

AHEAD OF HIS TIME: Carl Rogers on 'Professionalism', 1973

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Perhaps the safety, the prestige, the vestments of traditionalism that can be earned through certification and licensure may not be worth the cost. I have wondered aloud if we would dare to rest our confidence in the quality and competence we have as persons, rather than the certificates we can frame on our walls.

Carl Rogers, 'Some new challenges to the helping professions', p. 374

In this tribute to Carl Rogers, I want to offer a retrospective on his outstanding and inspirational article 'Some new challenges to the helping professions', published almost 30 years ago. On re-reading this seminal article, what strikes me most is its freshness and telling prescience for anyone concerned with the present state and future development of the 'psi' field in Britain. 'Ahead of its time', 'definitive' and 'seminal' are not descriptors to be thrown around lightly; but if I had to pick an article from the literature which for me offers *the* most convincing argument against the institutional regulation of therapy, it would be too close to call between John Heron's brilliant paper 'The politics of transference' (orig. 1990, and reproduced as Chapter 1 in the *Implausible Professions* anthology); and Carl Rogers' masterly article, the latter being published some years before Dan Hogan's exhaustive 4-volume *tour de force*, *The Regulation of Psychotherapists* (1979), and well over twenty years before Richard Mowbray's formidable anti-regulation treatise, *The Case Against Psychotherapy Registration* (1995).

In what follows I will highlight the relevance of Rogers' 'helping professions' article for illuminating the arguments about statutory registration that are (thankfully, and at long last) beginning to spread throughout the institutions of therapy (most notably, the UKCP and the BACP). That Rogers' prophetically incisive arguments have stood the test of time across some three decades is testimony both to the enduring universality of perennial wisdom, and to the quality of insight possessed by this remarkable man – some other examples of which will no doubt be recounted by other contributors to this *Ipnosis* centenary symposium.

Rogers' article (which, for ease of reference, is usefully reproduced in *The Carl Rogers Reader*) would make compelling reading on any general "Sociology of Professionalism" course. Rogers poses five distinct questions which focus on 'the challenges that are currently facing us, or will... face us in the near future' (p. 358). He asks, first, whether the psychology profession dares to develop a new conception of science; second and relatedly, whether our current taken-for-granted notion of 'reality' is the only one; third, whether we dare to be designers of society rather than reactive 'fire-fighters'; and whether we dare allow ourselves to be whole human beings. In this short article, however, I will reluctantly confine myself to Rogers' third question, constituting one section of about four pages (pp. 363-7), and provocatively titled 'Dare we do away with professionalism?'

In just four pages, Rogers succeeds in elegantly distilling a quite devastating indictment of 'the professionalising mentality'; and one of the more remarkable features of the current therapy landscape is that, to my knowledge, not one of the proponents of therapy's statutory regulation has even *acknowledged*, let alone engaged with, Rogers' anti-professionalisation arguments. In Nick Totton's parlance, it has essentially been 'ignored to death' by the nascent

therapy ‘profession’; and I hope the current article helps to re-awaken a richly deserved interest in this much-neglected paper.

Rogers began by referring to ‘the radical possibility of sweeping away our procedures for professionalization’ (p. 363) – and the ‘terror’ that such a possibility strikes in the heart of the ‘psi’ professional. For Rogers, ‘as soon as we set up criteria for certification . . . , the first and greatest effect is to freeze the profession in a past image’ – an ‘*inevitable*’ result, he maintains (p. 364). For Rogers, then, certification is always and necessarily rooted in the past, and inevitably defines the profession in those terms.

Second, Rogers starkly exposed the flakiness of the one argument consistently adduced to support regulation – ‘protection of the public’ - when he wrote: ‘there are many with diplomas on their walls who are not fit to do therapy. . . [T]here are as many *certified* charlatans and exploiters of people as there are uncertified. . . Certification is *not* equivalent to competence. . . , [and] tight professional standards do not, to more than a minimal degree, shut out the exploiters and the charlatans’ (p. 364, 365, Rogers’ emphases). A pernicious and hyperactive ‘surveillance culture’ and ‘low-trust ideology’ have recently swamped our institutions without public debate, and with minimal public awareness (e.g. Power, 1997; Clarke et al., 2000; Cooper, 2001). The fashionable drive towards the statutory regulation of therapy is arguably yet another case of such uncritical ‘control-freakery’; and it would surely be a tragedy if the field were unwittingly to collude with such damaging cultural forces. Any remaining semblance of creativity, innovation and child-centredness within the mainstream education field, for example, has been comprehensively decimated by this mentality and the soul-less aridity of ‘modernity’ (House, 2002a). If Carl Rogers were alive in now in ‘UK 2002’, he would surely be arguing that it would be a disaster for a therapy field that makes claims to openness, awareness and insight to embrace pernicious values and practices such as these.

Third, Rogers indicts the tendency for professionalisation to ‘build up a rigid bureaucracy’ (p. 364). Issues of quality so easily come to be neglected, and ‘The bureaucrat is beginning to dominate the scene in ways that are all too familiar, setting the professional back enormously’ (p. 365).

Rogers goes on to argue not only that there are plenty of ‘psi’ workers who are ‘unqualified’ by conventional standards but who are nonetheless ‘both dedicated and competent’ (ibid.), but further, that ‘If we were less arrogant, we might also learn much from the “uncertified” individual, who is sometimes unusually adept in the area of human relationships’ (pp. 365-6). The important work of Peter Lomas and David Smail comes to mind, with their emphasis on the healing value of unaffected *ordinariness*, in contrast to the often precious professionalised mentality which can so easily come to dominate psychotherapeutic ‘regimes of truth’ (House, 2002b).

Rogers continues, ‘If we certify or otherwise give. . . individuals superior status as helpers, their helpfulness declines. They then become “professionals”, with all of the exclusiveness and territoriality that mark the professional’ (pp. 366-7). I am reminded here of a personal communication I received from Professor Art Bohart (of the Psychology Department at California State University, Dominguez Hills), commenting on the American situation in the mid-1990s: ‘I’m sorry to hear about the fight over licensure in Great Britain. . . The battle, of course, is over here, and we are busy becoming more and more medical-like, rapidly losing our human souls. But we are a “Profession”’. It is somewhat of a cliché that what happens in the USA almost inevitably follows here some years later; yet surely if we listen to the dire warnings given by Professor Bohart and others, a responsible and mature field still has time to choose *not* to pursue the statutory regulation route (House, 2002c), with all its unwanted and unpredictable side-effects – and to find a better way. Certainly, it is highly noteworthy that in his article, Rogers expressed deep regret at not himself having stood out against the formation

of the American Board of Examiners in Professional Psychology in the late 1940s. And just as it is unknown for turkeys to vote for Christmas, so it is also quite unheard of for “professions” to legislate themselves out of existence... So let everyone who deeply cares about the future of the therapy and human potential field take note: *once the regulatory path is engaged with, there will almost certainly be no turning back*; and, like Rogers in the 1970s, we will almost certainly be left to repent at our leisure.

Rogers posed perhaps *the* crucial accountability question, when he wrote: ‘Can psychology find a new and better way? Is there some more creative method of bringing together those who need help and those who are truly excellent in offering helping relationships?’ (p. 366). Rogers did offer a positive (if little fleshed out) proposal for an alternative to soul-less professionalisation, when he wrote that ‘we might set up the equivalent of a Consumer Protective Service... If many complaints come in about an individual’s services to the public, then his [*sic*] name should be made available to the public, with the suggestion “Let the buyer beware”’ (p. 367). Both Mowbray (1995) and Hogan (e.g. 1999) have taken this kind of proposal further, and the most comprehensive alternative framework for accountability yet developed is that of Postle (forthcoming). With these detailed proposals shortly to be out in the public sphere and drawn to the attention of government, *there is no longer the slightest justification for arguing that there is no viable alternative to statutory regulation*.

It is interesting that in his latter years, Carl Rogers moved more and more in a transpersonal, even mystical direction (Thorne, 2002a). There have indeed been interesting parallel discussions and controversies about ‘professionalism’ within the pastoral field. Herrick and Mann (1998: 103) epigraphically quote Alistair Campbell, who wrote, ‘If we professionalise pastoral care, we will lose the spontaneity and simplicity which characterises love’. They interestingly point out that the term ‘profession’ originally referred to the public declaration of faith associated with *a life of religious devotion* (p. 104, quoting Campbell). Herrick and Mann also draw what is surely a crucial distinction for the therapy field - between ‘being professional’ (adjective) and ‘being A professional’ (noun). For them, Jesus himself was certainly not *a* ‘professional’ in the *modern* sense: rather, he was ‘a maverick in splendid isolation!’ (p. 108) (rather like the so-called ‘wild analyst’ – e.g. House, 1997) – ‘neither detached... nor emotionally neutral’ (p. 109). Further, ‘Jesus was “untrained”. His knowledge and expertise came in the form of a natural “gifting” in relating to people and a unique sensitivity to the prompting of the Holy Spirit’ (p. 106). Jesus also ‘*reversed all the world’s hierarchies* in his own nature... The great challenge... is to learn how to de-egotize leadership’ (Richard Holloway, quoted on p. 110, my emphasis). I think much of this is consonant with what Carl Rogers was saying in, or implying by, his seminal 1973 article.

Returning briefly to the more profane matters of modern ‘professionalism’: thankfully, the debate about therapy’s regulation has recently been opened up within the UKCP (House, 2002a); and in the counselling (recently renamed the “counselling and psychotherapy”) field, several major figures have recently dared to address an issue which had erstwhile been studiously ignored. Coming as it does from the Chair of the UKRC executive, Ian Horton’s recent paper (2002) is well worth reading; yet it is notable that in his discussion of ‘Arguments against regulation’ (pp. 59-60), he makes no attempt to refute those arguments. Rather, he simply invokes the *ex cathedra* technique of tacitly dismissing one’s opponents by referring to their arguments as ‘vitriolic’ and ‘polemical’ (p. 59) – as if this were somehow of itself sufficient to refute those arguments! Perhaps it is precisely because of this kind of attitude to the manifold arguments against professionalisation that its critics often feel driven to resort to polemic and passion! Moreover, there is simply no basis to assume, as Horton and other supporters of professionalisation commonly do, that ‘professional bodies, *presumably reflecting the views of the majority of practitioners*, either accept the inevitability of some form of regulation or welcome it as an important milestone in the evolution of the profession’ (ibid.: 50, my emphasis).

The recent intervention by Brian Thorne (2002b) is far closer to the critical dissenting tradition demonstrated in Rogers' article. For Thorne 'smell[s] the allurements of the "closed shop" and the not easily disguised smugness of the "expert" who can claim the power to exclude' (p. 4); and 'Behind much of the thinking and activity directed towards statutory registration, I detect not humility but scarcely veiled arrogance and power seeking...' (p. 5). Certainly, with such formidable cohorts as the late Carl Rogers and Professor Thorne challenging so convincingly the foundational rationale for statutory regulation, 'the profession' must surely think long and very hard before pursuing a path which may do untold – not to mention quite *unpredictable* - damage to all that is best in therapeutic practice.

In this short tribute commemorating Carl Rogers' centenary, it's only right that he should have the final word. In a statement that resounds across the decades, and whose recommendation this journal itself is doing so much to actualise, he wrote: 'If we did away with "the expert", "the certified professional", "the licensed psychologist", we might open our profession to a breeze of fresh air, a surge of creativity, such as it has not known for years' (p. 366)... Amen to that.

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