

Constructivism in Psychotherapy
50 minutes conversation with Robert Neimeyer
Psychotherapy schools and approaches

A.H.: Changing the topic from manuals to models and schools role in our education we can see in your clinical writings a strong integration of Coherence Therapy concepts and techniques. How do you see this model – Coherence Therapy – and it's visibility in the USA?

R.N.: It's almost invisible, which is tragic. Bruce Ecker, the principal contributor of course to that tradition publishes beautifully but infrequently. And as such it does not have the level of prominence that it deserves. I find it to be an elegant and intelligent model and probably one of the purest instantiations in therapeutic method of a constructivist orientation. I think that it is itself deeply coherent with the core of constructivist work. And I think it is clinically elegant and parsimonious while also conferring on the client the status that he or she appropriately has of being an agent responsible for his or her existential and even symptomatic position and capable in a moment of changing that. And so I strongly support the broader diffusion of this perspective and it has certainly deepened and clarified my own practices as a therapist.

A.H.: Psychotherapy schools have been – I don't know if you think like that – have been solid anchors for the maturing therapists, for trainee therapists? But also obstacles to a so much needed epistemic openness and flexibility. Do you think they are still necessary? Schools are still necessary for our development as therapists?

R.N.: Yes, because as human beings we are limited and we organize our lives around attachment to people, places, projects, possessions that matter to us. Our schools give us a focus for that attachment to a given tradition and the people who represent that tradition. I think in this way they make a useful contribution but we need to always remember not to take our models too seriously, to regard them as humble approximations to a much more complex phenomenon that is human life. And as such I don't encourage people to hold on to their models with white knuckles or to defend them against all opponents but instead to use them as a basis for dialogue around matters of common concern with practitioners of other perspectives. And as we engage in deep dialogue in this way then we find that our models naturally begin to flow and to change and this is the nature of dialogic interaction, whether it is with other models or with other human beings. And of course in the case of psychotherapy we are speaking about the people who are exponents of those models. So I think we are far better of building bridges rather than walls in relation to people who occupy other perspectives.

A.H.: How do you think schools are evolving nowadays in this perspective? Do you think they are moving and improving in an integrationist way and direction?

R.N.: I think many of them are, in the sense that as I speak to practitioners of different schools of Family Therapy – there is a blending of traditions – so the work of the Milano School for example would now be blended with more structural or systemic or strategic approaches. I think within the psychodynamic field one has a very rich interchange – you no longer have people divided so clearly into Kohutians and Kembergians and, you know, people who have an object relations orientation – there's much more interchange within related families of models. There are still less interchange across models and then in the cognitive-behavioural area - where

theoretical sophistication has always been at a low level compared to other approaches - there is a tendency to appropriate techniques from other approaches and then simply relabel them as cognitive-behavioural. So *de facto* it is an integrative tradition – sort of. But it's almost ironically unconsciously integrative in the sense that it does not seriously engage and tend to practice dialogue with the theoretical premises about their models as extensively as it might.

A.H.: They focus mainly in the techniques...

R.N.: I think yes. I think that it is... The focus is at a more concrete level overall and this is also registered in a kind of movement toward technical integration that seems to be preferred within these orientations. But overall I think across the field of psychotherapy interchange is more common than it was fifteen years ago and I think that that's a healthy thing.

A.H.: Yes. Some authors see a future for schools and models to disappear and give place to fundamental guiding principles to work with specific problems and fundamental processes to work with emotion, cognition, behaviour and motivation. Do you believe in this trend and development in the future and how far are you from this point?

R.N.: My orientation in general is to embrace developments of conflicting and contrasting kinds because culture is sufficiently broad – even the culture of psychology or psychotherapy - is sufficiently broad that it can afford to develop along different lines. And so I would happily agree with people like Les Greenberg who might be seeking basic processes of change and the markers that indicate the appropriateness of particular therapeutic strategy in the context of therapy. I would happily embrace the work that is informed by contemporary neuroscience that suggests the role of affect, affect regulation, attachment schemas and so on, which can be seen to operate at the level of functional MRI's, and the influence of the new brain sciences in this way for understanding human change in the context of therapy. And I also see a role for continuing refinement and application of traditional models of therapy. So, I think that there is room in this field for coexistence and a kind of collaboration and interchange among people who are pursuing different routes to the development of therapy.