

Constructivism in Psychotherapy
50 minutes conversation with Robert Neimeyer
The training in psychotherapy

A.H.: Changing the topic for the last time, to the training in psychotherapy and constructivism. Robert you travel a lot, since decades, meeting colleagues seasoned and younger ones around the whole world, did you find relevant differences in the United States training standards compared to European ones?

R.N.: Oh, yes! Well, standards is too bureaucratic term for me to relate to - I don't really care about standards. But I would say forms of training differ, would speak about qualitative differences rather than meeting a standard or failing to meet a standard. Much of the training in psychotherapy in Europe happens in institutes outside of programs, that is outside of psychology training programs which often are devoted to more lecture material, less experiential work. I think then it is typically true in the U.S. - of course we're speaking in the U.S and Europe but other models will predominate in South-America or China and Japan and so on. I mean, we can be more global in our comparisons but just looking at the U.S. and Europe there're many similarities and there are some differences. Except for few different settings most of the psychodynamic training in the U.S. is provided in institutes, but much of the training in other forms of psychology would rely upon placement in clinical or counseling training programs - which are APA approved and regulated and are anchored in universities and with a number of practicum settings that may be in hospitals or community agencies - so I think it is more, in some ways, it's more academic in the U.S.. In my impression about different places I've gone - of course different countries do it differently - but there tends to be more of a segregation of academia and then practice sites and supervision in the European centers, at least with the ones I'm familiar. I'm not sure that one is better than the other.

A.H.: Do you think that trainees, as generalist practitioners, should be educated and proficient in one unique model and master it or should they know more than one model?

R.N.: Well, I don't really operate in the basis of too many should, let see what I can say about that. I like breadth, I find inspiration in many approaches to psychology and to culture life more generally and so all of us like to have more students be like us, in this regard. So I am happy to have students who have a broad and deep curiosity about many things, about many theories and many different people. But I think that students themselves tend to be more conservative, in part because this is new to them and they really want to do it well and it's easier to do something smaller well, than to do something endlessly broad and multidimensional. And so I think students tend to gravitate toward a preferred model and mastering that then they can begin to innovate in the model, in modest ways and then more boldly. And I think this help us understand

how, really across the course of our development as therapists, we often begin with one relatively focused perspective and then begin to breach out - much like a tree will have a trunk that will begin to yield large branches and then many small ones. So I think that, in some way, advanced practitioners tend to move toward greater integration across time and we should tolerate and understand compassionately the need of our students for simple begins, recognizing the complexity will come naturally. And my goal as a supervisor is to provide them the natural opportunities to challenge and extend their initial premises and positions.

A.H.: In your opinion what makes a good therapist, would you underline a specific skill or profile in order to be a good therapist?

R.N.: Well, I think that – very much in keeping with the honored tradition of humanistic psychology – a cardinal condition is a deep and refined capacity for emphatically grasping the personal world of another and I think that’s indispensable, really, to most forms of significant therapy. I think that it help as well to deeply embody a position of compassion with reference to human suffering and to be very wary of adopting positions of contempt or self-congratulations about the way in which we may be living better than our clients. And then I think, as well, we do well to use ourselves and our language carefully as instrument of change in therapy, to be willing to risk deep personal engagements with our clients, to be willing to show the feelings and a sense of being moved by them and their struggles, their achievements, as we engage them, and to use language powerfully and poetically in order to help them grasp, configure and further elaborate the growing edge of their understanding, while being open to other forms of symbolic exploration and expression of evolving meanings – which may entail body work as well as artistic representation and other forms of symbolizing experience that go beyond language *per se*. I think all of this would be characteristics of a good therapist and a final one that I would add – appears on very few lists of desiderata or positive features of therapists – but I would say wisdom. It’s insufficiently recognized at its importance, and it’s hard to define. But I think that a kind of sense of perspective, a being able to place human experiences in a broader and broader frame, while also honoring the particulars of the client’s existing frame. This is a helper stance to have as a therapist - to be able to shift from this deeply personal to the broadly existential, and to be quite comfortable functioning at many levels, in many languages, with many different kinds of clients and problems.

A.H.: It’s not so easy...

R.N.: Well, it’s an interesting way to try to make a living though, I tell you that.