

Briefing?

# : **Carl Rogers in South Africa : The Issue of Silence**

Leslie Swartz

University of Cape Town

In early 1986, Drs Carl Rogers and Ruth Sanford came to South Africa to run experiential workshops designed to assist participants in exploring and modifying their intergroup attitudes. It was hoped that these group members would in turn facilitate other groups, and that ultimately intergroup conflict would be lessened and intergroup understanding increased. Drs Rogers and Sanford were however careful to state during their visit that they were not being prescriptive and that they did not pretend to have answers to South Africa's problems.

It is all too easy to be dismissive about the Rogerian "African safari", to point out that Drs Rogers and Sanford seemed less than adequately informed about South Africa, to marvel at their political naïveté as witnessed by their individualizing perspective on group matters, and to chide them for their apparent ignorance of (or, at any rate, lack of serious attention to)

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major developments in the psychology of intergroup relations over the past 20 years. All the allegations appear to be reasonable, but in this brief note I should like to focus on another issue which seems to me to be important for the development of a critical psychology in South Africa. The issue is that of silence.

Most psychotherapeutic methods, Rogerian therapy included, depend on transforming what has been silent into words. Speaking the unspeakable is commonly thought to be an ingredient of psychotherapeutic process. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Rogerian prescription for South African problems is that people from different groups talk to each other, and render the unspeakable harmless by virtue of its having been said.

It is quite clear that South Africa is a country of silences. The words of many of the country's leaders cannot legally be said; all kinds of people and information are banned. Opposition groups are spoken about, spoken for, presented for public scrutiny by others. In this climate, once again, it is understandable that Rogers, his hosts and followers should feel that talk must be the cure.

What they fail to recognize, however, is that talk in the context of silence can become little more than a smokescreen for that silence. If Carl Rogers and others can talk completely openly in South Africa, then it may appear that "completely open talk" is universally possible in this country. Our laws tell us otherwise, but on the other hand the state repeatedly calls for all reasonable people to talk, or for all non-violent people to talk. "Completely open talk" of a particular kind is called for. Not all talk is permissible.

Psychologists working with individuals know that not all silences are the same. Only certain things that are unsaid are repressed. Other



unsaid material remains unsaid simply because of its inappropriateness to the context of psychotherapy. Similarly, there are many kinds of talk. It is possible for talk about very intimate matters to be serving a defensive function far more profound than would be served by silence in the same context. An example of this can be seen in the talk of somebody who is very well-read in psychological theory and who can talk at great length about sexual and other fantasies in a distanced and intellectualized way. Even if we accept, with Rogers, that there is little qualitative difference between individual psychotherapy and facilitation of intergroup understanding (I, for one, do not), then we can argue that just as in individual therapy it is possible for talk to be defensive. It is possible for the facilitator to collude (wittingly or unwittingly) with interests in the groups which seek to submerge or at best deny aspects of what is in fact being expressed by the silence.

In his refutation of what he terms "the repressive hypothesis", Foucault (1978) has argued that there has been an "incitement to discourse" about sexuality. Sexuality has been discussed more and more, but within the context of particular power relationships. I suggest that Rogerian talk in this country is part of an "incitement to discourse" which, though in some ways very different from the incitement to discourse about sexuality, has some similarities to it. Over the past few years it has become not only permissible but actually desirable (in government terms) for state officials to speak about any number of "unspeakable" things: inequality, racism, discrimination, and so on. Silence over the inequities of the South African system has been replaced by repeated public admissions that things have been wrong and need to be changed ("reformed"). Posel (1984) has argued that the language being used by the South African state is that

of late capitalism, and that its solutions are essentially technicist. In this ideological climate, the political arena is carved up and technical "experts" are given the authority to speak about the "realities" of matters falling within their areas of expertise.

The Rogerian intergroup enterprise is an incitement to discourse about the psychological realities of life in South Africa. Rogers is not only a psychologist (i.e. a person who has technical and hence authoritative understanding of the subjective) but he is also a leading psychologist who comes from a country which is the undisputed leader of the capitalist world. Given these facts, the subjective (as opposed, say, to the material) becomes a key factor in the need for change in South Africa. Even more importantly, though, that which Rogers renders sayable becomes, to some of those who accept his approach, the key factor that has been repressed. The feelings that emerge in Rogerian encounter groups take on a preeminent status in the discourse of change in South Africa. What Rogers does not see, or ignores, becomes relatively unimportant, precisely because of Rogers' authority. By further implication (and it is here that the Rogerian collapse of individual and group issues becomes most salient), those who do not participate in the Rogerian incitement to discourse can be seen to be operating for subjective, irrational and unreasonable motives. To be silent when a technical expert like Carl Rogers invites you to speak can be seen to be choosing the side of repression as opposed to the talking cure. What Rogers is trying to do is cast as constructive, respectful of the person ("unconditional positive regard") and facilitative. Other ways of operating become the opposite.

In this note I have raised issues which clearly await further elaboration and concretization. I hope that I have begun to show, however, that



full understanding of the Rogers visit does not lie simply in speculating about his motives or those of people who brought him here. There is no question in my mind that he is sincere in his aims and that he may have helped many people deal with their feelings during his visit. Examination of the ideological context of the visit, however, may tell us something about our own position as psychologists in South Africa as well.

#### REFERENCES

- Foucault, M. 1978. The history of sexuality : Volume 1. An introduction (trans. R. Hurley). New York : Random House.
- Posel, D. 1984. Language, legitimation and control : the South African state since 1978. Social Dynamics, 10, 1-16.