This is a fluid, sensuous, undulating world in which the mind moves from place to place, and figure and ground continually shift in response to its own particular priorities. Attention is self-transcendent or holistic —directed outwards beyond the skin of individual persons to involving itself in the group, community, and natural world. Viewers, like the artist, are drawn into the imagery and find themselves drawn beyond their own skin, dwelling in the swirling interconnected world. Such a state of mind, in which familiar ego-boundaries are loosened, may be referred to as self-transcendent or holistic consciousness. It is not limited by fixed boundaries of time or space. Long dead relatives or folks across the globe are as real and as palpable as some solid object held firmly in hand. Self-transcendent consciousness does not experience itself standing apart from the world but as constituent parts of yet larger wholes.

The art most highly revered by modern Westerners, by contrast, strikes one immediately as far more self assertive. From the Renaissance onwards we see distinct images of recognizable individuals, their faces bearing the hallmarks of a complex and unique interiority. The self-portraits of European masters look directly out at the viewer as if to say, "Here am I," conveying an impression of a consciousness which pays attention to unique personhood, and identity. Modernist consciousness sees itself self-assertively —as foreground— the rest of creation set behind, as background.

We are describing here more mere difference in conceptualizations about universal realities, but different phenomenal worlds are so differently structured and populated as to constitute different lived versions of reality.

Empathy Through a Sociocentric, Holistic Frame

Now, in the last decade of the twentieth century, it is clear that the extreme of Western modernism in psychology is coming under scrutiny, driven largely by cross-cultural and "cross-genderal" critiques of mainstream thought.

Beginning in the mid nineteen seventies Carl Rogers' work began to shift in a sociocentric direction, as his interest moved beyond its earlier individual focus to the workings of relationships, groups, communities and ultimately societies. (Bowen, O'Hara, Rogers, & Wood, 1979; O'Hara, 1983; O'Hara, 1989; O'Hara, 1984; Rogers, 1977; Rogers, 1980) It was this work which compelled us to rethink traditional Rogerian ways of understanding empathy.

In 1977, five members of the Center for Studies of the Person of La Jolla, California, myself and Rogers among them, were invited to convene a large community workshop in Brazil.(Bowen, et al., 1979) On that trip we were plunged into intensely intimate engagement with people whose world view was far less egocentric than ours. When we presented our ideas we were chided for what Brazilian participants experienced as our exaggerated individualism. This cultural collision made it necessary to acknowledge the limitations of the ego-centric world-view for addressing relational realities. Our understanding of empathy in particular became greatly enlarged.

Empathy as contextual awareness.

Empathy has a more respected role in sociocentric human relations than it typically does in egocentric cultures. Not seen as poor relation to objective interpretation, many non-Western societies encourage the development of empathic skills and consider the ability to empathically apprehend realities —activities like meditation, astrology, poetry, the Yogas and so on —as an essential element of adulthood and an indispensable part of a leader's education. The Japanese *omoiyari,* for example, is characterized by a heightened sensitivity to and concern for the feelings, and thoughts, needs and moods of subordinates in hierarchical relationships such as psychotherapy.(Roland, 1988) p.82. The Japanese take it for granted that those in authority will have *omoiyari* toward subordinates. Indigenous American tribal people also consider modernist Westerners somewhat handicapped by their limited empathic abilities.

It was decidedly humbling for the Rogers team attempting to transfer to non-Western societies the importance of empathy in client-centered psychotherapy, to discover that workshop

participants in sociocentric cultures were routinely more empathic than we were —sometimes to a startling degree. Time and time again people —therapists and lay-people— were able to sense feelings, thoughts, movements and dynamics of both individuals and groups with astonishing perceptivity.

I suggest that the highly developed empathic abilities of people in sociocentric cultures is a new kind of empathy for Westerners, a full understanding of which requires a shift from egocentric to sociocentric thinking. It requires a shift from over-reliance on abstract, analytic, contractual thinking to a consciousness that is more contextual, holistic and synthetic.

Relational Knowing

From within a sociocentric frame of reference, it becomes possible to understand empathy as a state of consciousness. It is a way of perceiving and knowing and a way of being connected to other consciousnesses, by which individual human beings gain access to the inner worlds of other individuals and to the workings of relationships, and whole ecologies, of which they are but parts. It is also a way through which relationships as entities, including groups, and communities can themselves become aware of themselves as wholes. Often this is accomplished through myth, ritual and other holistic forms of knowing. Let me give an illustration:

In one Brazilian workshop the community building process had bogged down in a tension-filled impasse as the group tried to come to a consensus about whether Carl Rogers should make a formal presentation of his ideas. There were many strong and conflicting feelings. Some felt Carl owed them a presentation. They had paid for the workshop so that they could hear him speak in person about client-centered therapy. Others argued that a formal presentation was a poor substitute for a lived experience of Rogers' work and wanted the unstructured process we were engaged in to continue. On the surface the conflict could have been easily resolved. The group could have voted on it and abided by the majority. Or those who wanted a presentation from Carl could have heard him by themselves while everyone else did something else. But the

group saw itself *as a whole* and could not agree to either of these positions. People resisted any moves to fragment the group. Just when one person would seem to be suggesting a reasonable solution someone else would point out what was wrong with it. This commitment to a somewhat chaotic and frustrating process of hearing everyone out, of staying open to the participation of even the small inarticulate voices or those who spoke in poetry and metaphor starkly contrasted the problem-solving focus more typical in groups of Europeans or North Americans. Rogers worked tirelessly to empathize with each of the individual participants, often capturing the meanings of people speaking a foreign language with exquisite accuracy. But even this was insufficient to break the impasse.

The second night people went to bed exhausted and angry. They were becoming disillusioned with the much vaunted "person-centered process." The following morning three individuals described dreams they had had during the night. All three dreams were similar and obviously referred to the impasse within the community. One featured a battle between a white polar bear and a Brazilian *mae do santo* or shaman. The shaman, a priestess of the Afro-Brazilian religion Macumba, was refusing to let the polar bear pass into her house. She finally consulted *exu*, a powerful spirit entity who according to Macumba tradition guards cross-roads and door-ways, who told her that as long as she gave *exu* his usual ration of *cachaça* (Brazilian rum), the polar bear could pass safely into her home.

All the Brazilians agreed that the reason for and the solution to the impasse was obvious. We Americans, especially big white bear Rogers, were trying to penetrate Brazilian society with our ideas. The shaman was there to help mediate the passage by insisting that traditional sensibilities be honored and that the local gods were given their due. The Brazilians interpreted the dream sociocentrically, as providing information in symbolic and metaphoric form which could be used as a guide for community action. That evening a local *mae do santo* arrived at the workshop, presumably invited by one of the participants, and the whole company participated in a ritual of passage, giving exu his cachaca and tobacco and invoking the help of the various

Macumba entities in unlocking our community's impasse. The ceremony went on well into the night.

The next morning the community meeting began a little later than usual. The change in atmosphere within the group was apparent at once. In place of tense competitiveness people were laughing and joking. Even Rogers, who until then had been a little uptight and stiff, was visibly looser and more playful, seated less formally, obviously enjoying his physical closeness to a couple of Brazilian voluptuaries. People talked about their experiences of the Macumba ceremony and as we approached lunch, the group had come to an agreement about Rogers' presentation. There was a clear consensus that nothing Rogers could say in a formal presentation could come close in richness to the experience of the last forty-eight hours.

When we first had experiences like these we did not know what to make of them. At first mysterious, we gradually realized that they represented holistic ways of knowing, which were commonplace among many of the world's inhabitants. The dreams and their interpretations by group members revealed an awareness of the community's "group mind," caught in a group-level identity conflict. We gradually came to see this, and other experiences similar to it, as evidence of a form of group-level empathy that was symbolic, holistic and trans-individual. The level of action based upon that empathy was also holistic, involving participation, symbol, and myth or story and ritual.

To us this was a new form of empathy, which occurred on conscious and unconscious levels. It provided complex, subtle and *reliable* knowledge, in imaginal, metaphoric and narrative form, about the community as a whole which could inform appropriate, coordinated and graceful action by the whole.

Conscious groups —groups in which many people are aware of group level phenomena—seem also to produce more than the ordinary share of exceptional individuals, suggesting to us that when a person can align themselves with the movements in the larger context without losing their unique perspective, they appear to "know" more and perform better than they ordinarily

do.When a mediocre basket ball player plays on a team which is flowing, she can play far beyond her own personal best. Collaborative learning can lift an individual student's performance several levels higher than usual; actors perform better when the audience is with them. It may also account for such frequently observed (and often trivialized) phenomena as "women's intuition," when a wife may have knowledge of her partner's extramarital affair even though he is going to great pains to conceal it. In one organization I consulted with, a car with Texas license plates in the company parking lot resulted in highly secret reorganizational plans being sensed by the whole organization seemingly at the same time. One employee told me. "Everything had been very normal, too normal recently. Everybody knew something was up, but nobody knew what. When we saw the Texas Lexus we figured out we were on the auction block." A month later the company was bought out by a Texas conglomerate.

Different communities understand such phenomena in different ways. In our Brazilian group, explanations would have included the activity of the spirits of the departed. My own British grandmother would have attributed such knowings to a "sixth sense." Organizational psychologists believe this to be a somewhat regressive state which recapitulates experience in the family. The group becomes "mother" and individuals merge with the group the way the infant merges with the human mother(Schein, 1985). Polanyi differentiates between focal awareness and subsidiary awareness. When we are focally aware of a whole, we are subsidiarily aware of its parts. When we focus on a part we are subsidiarily aware of the whole. In Polanyi's view modernist over-emphasis on attention to the parts has lead to a disregard for the skills required for tacit knowing of the whole. He suggests that knowledge breakthroughs are made when scientists or poets who have retained their ability to "indwell" in the fuzzy world at the boundaries of consciousness and are able to dissolve their attention past the focally apparent particulars to gain a glimpse of some until now unapprehended greater whole. In moments like these we know more than we believe we know because it is possible to shift attention from the parts to the larger whole if we believe there is a reason to do so.(Polanyi, 1958).

This ability to shift attention back and forth between the parts and the wholes to which they pertain might account for some of the seemingly magical and even *paranormal* breakthrough events that occur in psychotherapy, such as when the therapist and client simultaneously share the same image, when the therapist makes an "out of the blue" statement that proves to be profoundly appropriate, or when the therapist knows in advance that the client will soon begin share some until now hidden story. A sociocentric view would explain this not by suggesting that the therapist is "inside the skin" of the client, but inside the skin of the relationship, of which he or she is a part. Bozarth has referred to this phenomenon as "emergent" empathy (Bozarth, 1984). I prefer the term relational empathy, to signify the sociocentric, relational nature of the process.

A Relational World View

Relational empathy.

When looked at through a sociocentric lense, empathy provides a means of knowing relationships not only egocentrically in terms of its particulars, but also holistically as wholes which are more than the sum of their parts. In their ground-breaking work examining the role of empathy in the psychological development of women, Stone Center theorists have recently shifted descriptions of empathy in a sociocentric direction by referring to it as the "*relational* skill par excellence."(Jordan, et al., 1991)

Holism, sociocentric awareness and trans-individual empathy.

For psychology to make a shift from an egocentric to a sociocentric understanding of empathy requires new holistic language. Holistic thinking distinguishes between those characteristics, and behaviors which give something (entity, object, thing, category, being etc.) "wholeness," and those associated with its "partness" (Koestler,). For example, a football quarterback, when known as a whole would be known in terms of features unique to him such

as personal biography, sense of humor, talent, speed, throwing accuracy, and stamina: those qualities he exhibits as an individual. He can, however, also be know as a *part* of the team. In this case qualities such as being able to get along with team-mates, engendering team spirit, planning plays within the abilities of his team, loyalty, and displaying the ability to inspire other players would be important. One familiar way to speak about this distinction in Western psychology would be to distinguish between his "self" and his "role". But in both cases he is obviously him*self*. The difference is between the aspects of self we see when we look at him as a whole and those we see only when we pay attention to the way he functions as a part. For instance his performance can be measured in terms of his individual statistics —the usual American way— or can be assessed in terms of how well his performance contributed to the performance of the whole team— the sociocentric cultural preference. Furthermore, his unique individual characteristics, as seen egocentrically, may be true of him in any context whereas the characteristics he demonstrates as "part" will change from context to context as a function of the wholes he is a part of. A careful analysis of how he acts in one context —say on the field— will be a poor guide to how he might be in others, like at home or in church. The same distinction can be made about he team itself. How it will play against another team will be a function both of its own limits and the opportunities provided by the context.

Koestler calls those states of mind and activities that have to do with a sense of ones wholeness, individualistic or self-assertive and he call states of mind and activities that have to do with the sense of participation and becoming one with a larger reality, self-transcendent or integrative. Wholeness is associated with sovereignty —individual identity, self-expressiveness, initiative, integrity, aggression, uniqueness, discrimination, delineation, clarity, separateness, analysis, either/or thinking, competition, distinction, specificity and boundedness. Partness or integrative behavior is associated connection —self-transcendence, empathy, listening, understanding, synthesis, cooperation, oneness, merging, diffuseness, participation, integration, belonging, both-and, generality, love, intuition. For any human entity, be it person, group, family,

community or tribe, both partness and wholeness are two faces of being. Like the two-eyed Buddha, who has one eye facing inwards to itself as a whole, and the other facing outwards to the cosmic whole to which it belongs, human consciousness knows itself both atomistically or self-assertively and relationally or self-transcendently.

Relational knowing

Human knowing is a *relational* activity. It implies both a *knower* and a *known* —we are always conscious of something, or better yet with something. It includes sensing, recognizing, and making sense and above all meaning of experience. Consciousness implies both self-transcendent and self-assertive states of mind. It requires the ability to discriminate between bounded categories and among entities, and it requires the ability to synthesize and integrate. It involves awareness of oneself in the process of knowing—how ones knowing is influenced by the contexts in which one is knowing—and it involves being swept away, out of oneself into the expanded contexts of life. By a continuous process of selection, categorization, and organization and synthesis consciousness weaves on-going representations of reality out of symbolic interpretations of inner and outer worlds and the dynamic relations between them.

Individual sovereignty versus group-think

Participatory or relational consciousness, where individual selves are known more through the way they participate in larger wholes than as unique individuals worries many Westerners. The idea of shifting attention away from individuals —decentering to postmodernists —looking at them only as clues to the workings of larger systems— raises fear that the intrinsic worth and sovereignty of individuals might diminish. Well known examples of the dehumanizing effects of perverted collective consciousness such as Fascism, Communism, the Salem witch trials, or the Inquisition, provide historical evidence of the dangers of "group-think," and support for the importance of creative egocentric individualism. More recently

feminist critiques of the hegemonic patriarchal world view, ethnic critiques of Euro-centricism, poststructuralist critiques of master narratives in general, and Kuhn's demonstrations of the conservative nature of scientific paradigms, offer further caution about the hegemonic properties of collective thinking. Psychologists, too, resist sociocentric consciousness when they feel it disregards the need for people to individuate and be cherished as beings-for-themselves. Client-centered psychologist Barrett-Lennard for instance, despite having focused his work on families and communities, shares what he calls his "prejudice", when he admits that he has "largely by-passed" the bulk of the systems theory discussions because he fears that "the subjectively experiencing person [may be] lost or underemphasized, in terms of agency. (Barrett-Lennard, 1984)

Such critics are right. If consciousness is limited to its wide-angled, sociocentric state, the only aspects of a person's being considered important are those having to do with his or her participation in larger contexts, and human beingness reduced to serving as mere clues to the workings of larger orders, then unique, creative selfhood and the view of self as autonomous agent, may indeed become invisible. People raised in sociocentric communities are not immune from pain at having their individual needs ignored. The *ie* stem family system of Japan requires that individual selves, so sacred to participants of Western democracies, become submerged in order to take their place in a larger, interpenetrated kinship system. Japanese psychologists report considerable psychic costs, seen in paralyzing guilt, repressed hostility and other psychological disturbances, that can be directly correlated with the submersion of individual expression (Roland, 1988). Across the world practices such as arranged marriages, obligatory veiling of women, forced political re-education, censorship, ritual genital mutilation, and many others, while certainly providing a sense of psychic coherence for sociocentric peoples, strike individualistic Westerners as unbearable assaults upon self.

This tension becomes resolvable not by taking exclusively either egocentric or sociocentric positions but by thinking holistically, and by striving to understand persons neither as abstracted

from their contexts nor as subordinated to them, but as both whole unto themselves and as active participants and co-creators of the contextual wholes which they inhabit. Furthermore, every situation is unique, every context providing novel and endlessly permutational possibilities which may in turn also be known uniquely by different individuals.

What any particular person is aware of, and the degree of focus or expansion of their awareness, will depend upon processes (physiological, neurological, conceptual, emotional) going on within that individual, and upon processes occurring within the larger context impinging upon him or her. It will also depend upon on relational conditions existing at the boundary between the individual level and the higher relational level. For example, if I am physically well, alert, safe, beloved and accompanied, I might have awareness of myself both egocentrically and sociocentrically. I may be conscious of myself as a unique individuated center of knowledge and agency. I know what I am striving for and the meaning it has for me. At the same time, I am aware of the way I am interacting with others. I can also be aware of how others are experiencing me. I may even understand relational movements in my marriage, the organizational dynamics at work, and the political or cultural movements in my community all at once —life as a fully experienced whole. On the other hand, if I am afraid, in pain or ill, my attention may be focused upon myself, even on some isolated body part, to the exclusion of all other dimensions. This shrunken awareness might be due to dysfunctions in the larger system--such as family or political oppression, or to dysfunctions within me--such as a biochemical disorder, or previous psychological trauma.

Psychological wellness as a function of degree of appropriateness in focus or inclusiveness of consciousness.

This leads us to the possibility of looking at psychological functioning of an individual or group not only in egocentric structural terms but also in relational and contextual terms. Healthy functioning implies that consciousness will include all contextual dimensions of concern within a given situation and at a given moment. And, if we are not to become overwhelmed by

endless contexts after context, we will exclude those elements that are irrelevant to present purposes. Much pathology or dysfunction is due to awareness that is either inappropriately shrunken or restricted — a person sees only fragments but not the whole, or inappropriately inclusive —attention is too global and life becomes overwhelming. The relational therapist's function is to help clients learn how to let their awareness focus or expand as their unique contextual situation demands.

When conflicts exist at an intrapsychic level, and many of them do, focusing consciousness at this level is appropriate in that it may yield solutions to situations of concern. But not all psychological conflicts or difficulties exist at this level. Nor do all resolutions. The individual psyche may not always be the relevant level for therapeutic attention. Some have suggested that excessive attention by psychotherapists on these intra-psychic levels of awareness has contributed to the rampant narcissism and other problems of contemporary Western life rather than their solution (Bellah, et al., 1985). The following example reveals the limitations of the traditional egocentric psychological world view for addressing relational needs.

A single father recently disclosed to his therapist that a few years earlier he had been intensely shamed by a psychologist who had interpreted as "inappropriate" his decision to cancel three weeks of twice-a-week therapy appointments to drive his eighteen year-old daughter across country to begin university. The trip represented an enormous sacrifice in terms of time and money for the father and he felt intense grief about losing his daughter —although he was proud that she was to attend his Ivy League alma mater. He was inexplicably anxious about spending so much time alone with his daughter. The daughter, on the other hand was very enthusiastic about the trip and was making elaborate plans. The psychologist suggested that the father was "co-dependent and controlling" and that his anxiety was a clear signal that he was unconsciously aware that he was being drawn into something that was not good for him. He also indicated that there might be some incestuous seductiveness on the part of the daughter in wanting to "pal along with dad" instead of taking herself off to college in an "age appropriate" way. The

psychologist tried to persuade the father that he should heed his discomfort and in the interests of his daughter's individuation and his own psychotherapy, cancel their plans and insist the daughter take a plane. The trip proved difficult for the father, although he was glad he'd done it. However, his experience of humiliation and anxiety at what the psychologist had said was so intense that he was unable to return to psychotherapy .

The psychologist in this case was obviously interpreting the client's actions from within the ego-centric bias of his training. To him, it was virtually axiomatic that interrupting psychotherapy for a month reflected resistance, that fathers and daughters do not behave as friends, and that psychological maturity required separation and individuation. A relational sociocentric perspective enables us to look at this situation quite differently, looking at the father's decision in context. Despite some uneasiness, both father and daughter felt somehow moved to make the trip across country together. To both of them it represented an almost mythic rite of passage. After raising her since childhood, the father was seeing his daughter finally moving out into the world, and both he and his daughter wanted their final three weeks to be a time to allow their relationship to make the transition to its new adult-adult configuration. They were both naturally anxious and uneasy about how this would play out on the trip.

While no doubt empathically accurate about the father's discomfort, what the psychologist missed, which thankfully neither the client nor his daughter did, were the needs of the relationship. Only from a relationally empathic vantage point within that specific father-daughter dyad could the relational needs be known. For some other father-daughter relationship perhaps allowing the daughter to go it alone would have been the relationally appropriate thing to do.

Psychotherapy is a joint project of at least two participants. In holistic terms it is a multi-leveled relational situation. There are *whole* individuals and there are participants in *relationships, dyads,* or *groups*. These levels are also parts of larger configurations such as professions, families, classes, cultures, and genders. Attempting to understand larger system

problems only from within an egocentric individualistic frame more often than not results in "blaming the victim." An example of this can be seen in the way responsibility and remedy for unwed teenage pregnancy is laid at the door of individual teenage girls or their families. Commonly absent from psychological discussions about why the girls become pregnant is consideration of larger system issues: the relationship between the rise of divorce rates among the girls' parents, the economic needs for two working parents, the biological imperative of physiological pressures, the interpersonal power inequality between fathers and teenage mothers in patriarchal society, the cultural shift to later marriage, the decrease in social abrogation and so on. All are forces which originate outside the individual psyche and derive from larger-order dynamics beyond the influence of individual teenaged girls. It is one thing to include the teenager's self-esteem, judgement or even psychopathology in the constellation of factors which end up in a teenage pregnancy, it is quite another to expect that she or her family will be likely to overcome the higher order forces setting her up.

The origin of a client's difficulty may be on any level. The holistic psychotherapist needs to be able to bring a repertoire of techniques —from the free association of psychoanalysis and the social activism of feminist therapy, to spiritual practices like Macumba, meditation or prayer, to help bring into awareness all the components of experience relevant to a predicament.

Empathy, in both egocentric and sociocentric modes, is an essential skill of both therapist and client in this process Egocentric empathy permits the therapist to know the client as a unique whole individual. Sociocentric empathy provides the therapist with ways of knowing the relationships in which their clients participate, including the therapeutic relationship.

Relational psychologists may have an even more important contribution to make to the larger culture, by helping society bring into consciousness and develop the necessary skills to effectively deal with higher order relational realities so long ignored by Western cultures. Futurists are warning that many of the complex problems facing postmodern global societies will not be solved by individual genius, but instead will need the coordinated efforts of diverse

and creative groups(Dubos, 1981; King & Schneider, 1991). It is commonplace to suggest that :nothing is so powerful as an idea whose time has come," but rarely do we consider how it is that an idea's time arrives. Our experience with relational empathy suggests that new and important ideas exist in groups in holistic, perhaps even holographic forms as emergent properties of group consciousness, On those rare occasions when group members are empathic not only with each other, but with the group itself as a conscious entity, then vague inchoate inklings just below the surface of the group mind, may crystallize into clear ideas. As the idea is articulated by one of its members the group as a whole becomes instantly conscious of the new reality.

Empathy Reconsidered

At this point it is possible to consider empathy from outside the modernist discourse and look afresh at this ubiquitous human activity from within a relational frame. From this new vantage point empathy ceases to be seen as the highly skilled instrumental activity of one autonomous individual—the therapist— intervening in the life of another—the client, while themselves remaining separate and unaffected. Instead, empathy becomes understandable as an essential feature of human relational connectedness; an expansion of a person's consciousness to include in the perceptual field the other as an individual, and the relationship with the other of which he or she is a part.

Empathy is probably one of the oldest —both phylogenetically and ontogenetically— ways of orienting to self and others, predating symbolic language in both pre-hominid and pre-linguistic human infants. One can speculate that for social primates without symbolic language the empathic ability to sense the feelings and intentions of others and accurately read the cues provided in the complex interpenetrated webs of actions of social groups, would have given enormous advantage to those that excelled at it. Cross-cultural studies of contemporary tribal people show that for people who live in highly structured interdependent communities such abilities are still needed and highly valued. Symbolic and linguistic skills, as well as more recent

technological advances in communication, while providing greater opportunities for complex social life, have not superseded more basic means of orientation. In fact this may have simply added other, larger contexts in which sociocentric empathy is required. Western culture has for centuries gone to great lengths to socialize children towards egocentricism. This is in marked contrast to sociocentric patterns of childcare. Brazilian rain forest Indian women hold their babies close to their own bodies twenty four hours a day. The continue this close connection for the first two years of life. Every breath mother takes, every movement, aroma, or word, occurs as part of the experiential field of both mother and infant. This shared experiential reality is in stark contrast to the first experiences of infants in Western technological societies where babies are frequently enveloped in sterilized clothing and placed for long periods in solitary cots. Indian babies know nothing of separation and separateness until well after language develops, while a Western baby may be detached from physical contact with its mother within minutes of birth. Such contrasting early developmental contexts provide quite different psychological challenges to the child's evolving consciousness.

Some writers have suggested that individuals socialized for egocentricity make poor therapists for clients from more sociocentric communities, such as females of Asian, African or Latin-American descent (Chin, 1994; Comas-Dias & Greene, 1994.). Fortunately, though, for those egocentric Western therapists who wish to develop more relational forms of empathy, it appears the relational competences can be regained, even in adulthood. By the end of his career "big white Polar Bear" Carl Rogers, after over fifty years of tuning in to the world space of others —the last fifteen years or so frequently immersed in non-Western contexts such as Africa, Russia, Japan and Latin America , said this about himself:

> [W]hen I can relax, and be close to the transcendental core of me, then I may behave in strange and impulsive ways in the relationship, ways I cannot justify rationally, which have nothing to do with my thought processes. But these strange behaviors turn out to be <u>right</u> in some odd way. At these moments it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and

touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and has become something larger (Rogers, 1986).

Mutual Empathy.

The discussion so far has been aimed at a better understanding of empathy as a way of relational knowing, a way of , in Polanyi's words, "indwelling" in the experiential life-world of individuals and groups. But there is still more that Western psychology can gain by moving beyond modernist views of empathy.

Empathy provides more than just information about relationships. It is an expression of being in relationship. It is not just a means to better healing relationship, but because it re-centers relationship as a central organizing feature of psychic life, empathy itself is healing. The experience of being known and accepted deeply by another, being aware of another being aware of you, what Jordan calls "mutual empathy"(Jordan, et al., 1991), is among the most psychologically important human experiences. There is ample evidence that without a clear sense of connectedness, human beings, especially infants and children, cannot thrive. It is through mutual empathy that we we develop a sense of ourselves in relationship, the security of knowing that we belong, the knowledge of who we belong to, and how we must participate if we are to be loved, and recognized by our community.

Although much easier to come by in sociocentric cultures than in egocentric ones, a sense of belonging is a sine qua non of healthy psychological functioning everywhere. Such a sense, beginning in infancy and continuing throughout life, comes about by experiencing mutual empathy; by sensing oneself as part of a whole, which recognizes and accepts that one is a member.

Relational empathy in an era of globalization, narcissism and industrialized health care.

The healing benefits of empathic connections are not something that the therapist can provide for the client, the way the physician gives medicines. For the full healing potential of therapeutic relationships be contexts in which human beings can heal and become fully themselves to be realized, relational empathy must be two-way. A common mistake made by egocentric therapists is to provide an empathic setting for their clients and interpret empathic attempts by clients as transference or as attempts at manipulation. People frequently leave therapy still operating from an egocentric frame of reference, wanting others to be empathic with them but having developed few or no relational competencies of their own. If people are to function well in the multiple relational contexts of their lives, clients need to learn how to enter self-transcendent states, to develop the capacity for egocentric and sociocentric empathy. This is best developed in a therapeutic relationship which is itself relational and in which mutual empathy can be achieved, creation of mutual empathy takes trust. It takes commitment to creating conditions which permit emergent forms of consciousness to develop. It takes effort and time.

Ironically, and potentially disastrously it is precisely these aspects of psychotherapy which are the first casualties in the massive changes in health care presently underway in the United States. The industrialization of health care, although intended to create economic gains for both employers and workers and to make mental health care available to a wider population, may accomplish this by forcing a return to the individualistic mechanistic paradigm of earlier periods of psychological history. Such retrograde developments may wipe out recent progress toward more holistic and relational frames of reference in psychotherapy and result in a greater emphasis on a one-size-fits-all modernist reductionistic behaviorism and on psychopharmacology. The role of empathy might conceivably return full circle to become reduced to a role only in the data gathering and hypothesis building stage of diagnosis. Its potential to heal disconnections and alienation and to provide access to ever wider pluralistic realms of knowing may be left unrealized. Worse yet, through the global reach afforded by

Western technology, as other societies wrestle with the demands of the new competitive global market place, we might export our alienating practices to those still uncommitted to modernism.

Postmodern possibilities for a relational psychology

Psychology has much to gain by resisting these pressures to shrink ourselves into isolated egocentric bubbles. Now is the time to help mid-wife a new postmodern psychology able to meet the demands of our emerging postmodern world. It is time to reach beyond our isolated and individuated selves into the infinitely interpenetrated relational world. If able to learn more about the workings of conscious groups and how to help them form, psychology might be standing on a new threshold of knowledge. The British biologist J.B.S. Haldane suggests a non-mystical way to understand such expansion of consciousness beyond modern individualism when he states,

> If the cooperation of some thousands of millions of cells in our brain can produce our consciousness, the idea becomes vastly more plausible that the cooperation of humanity, or some part of it, may determine what Compte calls a "Great Being" (Haldane, 1954).

Relational empathy permits individual and collective access to the wisdom contained in higher order shared contexts and nurtures the ground out of which new creative possibilities might emerge. A new generation of Western artists are already pointing the way.

British artist David Hockney's photo-collage, My Mother, Bolton Abbey, Yorkshire Nov. '82, is of the artist's mother within the ancient ruins of a Cistercian abbey. The picture is composed of multiple shots, multiple camera positions, and an idiosyncratic, irregular frame. It contains an unmistakable reference, in the form of a shot of the artist's own feet peeking into the bottom of the picture, to the subject-to-subject relational connection among the artist, Mrs. Hockney and us, the viewers. Hockney, inspired both by the work of twentieth century physicists and fourteenth century Chinese scroll paintings, strains to render the images of a

reality yet to be created. We need, he says, "...to break down borders, to entertain the interconnectedness of things and of ourselves with things; the notion...that it is no longer possible to have ideas about reality without taking our own consciousness into account" (Hockney, 1988).

Should psychology choose to go in this direction and develop greater understanding of relational empathy, as a way of knowing and as a way of being connected; should psychology learn more about the contexts in which relational consciousness can be developed, and how to create communities which permit both being and belonging, psychology might yet offer some grounds for optimism in an increasingly alienated, fragmented and pessimistic society.

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