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**New men? — A new image of man?
Person-centred challenges to gender dialogue**

Abstract

Carl Rogers emphasized the common ground between people — a decisive corrective in the context of his time. Some sixty years later the *differences* are also coming clearly into view, requiring precise concepts and actions: we are persons as women and men and therefore person-centred as women and men. The gender-specific aspects in therapeutic and psychosocial relationships enrich and differentiate the understanding of person-centred practice and theory. These need to be genuinely further developed; on the one hand with regard to facilitating individuals and groups, and on the other with regard to the understanding of relationships. Person-centred epistemology and anthropology need to be continuously developed.

The thus far neglected topics of sexuality and aggression — discussed as examples — are waiting to be examined. In the process of emancipation, men ‘disconcerted’ by women have the difficult kairotic task of facing up to what is also the enjoyable challenge of developing a new, previously unfamiliar, non-dominant system of values instead of cultivating defence strategies. Person-centred theory and practice contribute important experiences and theories to this end, amongst other things with the empowerment concept based on personal anthropology.¹

¹ I am very grateful to Pete Sanders for making the text understandable to the English reader.

The legal equalization of women has to be prevented under all circumstances — the Roman statesman Cato the Elder (234-149) is reported to have implored the Senate: ‘Because once they are equalized they will be superior.’ Some two thousand years later the traditional system still lasts, but now it is likely that male dominance will come to an end within a few generations.

There are many rearguard actions, however. Some prefer to pretend to be unaware. Others claim that they are beyond feminism already — whatever this may mean. (This was the explanation of one of the organizers of the 6th Person-Centered and Experiential World Conference in The Netherlands, to explain why they had invited only male keynote speakers. He claimed it is persons that count, not women or men.) Another method of avoidance among person-centred people is to use ‘understanding’ as a fatal ideology: To make believe to understand the other in order to be left in peace and keep away from confrontation.

Men do not only violence to others. They do it to themselves. Facts speak a clear language: Men live shorter (5.7 years in Austria) and more dangerously (they are more often involved in serious road accidents, provide two thirds of emergency patients and three quarters of murder victims), they damage themselves more systematically (twice as many men are hospitalized due to chronic diseases) and commit suicide three times as often. The medical image of the ‘typical heart attack patient’ equals the ideal image of the ‘typical man’ in our achievement-oriented society. In a word: Men are not only very good at the exploitation of others but also at self exploitation. (Schmid, 1993a; b; 2002c)

This article examines a few considerations regarding the gender issue from a person-centred point of view developed through experience in person-centred practice, theory development and training, particularly from the perspective of men.

There is no person except as a man or a woman Towards a gender specific person-centred anthropology

Carl Rogers discovered the centrality of the person, but he did not pay attention to sex and gender difference.

Although it is clear that he increasingly came to learn to perceive women-specific perspectives in the course of his life — not least through the influence of his daughter Natalie (N. Rogers, 1981) — he was everything but a feminist. His merit was to emphasize the personal, the common ground on the one hand and the individuality of each person on the other hand — a decisive corrective moment in the context of his time. After all he definitely took leave of a uniform model of partnership (cf. Rogers, 1972). But some sixty years later, in the light of a new self-confidence of women, and the amount of feminist work done in the meantime, gender difference issues have become clearly apparent. They require concrete concepts and approaches to action, including in those interpersonal relations we call person-centred psychotherapy and counselling.

There is no doubt that many traditionally male concepts had already been damaged by the person-centred approach. For example, the priority given to empathy and unconditional positive regard in epistemology and the practice of therapeutic understanding are things that are traditionally regarded as ‘female’. This thorough paradigm change — and the development that followed in nearly all therapeutic orientations — contrasts sharply with the expert- and thus male-dominated classical concepts of psychoanalysis and behaviourism.

On the other hand the person-centred concept is by no means free of one-sided male thinking: The description of the actualizing tendency, for example, as given by Rogers (e.g. 1959: 196; 1979: 99-100) as a directional, forward striving, expanding, transcending, increasing force, a force towards autonomy, is clearly determined by male experiencing and consciousness and formulated in male language. An understanding which is more articulated out of female experience and familiar to readers of feminist writing would possibly set out from the idea that the human being is embedded in relationships from the very beginning. Therefore human development and thus the actualising tendency would be regarded more as an unfolding and differentiating process of shaping relationships. The actualising tendency could be more accurately viewed as the force of the individual embedded in interconnectedness. As a consequence, this would stress the social nature of the person much more than it was originally conceptualised in Rogers' anthropology, although there is evidence that he gradually moved towards this understanding (cf. Schmid 1996a: 497; 2001a).

The actualising tendency example also shows that person-centred conceptions are open for further elaboration due to a developing understanding of the human being. This is because they are created out of experience and try to remain as close to experience as possible. The most fundamental theory in this regard is the concept of the human being as a person which underlies the *person-centred* approach as a whole. Rogers used the term 'person' deliberately to characterize a particular understanding of the human being as the foundation for his view of psychotherapy and personality development. This notion embraces equally and dialectically both the substantial and the relational dimension; autonomy and interconnectedness; sovereignty and commitment (Schmid, 1991; 1998a; 2001a; b; c; 2002a; b). Such understanding of the human as a 'person' can be the foundation for a non-patriarchal image of the human being, an image characterized by partnership.

In order to do so it is important to also conceptualize theoretically that the human being is person as man and woman — not sexually neutral. The human only exists as a female or a male human. What sounds so self-evident, still often means, in the unexpressed consciousness of many (including theoreticians) that the human being is male, and then there is a female variant. In the meantime, many female theoreticians forcefully offered resistance and contributed to build a counter culture. Furthermore, for the moment, Rogers' focus on the respective individual, instead of the classified category, has prevailed in therapy theory and practice. Also, finally, we can no longer simply speak about 'the person', 'the man' or 'the woman', as if there was no difference, no subjective view and no history between men and women.

It is important that the dialectical understanding of the person as an autonomous being, interconnected in relationships, is not itself one-sidedly interpreted in a traditionally male sense. This always happens when the notion is grasped in an imbalanced way in respect of the substantial-individual aspect. Besides the male dominated approaches to understanding and interpretation (also still visible in Rogers' work), and the low regard for the body, the reason why gender specific aspects of being a person (particularly also in therapy theory and practice) have been almost ignored for such a long time, lies in a lack of understanding of the quality of the personal. Thus we can now see why the dimension of *autonomy* (traditionally attributed to men), stood for so long in the foreground of theory of therapies in general, person-centred therapy included, while the 'typical female' dimension of *relationship orientation* was considered to be of minor importance. There is now a growing recognition in PCT of the importance of encounter — meaning to stand 'counter' *and* to be essentially affected by the person opposite (cf. Schmid 1994; 1998b; 2002b). The consequence for the

therapeutic endeavour is that person-centred thinking and acting can no longer be confused with a male-centred viewpoint.

The task now is to spell out and put into concrete terms what this means for the different areas of life. The person-centred approach needs urgently to deal and intensively with the so far largely neglected areas of theoretical conceptualisation, the practice of therapy, training and supervision.

As an example I will look at two topics almost completely neglected up to now.

Intimacy, tenderness and lust From sexuality to sexualities

The notably small number of relevant publications is evidence that person-centred people, in most cases, do not examine sexuality closely and thus do not make it a theoretical topic. One can no longer excuse this with regard to the necessity of putting the person as a whole in the centre of attention. There is no person without his or her sex. Whoever leaves sexuality out of consideration, misses the whole all the more.

It goes without saying that sexuality can be misused as a way of having power over someone - by both men and women. Often it has been used as *the* way for men to exercise power over women e.g. in rape, in heterosexual sex frequently being defined for the fulfilment of the man's desire. Each psychotherapist is confronted with the destructive consequences of the numerous ways of sexual violence and misuse. But the subject deserves deeper investigation.

According to person-centred anthropology and Rogers' core conditions, human sexuality can be understood in its substantial dimension as an expression of, and a striving for, *self-realization*, for pleasure, lust and satisfaction, or fulfilment. In its relational dimension, sexuality is *self-transcendence*, i.e., dedicating oneself to transcendence of one's individuality.

On the one hand it is organismic experience and self-experience (the person senses and experiences him- or herself) and thus it is the expression of one's own potency, the overall tendency of life to unfold its possibilities. It is therefore conceptually opposed to (a) the very obvious tendencies of distrust and suspicion which can be found not only throughout history in so many cultures and religions, but also in different stages of one's own life and (b) unlike other therapeutic conceptions, sexuality must be seen as a fundamentally constructive and trustworthy force. This is separating organismic experience from societal meanings and constructions of sexuality which in the main are often about domination.

On the other hand, sexuality dissolves separation and isolation, opens the human being up for the Other and, as 'body language of the person' constitutes a central form of communication, 'embodied encounter'. In sexuality, the human being 'takes a step beyond him- or herself' and may even transcend their own boundaries and limits towards the Other, in heterosexual sex including the possibility of the propagation of new life. In pointing at the essential interconnectedness of all life sexuality also is a decisive approach to the world.

In both dimensions it aims at self-transcendence: It is more than individual fulfilment, or completion of the one by the other, or, in a heterosexual context, for example, mutual completion of both sexes. It means self-acceptance and acceptance of the Other through

dedication to the Other. As an essential aspect of being a person, sexuality is inseparably connected with personalisation — the development of the person — and thus (as an ‘interface’ of physical and psychological processes and as a key to the alternative ‘identity versus alienation’) also is central for psychotherapy.

The hasty use of clichés to label the two dimensions as ‘male’ and ‘female’ or even assign each of them to one of the sexes is a frequent trap for downplaying of sexuality. It is an important task in the process of emancipation to free oneself from gender assignments and mixings handed down by society and to find one’s personal feeling and meaning, particularly regarding sexuality. Then we can experience respective congruent symbolization and expression of sensual, erotic, sexual feelings and experiences and develop a personal way of sexuality as opposed to just taking on what traditional role assignment and societal fashion suggest. In an analogy to Rogers’ (1957) core conditions; *intimacy* (gentle empathy and temporary becoming a unity without giving up oneself), *tenderness* (non-possessive lovingly acceptance) and *lust* (congruence of the tension of needs and authentic activity to enhance or resolve them) can be seen as conditions for congruent, fulfilled sexuality. (This is described in more detail and with references in Schmid, 1996c.) In respect of male and female contexts of living, it goes without saying that the experiences connected with sexuality differ and it is an important challenge for each individual, woman and man (as well as their therapists), to be aware of this and to adequately symbolize it — a challenge and request to set out from the (seeming) security of traditional positions.

If sexuality is regarded as a complex interplay of biological, psychological and social factors, which actualize themselves differently in different situations and life stories, it is necessary to speak specifically and precisely. This means plurality. Therefore we need to investigate *sexualities*, particularly in person-centred contexts and when talking of the individual, or within certain sexual orientations (like attraction to same or/and opposite sex). In each of us there are different sexual inclinations, interests and potentialities. A psychotherapy oriented by person and encounter faces two important tasks: first, to deal sensitively, empathically with, and be ready to respond as a person to, these dimensions in general and with the sexual dimensions of the therapeutic relationship in particular. Second, to strictly observe sexual abstinence (because there is no sexuality without interest and therefore living up sexuality by the therapist always constitutes an abuse of the relationship in order to satisfy the needs of his or her own interests). (Pfeiffer, 1992; Schmid 1996a; b; 1996c)

Steps towards each other

No understanding without aggression

Covering up anger by alleged empathy is the beginning of what might end up in open violence. Wherever aggression is treated as a taboo or is ignored due to ideological reasons — e.g. because one thinks he or she should turn to ‘the positive’ — the danger increases to encourage destructive tendencies all the more. He or she who understands everything, understands nothing. The acceptance of a person who can accept everything is of no worth. The person who cannot stand ‘counter’ his or her clients, cannot en-counter them. The person who ignores aggression, refuses him- or herself as a person.

Although aggression is often associated with, and experienced as, violence and although fears are realistic when encountering aggression that violence is round the corner, from a person-centred perspective, aggression is a fundamentally constructive force of the human being and an expression of the actualizing tendency: from a substantial notion of what it means to be a

person an expression of the experiencing of the person and from a relational notion a turn towards the Other. On the one hand, in aggression the independency of the individual becomes apparent, if he or she aims at establishing and fostering identity by differentiation (saying no, e.g. in puberty) and in this process of separation the foundation for the recognition of myself and the Other is found. On the other hand, through aggression the interconnectedness becomes clear. This is because to be aggressive means to approach the Other ('ag-gredi' = 'make steps towards', to approach, to confront), since the Other is acknowledged as a partner in the relationship by the confrontation. In this counter-position of the con-front-ation ('frons' = 'forehead') the Other is faced, which shows that aggression is an unavoidable condition for every 'en-counter'. So, aggression is necessary for both the observance of distance and the establishment of nearness thus protecting from the loss of identity; either by merging or by alienation.

For person-centred therapy which is based on empathy, an open way of dealing with aggression and a respective therapeutic attitude of openness for conflicts is particularly important — the constructive and vital aspects of aggression may otherwise be overlooked or covered up. When denied or incomplete, incorrect or distorted aggressions can become destructive. As an example we only need to look at the aggressive and auto-aggressive parts of pity, depression or suicide. Other examples are psychosomatic suffering; where the body itself symbolizes the not-understood, or addiction; which can be seen as (auto-)aggression. Rogers, although never developing his own theory of aggression, points out that 'accepted or transparent anger is not destructive' (Rogers, 1960: 177). From a therapeutic perspective it is important to symbolize and integrate aggressive feelings and impulses as completely as possible. The ability to tolerate conflict is also crucial in terms of prevention of violence — it simply is a characteristic of maturity. Furthermore Ute Binder (1996; Hoffman, 1990) stressed the importance of 'empathic anger' in dealing with depressive patients. (For aggression in a person-centred anthropological perspective see Schmid, 1995; 2001c.)

The fundamental importance of aggression for gender specific identity is often underestimated. Aggression is seen as 'active' and assigned to male experiencing and behaviour (although only permitted in certain situations). Accordingly, women are then put on the 'passive' side and 'have to' suffer from aggression. Often there is only a small step from here to the cliché-like allocation of roles such as 'perpetrators' and 'victims'. Without ignoring the reality of men being so much more likely to be perpetrators of violence and women be victims, such unreflected and ill-considered allocations very often serve to disguise actual perpetrator-victim structures and prevent a differentiated understanding of ways of relationships.

Since aggression so often is associated with evil or not desirable behaviour, person-centred contexts are frequently classified and practiced as soft or even weak, mild and mellow. This neglects the power of the person and the 'counter-play' of genuine encounter. To be facilitative requires aggression in terms of encountering and confronting the client with him- or herself, and to think him or her sufficiently robust. It seems that due to an inappropriate public image, often people are interested in a person-centred training who are uncomfortable with the potency of their aggression

On male power, on female power

The person-centred empowerment concept as the basis for female and male emancipation

The person-centred approach contrasts sharply with the traditional authoritarian understanding of psychotherapy, particularly due to its emancipatory understanding of power as empowerment (Rogers, 1977; Schmid, 1996a: 451-468). It is no surprise, then, that its anthropology serves as a foundation for feminist approaches in psychotherapy (e.g. Winkler, 1992; 2002). It builds a solid and genuine basis for new approaches of self-understanding and understanding of women in general, and in the realm of psychotherapy and counselling in particular. Women have come a long way in developing a considerable amount of sovereignty and solidarity. And along the way they shook the traditional male human image of the human being — and with this, they shook men themselves.

In contrast, the emancipation of men still is pending. A free, sovereign self-understanding of men ‘after’ the feminist movement is still anything but obvious. It goes without saying that the ability to change nappies and sort cloths for washing machines is not enough. What does male liberation (ironically it may be called ‘*emancipation*’) really mean? It cannot mean simply to copy women. Neither Rambo nor Woody Allen, neither androgynous superstars nor simple house fathers are suitable as figures for identification on the long run. Machos and softies are out. To retreat into the forest and to live only on cereal and fruit, muesli and berries is not an attractive alternative at all, and so the ‘wild man’ of the late eighties and early nineties did not really prevail. However, a new image of men is not yet in the offing. Men find themselves under pressure, but this still does not mean that they have changed. It is a long way from knowing the necessity for change to actual change. The traditional image of the male is almost as strong as before; change is only superficial. For example: Although a majority of men are accepting responsibility for children and the family, in a survey 60% of the men who claimed they were ‘non-traditional’ said women should be the first ones to be fired in a crisis situation (cf. Schmid, 1996b).

Men have also come under pressure (and this has forced them to make a move or to get involved in rearguard actions), due to the waning influence of the traditional male bastions of the military, church and political parties. They no longer provide secure support as they used to do in times of unquestioned patriarchy. Again, men have had no choice but to behave more like partners. In critical situations, however, they fall back on the traditional image of men which consists of defining oneself by a role. What are men, if they are not lovers, fathers, bosses etc., but simply male human beings? Male role stereotypes no longer take effect, both in society and in the relationships between men and women. The man’s world can neither go on as it is, or go back to how it used to be. And there is no immediate substitute. It’s beginning to dawn on men that a new understanding of themselves and their roles must not rest on old or new stereotypes, but the creative development of new alternatives still seems a genuine mystery to men. Men might understand the necessity of their own emancipation but to really carry it out and to put theoretical insights into practice obviously proves to be very hard. Men have no choice but to turn to working for an appropriate new self-concept: the task for men is no more nor less than to understand what it means to become a person.

Moreover, where relationships are concerned, men have a much harder time to associate with men than women have associating with women (without ignoring that there are also difficulties for women associating with women due to, for example, heterosexual competition for men). The experienced threat led to new forms of male bonding. There is a great temptation to turn back the hands of time or to take countermeasures by grouping in

traditionally male associations or unions. This encourages crypto-fascist and homophobic patterns of thinking and acting and is clear in recent developments in Europe and North America with the present political shift to the right. One particular issue is the still widespread, and not reflected, latent and deep seated anxiety about homosexuality fed by many sources. It all too clearly shows the difficulties men encounter when dealing with both their equals and themselves. The development of new models for social relations of men with their fellow men, for male friendship and for communities of men is largely in abeyance.

This insecurity in men is evident particularly in psychotherapy and counselling training programs. To a great extent psychotherapy and counselling is regarded as a 'typical female' profession. Often in a minority, male trainees find themselves in a defensive position. This becomes particularly evident when women challenge the men, for example, in encounter and self-development groups to express their view of the relationships between men and women. When so challenged, men are often speechless. Experiences like these reveal that men have become conscious of their incongruence, but the path to new congruence seems to be a long one.

The task is not to simply react but to create. When stimulated or 'disconcerted' by women, men are challenged to find out what being a man is all about and to develop a new self-understanding. This must happen in dialogue with women. The objective is neither new male chauvinism nor a feminization of men or society. The aim is not that men roam about in penitential robes or set out to play the roles of victims themselves. A retreat from dealing with the conflict cannot be the solution either. However, a temporary retreat may be an important and necessary step. Men must take responsibility for their own solutions, not expect women to teach them. So whilst self-experience in all-male groups is important, it is insufficient for emancipation, if taken as the sole action; it rather indicates being stuck in a puberty-like position of denial. And as it is clear that male emancipation cannot mean that men become what emancipated women think they should become, it is also clear that dealing with women is crucial as a starting point for dialogue. It goes without saying that it needs political work — together with the women.

A new male image cannot be foisted but rests on a new feeling of self-worth, the source of which is neither guilt feelings nor defensiveness. On the basis of an understanding of power as empowerment and potency as potentiality, men can find the possibility for a new self-understanding in dealing with each other and with women. After taking leave of the traditional patriarchal allocation of role and power, both men and women, can, in the end, only together develop new approaches to same and different sex partnerships and the intrinsically connected therapeutic and political implications.

Much unused potential of men goes to waste. From a person-centred point of view the question what a male human being might look like 'before' all role expectations and assignments, can only be answered with respect to the primacy of the experience and the importance of self-understanding. The untapped potential of sensitivity, partnership and capacity to love, waits for its actualization. This will not happen by demonizing rationality in favour of emotionality or by creating new taboos in areas where formerly men were justly blamed for over-emphasising their importance; potency, rivalry, the power of self-assertion, achievement, toughness etc. They need to be balanced in their importance and value, not to be devalued completely. Only on such a basis new self-esteem can grow that does not rest on being directed against somebody — against women, against fathers etc. Rather it discovers and develops authentic male tenderness, male desire and desirability, male body language, male dedication, a new culture of conflict resolution among men and with women and self-

confidence without striving for dominance etc. This of course means to be challenged: to give up securities and embark on the path of risks.

The task of person-centred therapists must be to facilitate such processes of development by congruently bringing oneself as a man or a woman into play. This means that men and women develop their respective self-understanding in sovereignty and solidarity — as male and female persons — instead of falling into new stereotypes, new false adaptation and appeasement, or being fixated on fights against the other sex, and therefore not being aware of the possibility of mutual enrichment. As always, in a genuinely person-centred approach, therapeutic support does not happen by keeping oneself out but rather by engaging in the therapeutic relationship which includes transparency as a man or a woman. Therefore it must be the task of person-centred training to actively further such attitude by first of all bringing the subject up and paying attention to it during the training programme.

Then the experience might be possible where a meeting and encounter of gender specific images of the human being will not only be fight and drama; it might well be fun and provide pleasure and delight.

Men have the difficult task of facing up to what is also the enjoyable challenge of developing a new, previously unfamiliar, non-dominant male system of values instead of cultivating defence strategies. This means no more or less than to face the challenge of developing a new image of oneself. These systems and images will not be the only ones that enjoy the power of definition and are of social relevance. There will be a paradigm change of tremendous impact which has already begun and will continue to be work for some more generations. This requires dialogue between and within male and female human beings on different levels (from talking about sex to research, from exploring one's own world of experiencing to empathising with the world of the other) — in a discourse no longer dominated by men. The task is to co-create a new self-understanding. Such dialogue promises to enhance the quality of life (as can be seen from the statistics mentioned at the beginning) in terms of health and life expectancy but also in terms of excitement and lust.

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