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Citation for published version:
Hauser, HJS 2023, 'More than my experience: An argument for critical realism in the person-centred psychotherapy', *Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies*.
https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2023.2295528

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies

More than *My* Experience: An Argument for Critical Realism in the Person-Centred Psychotherapy

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More than *My* Experience: An Argument for Critical Realism in the Person-Centred Psychotherapy

Abstract: In acknowledging psychotherapy as a space oriented towards philosophical exploration, this article embraces Schmid's challenge for person-centred psychotherapists to develop philosophy more congruent with the practice of the person-centred approach. Inspired by practitioners from other approaches, the author challenges the dominant interpretive-phenomenological foundations of recent person-centred conceptual developments, tentatively arguing the case for a critical realism as an alternate onto-epistemic framing for person-centred psychotherapy. The author acknowledges weaknesses of interpretive phenomenology in relation to the person-centred approach, particularly the challenges it presents for dialogue, development and decision-making in terms of theory, research and practice. These challenges are highlighted in reference to Rogers' conceptualisation of a 'New Integration' of science and experience put forth in *On Becoming a Person*. An abridged explanation of critical realism is offered before considering critical realism's application to the person-centred approach. The author demonstrates critical realism's use in formulating congruence theoretically, providing robust frameworks for research that can generate knowledge without assuming the role of expert, allowing critical reflexivity on socio-cultural contexts of theory, and offering holding, developmental frameworks for practitioners and trainees.

Keywords: person-centred approach; critical realism; psychotherapy; congruence; ontology; theory

Word Count: 8452

I consider psychotherapy to entail wondering, implicitly or explicitly, about the nature of being. I struggle to recall a relationship in which I offered the necessary and sufficient conditions of the person-centred approach (Rogers 2007) to a client where they did not inevitably consider to some degree who they are, what has brought them to this moment, and what they might become – what is, was, and will be. In exploring one's becoming different, we necessarily grapple with existential ramifications of that possibility. My experience in the counselling room is that these ruminations rarely

employ the formal language of philosophy, but instead are grounded experientially; clients empirically inquire through the psychotherapeutic encounter into the nature of reality and their place in it. I believe this contributes to the 'significant learning… which makes a difference… [that] interpenetrates with every portion of [a person's] existence,' which Rogers (1961, p.280) claims is facilitated by the therapeutic relationship. For me, the discoveries clients make regarding their realities are often delightfully paradoxical, somehow both universal in magnitude and mundane in their omnipresence. I feel privileged in my role as psychotherapist to encounter the rich wisdom of each individuals' living process, even if such musings at times only reveal certainty of what is necessarily uncertain.

As relational collaborators in such inquiries, I believe psychotherapists, too, hold a responsibility to ponder reality and its nature – not only in our reflexive self-work, but with regard to our profession as a whole. I'm inclined to agree with Schmid's reflection that, 'The ongoing challenge to person-centred therapists is to be congruent with their philosophy and to further explicate foundations, philosophy, theory and practice – in dialogue with other modalities and through dialogue and co-operation within the "family" [of practitioners using Carl Rogers' work as a foundation]'(2003, p.117). We must wonder about the nature of reality itself as we seek to meet the Other in it, and articulate what we can (and cannot) know of it; this is the work of ontology ('what is?') and epistemology ('what/how can we know?'). The nature of reality has implications on the nature of knowledge. With that in mind, while discussing philosophical perspectives and how they relate ontology to epistemology, hereafter I refer to this relationship through the term 'onto-epistemic'

I believe we have room for growth in person-centred theory's engagement with onto-epistemic conceptualisations. I find unsatisfying that, in accepting the transcendent

nature of subjective experience and the limits it implies on knowing the Other, person-centred writers almost exclusively invoke philosophers who endorse reality as constructed by experiencing, particularly interpretive phenomenologists like Heidegger (1962; Gendlin 1978/79; Crisp 2015) , Levinas (1969; 2003; Schmid 2003), and Merleau-Ponty (1962; Gendlin 1962; Cooper & Bohart 2013, p. 111). Person-centred practitioners have expanded this philosophy in the advancement of our field, particularly Gendlin's (1962) experiential phenomenology. Gendlin's work in philosophically formulating the felt-sense of bodily experience as primary and symbolisation from it as a secondary process has made waves that reverberate in the person-centred community's conceptualisation of our work, our experience, our knowledge as within a first-person frame (Kypriotakis 2018, p.141). An interpretivist-phenomenological onto-epistemic position, in which 'experiencing/being' and 'knowing' are processes drawn together in subjectivity (Burns et al. 2022, p.5), has become dominant within the person-centred approach with little alternative presented.

I contend that the interpretivist-phenomenological onto-epistemic position is not congruent with counselling training, research and practice, nor the fundamental theories grounding the person-centred approach. Furthermore, I am concerned that interpretivist-phenomenological positioning can prevent discourse within our community and with other allied fields, as we, albeit in a covert manner, struggle to define what can or cannot be known about the person-centred approach as it meets the Other.

Recent debates arising from Cooper and McLeod's (2011a; 2011b) propositions regarding pluralistic practice in person-centred therapy, and subsequent critiques (Ong, Murphy, and Joseph 2020) and counter-critiques (Crisp 2023) serve to evidence what I mean. Cooper and McLeod (2011b) posit that every person is different and unknowable in their transcendence (including what might be therapeutically useful for them), and

therefore person-centred intervention should be adapted to clients' demanded goals and expectations. Ong, Murphy, and Joseph's (2020, p.174) critique rests on the person-centred approach's inherent ontology being incompatible with incorporation of technique or intervention that would make the practitioner expert, even if a client requests it. This assertion is based on Schmid's (2003, p.112-113) conceptualisations, who frames person-centred philosophy phenomenologically through 1. The conceptualisation of the fundamental *We* that constitutes the self as defined in relationship and being together through the personal-dialogical position (We = You + I, where you = an Other), 2.the Thou-I relationship (as opposed to defining other as perception of the self-ego proposed by Husserl critiqued by Levinas) through which the therapist responds as a person to the clients' directed articulation and presentation of self, and 3. the Other as an inherently independent, unknowable entity that is epistemically primary regarding self, ultimately aligning these tenets with Rogers' ethics regarding the person being valued above all. What is not satisfyingly answered in this framing, however, is how, in abdicating claim to knowledge of the Other, one can posit that certain necessary and sufficient conditions will ultimately engage actualising tendencies within our clients (Rogers 2007).This leaves us in a paralysed state – simultaneously restricted in our capacities to be able to know the Other, and forbidden to use what knowledge we can generate to inform changes to practices (less we become expert over the Other).

This is not just limited to this particular debate in the person-centred literature, nor Rogers' claims and proposed conditions, but extends to proposals that thinkers who support an interpretivist-phenomenological position offer in implicitly universal terms. Take, for example, the idea of *en-counter* (Bazzano 2014; Schmid 2002) which Schmid defines as a stance or positionality engaging in, '*an amazing meeting with the reality of*

the Other' (2019, p. 205, his italics). Encountering incorporates not just experiencing, but permitting oneself to be authentically moved by the existential difference of the Other in their utterly unique personhood. Schmid claims that, 'To encounter springs from and furthers a stance of being curious and humble to what we encounter, and it provokes the existential response to change ourselves if we want change in society in the world' (2019, pp. 211). This would imply an affective commonality of encounter on not only himself, but Others. How can this claim over what the encounter position provokes in "ourselves" be maintained alongside acceptance of utter existential alienness of the Other? How can the Other be unknowably unique such that we must abdicate expertise, while we continue to make claim to how a condition offered might change an individual?

I tentatively propose an alternative onto-epistemic position that might unpick this double-bind: critical realism. This assumes that person-centred philosophy does not inherently imply any discrete, specific onto-epistemic position, and it is therefore reasonable that we consider what conceptualisations of reality and knowledge are most congruent with its theoretical principles and actual practices (after all, why would Schmid (2003) challenge us to further explicate such foundations if there was an inherent ontology and epistemology to the approach?). Critical realism offers the framework for understanding the subjective experience of Other as transcendent, but within realist ontology that permits claims to context-informed, emergent knowledge regarding intransitive relational properties. Other authors (Pocock 2013; Sterner 2021) acknowledged similar challenges in their therapeutic disciplines (family systems and gestalt therapy, respectively) and engaged convincingly with this philosophical framing; I propose to entertain this option in person-centred psychotherapy, especially its utility in unifying practice, research and theory.

This endeavour, to be clear, is because the philosophical concepts put forward by Schmid (2002; 2003; 2012; 2019) and others in approaching person-centred practice are ultimately ones that I believe extraordinarily insightful. The richness of concepts such as the fundamental *we* , the personal/dialogic position of *Thou-I* relationship, en-*counter*, and others that stem from interpretive-phenomenological philosophy (Bazzano 2014; Schmid 2003) have developed considerably the conceptualisation of our position of being and approaching the world as a person-centred person/practitioner/politician (Schmid 2012b; 2019). My hope is not to do away with these concepts. Instead, I strive for a more nuanced onto-epistemic foundation that might retain these boons without relinquishing our grounds for generating knowledge, dialoguing with other approaches to mental health, or implementing safe training for new practitioners.

This article seeks to challenge dominant interpretivist-phenomenological onto-epistemic positions, arguing for a critical realist conceptualisation of person-centred psychotherapy. First, I present limitations of interpretivist-phenomenological onto-epistemology within person-centred psychotherapy as they meet theory, research and practice. I then outline critical realism, presenting a working understanding of its philosophical underpinning. Finally, I examine critical realism's utility for addressing aforementioned limitations, demonstrating its applications in congruently connecting theory, research and practice.

Limitations to Interpretivist-Phenomenology in Person-Centred Theory, Practice and Research

Before offering alternative to interpretivist-phenomenological conceptualisations of person-centred psychotherapy, I will delineate weaknesses in it. Every philosophical position has degrees of upside and downside in its approach to reality, knowledge-generation, and applied praxis within a field. Critical realism's suitability must be

evaluated alongside strengths and challenges of interpretive-phenomenology. This list, while not exhaustive, reflects some salient issues presented by adopting an interpretivist-phenomenological stance.

'Truth-Immediacy', and the Epistemic Impasse of Perspectives

My first challenge to interpretivist-phenomenology in the person-centred approach is epistemic, and concerned with how truth is conceptualised within constructivist ontology. Constructivism ontology posits reality as created by and contingent on subjective experiencing. The interpretivist-phenomenological understanding of the person-centred approach predicated on Heidegger's *Dasein* conceptualisation (1962; Gendlin 1978/79; Crisp 2015; Watts 2014, p.40), or Levinas' critiqued and re-formulated version (1969, p. 28; Bazzano 2014; Crowell 2020) would fall within this (Annells 1999); being *is* experiencing, and reality is intractable from conscious experience. Crowell claims Levinas', 'phenomenological ontology is an account of life' (2020, p.17); to live something is for it to be real and known as real through conscious being-experience (Burns et al. 2020). So, what happens when two agents claim different truths that are both necessarily contradictory *and* based on lived experienced?

Cruickshank describes this conundrum as inherently linked with, 'the philosophical logic of immediacy' (2002, p.7). This refers to onto-epistemic positions that claim that, 'manifest truth is immediately recognisable as such' (Cruickshank 2002, p.7) when encountered. This includes constructivist and positivist concepts of truth; both require empirical observation/experience in truth claims. Conceptualising truth as immediately clear upon observation, however, becomes problematic when contradictory truth claims are proposed based on immediate models of truth determination. A common example is eyewitness accounts to criminal activity, where different observers often describe factually contradictory events when interviewed (Albright 2017). These

truths are independently claimed, but cannot dialogue; they are experienced, therefore constituting reality phenomenologically – and yet, they are contradictory in truth's manifestation, having no translatable correlate.

Trigg puts the implications of this bluntly in his realist critique of constructivist ontologies: '[S]cience cannot claim any truth… because there is no truth… [S]cientific progress is an illusion. We are not finding out more because there is nothing to find out' (2016, p.33). Cruickshank similarly remarks, '[I]n making truth wholly relative to perspectives, such relativism reduces truth to perspectives' (2002, p. 7). This ultimately creates problems in discourse: how can we resolve differing perspectives within our field in relation to the person-centred approach (let alone discourse with other approaches) if differing perspectives can simultaneously claim contradictory experiential 'truth'?

Consistency with Person-Centred Approach's Establishment

As a second criticism, I claim interpretivist-phenomenology contradicts the initial theorising and research that established the person-centred approach. In *On Becoming a Person*, Rogers (1961) speaks directly to tensions between person-centred practice and research in the chapter "Persons and Science". Rogers addresses conflicts between a positivistic model of psychology and a phenomenological engagement in therapeutic practice (Rogers uses the terms 'Science' vs. 'Experience'), examining' assumptions and rebuttals, and critically re-evaluating subjectivity in positivist paradigms. Rogers ultimately arrives at, 'A New Integration':

> Science, as well as therapy, as well as all other aspects of living is rooted in and based upon the immediate subjective experience of a person…. But… I can abstract myself from the experience and look upon it as an observer... To avoid deceiving myself as observer, to gain a more accurate picture of the order which exists, I make use of all the

canons of science. Science is not an impersonal something, but simply a person living

subjectively another phase of himself. A deeper understanding of therapy (or of any

other problem) may come from living it, or from observing it in accordance with the

rules of science, or from the communication within the self between the two types of

experience. (Rogers 1961, p.222-223)

This section may be familiar for Rogers' critical reflection on positivism, dismantling

the "view from nowhere" by acknowledging necessary subjectivity in scientific inquiry.

However, this integration also rebuts an interpretivist-phenomenological onto-epistemic

position – namely in acknowledging the possibility of self-deception. Rogers' 'New

Integration' is neither naively constructivist nor positivist, but rather has elements of

both where scientific methods and subjective experience are both knowledge generative,

but *not necessarily corresponding to reality*. This undermines the truth-immediate

understanding of interpretive-phenomenology, refuting such a position from the very

onto-epistemic foundations of the person-centred approach.

This understanding is echoed in how Rogers (1961) presents research in *On

Becoming a Person*. Rogers outlines many studies that evaluate the person-centred

approach's efficacy as a therapeutic intervention. Many of these studies analysed data

attributed to perspectives beyond the client and therapist when seeking to evidence

person-centred psychotherapy's effectiveness, implying certain onto-epistemic

assumptions. One illustrative example is a study Rogers (1954) designed to evidence

personality change resulting from person-centred therapy. Rogers examined control

groups and those undergoing person-centred therapy on the basis of maturity-associated

characteristics using Willoughby's Emotional Maturity Scale. Change was measured

through three perspectives – by the client, the therapist, and, notably, *the client's

friends*. Rogers explained this was to demonstrate clients receiving person-centred

therapy, 'behave in ways which are less defensive, more socialised, more acceptant of

reality in himself and his social environment' (Rogers 1961, p.259). It was significant to Rogers' inquiry that the client did not just feel different internally, but externally changed as corroborated between observers, participants and social 'reality' (which has distinct internal and external formulations).

. For Rogers, therefore, changing and becoming different are salient not only in the client's perceptions, but among observers' experiences too. This would imply that being and reality is constituted by more than experiencing and can be understood to some degree by externally observable means – simultaneously challenging the foundational phenomenological conceptualisation of conscious experiencing as unable to be known this way (Giorgi 2020) and problematizing an intepretivist-phenomenological understanding of the person-centred approach. In reflecting on and observing our own work and relationships, Rogers acknowledges self-deception is a concern we must hold in mind and account for. Therefore, If we insist on an interpretivist-phenomenological understanding of the person-centred approach, how should we justify deviating from these concerns?

This is not to say that our conceptions of onto-epistemology can't grow past Rogers' and his associates' work. However, it is problematic that one might apply his work without a fundamental consideration of how the person-centred approach's central tenets are impacted when onto-epistemic positions shift to inherently contradictory approaches, such as interpretivist-phenomenology.

Covert Realism in Practice

The final criticism I raise of interpretive-phenomenology relates to person-centred practice. Pocock challenges constructivist positions in the therapy room, asserting, 'When strong constructionism no longer supports practice, we become covert realists' (2016, p.168). This begs the question – even if one claims an interpretive-

phenomenological conception of the person-centred approach, is that consistent with how one actually practices? If so, is this desirable?

Let's examine Pocock's assertion through a thought-experiment. Imagine that a client discloses to you that they were having a sexual relationship with a ten-year old child in their care. They explain, in a manner encountered as genuine in your empathic capacities, that they are in love with this child and the child is in love with them. They express sadness, for they can't disclose this important and meaningful relationship with significant close relations for fear of stigmatisation, but take solace that they get to experience this love and joy themselves.

How should we meet this experience? In the client's experiencing, there is nothing wrong or afoul – they are having a relationship that, while self-admittedly is socially unacceptable, is loving and meaningful to them. This satisfies the criteria for constituting reality in an interpretivist-phenomenology. Do we accept this experience as presented, for we cannot know what is best for the Other? Do we consider the child's reality in this decision, when we cannot engage with it and it is accounted for through the client's experience? Do we challenge the client relationally, in the dialogue – and if so, on what grounds do we challenge their reality from our own? Do we intervene by breaking confidentiality or notifying protective services – choosing regulatory or governmental authorities' reality over our client's? How do we choose whether to support or challenge the client's reality from an interpretivist-phenomenological position?

The stated example may seem extreme. It may to some person-centred practitioners seem I present a client who is "bad" and needs dealt with; this is not my intent, nor do I wish to characterise a person who discloses thusly as some kind of caricatured bogeyman. Nevertheless, I must insist that we consider our conceptual

foundations at the highest reasonable stakes; our philosophical underpinnings must be stress-tested at the greatest magnitude of what can genuinely arise in our work, for this is where inconsistency and incongruity are most likely to be exposed. Entertaining such possibilities, admittedly, means confronting what Schmid (2003, p. 111) identifies as taboo in person-centred philosophy: addressing aggression that evidently manifests between persons in society.

Schmid (2012a, p. 45) acknowledges that, 'Some person-centred therapists tend to avoid confronting their own and their clients' feelings of aggression and dealing with so-called negative feelings or thoughts', and I implore that readers overcome this temptation less they practice a 'watered-down version' of the person-centred approach. Rogers' spoke openly to his understanding and awareness of humanity's capacity for cruelty or 'evil', as Schmid (2012a) attests, and these edges of personhood are as much a part of us as are other emotions or affectation. I believe engaging these edges can only serve to further our development through the 'counter' element of en-*counter* (Schmid 2012b, p. 102) So too does it facilitate our clients' processes; though difficult to sit with in such a case as this, I agree with Bohart's (2012, p. 61-62) stance that, in the unique self-organising wisdom of a given client, confronting one's dysfunction or 'dark side' can be part of, or even necessary, in engaging what the client needs to grow, and this may be part of what is occurring in such a client disclosure.

However, even if such a presentation might be important for the clients' process, this scenario acknowledge a clients' process is interrelated with Others', and we will need to at times make difficult decisions about how we meet these processes professionally. In order to make such decisions, practicable understandings of safeguarding and ethical action should be consistent with our philosophical understandings of reality and knowledge. Willig states, 'A commitment to collaborative

working does nothing to loosen the therapist's ties with their [philosophical] assumptions' (2019, p.190). We must be willing to see if a collaboration that can plausibly arise in practice challenges our philosophical foundations and, if it does, consider if they are fit for purpose. Levinas writes, 'Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy' (1969, p.304); congruent practice, I contend, demands an onto-epistemic approach that leads clearly to ethical reality.

I posit that the privileging of specific realities or values despite the proposed immanent nature of Other feels inevitable the proposed scenario. This is not completely incompatible with an interpretivist-phenomenological approach; Schmid acknowledges that, 'The a-contextual dual is an artificial construct…. [T]here are many Others, the Others of the Others…. Even in one-to-one therapy the Others are present' (2003, p.112). However, Schmid (2019) later insists that this ontological feature means, '[H]ow to act is no longer obvious, and the question of justice and necessity of judgement arise. This provides space for freedom and makes it necessary for us to distinguish and to decide' (p. 207). This creates a contradiction in my mind; the practitioner has agency of decision-making, and yet on what grounds is this agency exercised? If we have no claim to knowledge of the Other in their alien nature, let alone the Other's Others, how do we determine what is just, or what constitutes a good judgement? If in 'acknowledging the Other we are able (and urged) to respond', making every relationship an '*ethical challenge*' (Schmid 2019, p. 207), how do we claim any authority, knowledge, or grounds for decisions made without putting our experience before the 'freedom' of the Other in the proposed case?

Pocock (2016) reflects of such issues, '[W]ithout a realist ontology little can be said on how a therapist should decide which ideas to bring to the dialogue' (p.173).

Burr (1998) acknowledges this danger as it pertains to socio-ethical issues from constructivist positioning, explaining:

> [T]he decision about where to get off the constructionist wagon seems prompted by the fear of losing our critical edge on important social phenomena, such as inequality or oppression, which threaten to become casualties of relativism and turn into just another story, just another way of interpreting the social text (Burr 1998, p.23)

Even the unconditional acceptance of truth in the Others' experience in the presented situation would imply ontological preference (that of the client's reality over potentially our own or the child). To intervene either implies some moral realism (e.g. positing an applicable maxim such as, 'children cannot give informed consent in sexual relationships with their caregiver'), or constitutes a meeting of two contrary immediate 'truths' – that of therapist and client – which I have acknowledged as dialogically problematic in their phenomenologically untranslatable nature.

Outlining Critical Realism

Given these challenges associated with interpretivist-phenomenological understandings of person-centred therapy, I propose an alternative: critical realism. This section outlines critical realism's ontological and epistemological positions before considering application to the person-centred approach.

Critical realism is a philosophy posited by Roy Bhaskar (1975; 1993; 1998a) characterised by transcendental realism, critical naturalism, explanatory critique and applications in dialectic modes (Archer et. al 1998). These ideas were later developed by thinkers such as Margaret Archer, Andrew Sayer, Andrew Collier, Tony Lawson, Justin Cruickshank, and others. The logical derivations on which Bhaskar bases his conclusions can't be comprehensively presented in this article's limitations. Therefore,

I'll offer an overview of critical realism's tenets for theoretical application to the person-centred approach.

Critical realism can be characterised as three philosophical positions: ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and judgemental rationality. Reality is considered external and independent of human agents (ontological realism), but knowledge exists only through human subjectivity (epistemic relativism). Bhaskar (1975) calls this onto-epistemology transcendental realism. Bhaskar reflects that transcendental realism, 'Regards the objects of knowledge as the structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena; and the knowledge as produced in the social activity of science' (1998b, p.19). This formulation holds knowledge/science as a subject-dependent phenomenon distinct from subject-independent truth. Bhaskar challenges empiricist positions that claims regarding causal natures require observation incorporating sense-experience (such as interpretivist-phenomenology and positivism), insisting they belie 'a concealed anthropocentricity' (1998b, p.26) that scaffolds truth onto human experience itself. Bhaskar calls this the 'epistemic fallacy', which he defines as, 'the view that statements about being can be reduced to or analysed in terms of statements about knowledge' (1998b, p.27). Bhaskar's transcendental realism specifically avoids this by proposing ontology and epistemology as distinct in their subject-dependence.

This conceptualisation of science and its objects as separate is largely achieved by scrutinising "hard" sciences. Extending this formulation to social science requires an establishment of critical naturalism, based on intransitivity, transfactuality and stratification, which Bhaskar introduces in *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1998a) and is developed considerably by Margaret Archer in *Realist Social Theory: A Morphogenetic Approach* (1995) and later works. Critical naturalism eschews efforts to draw onto-epistemic equivalence between social science and natural sciences, again challenging

empirical accounts that insist on a unitary approach to knowledge-generation in our engagement with reality. Critical naturalism accepts society, and likewise social science, as an irrevocably open system that cannot be closed by epistemic understanding, but rejects the post-modern conceptualisation of reality as rooted in discourse which, Archer contends, 'condemn[s] the explanatory enterprise as such and replac[es] it by aesthetic appreciation' (Archer 1998, p.194). Therefore, the intransitive, real objects that social science is concerned with are independent of experiencing or conceptualising of them.

Since society is an entity that changes form, organisation, and constituents in ways that preclude its continued existence – Archer encapsulates this with the term 'morphogenetic' (1995, p.135) – the objects of social study for critical realism must be intransitive for knowledge to be reflective of real phenomena. Bhaskar (1998a) claims that the intransitive aspects of society are *relational*. These are not constituted of specific units of individuals or groups, but the dynamic interactions between both that make up and prolong societal organisation. These relational social objects are considered transfactual; they are persistent, continuous and necessary with regard to social relating (even if outcomes in application or perceived forms are not identical, given society's open system). Elements of the person-centred approach correspond with this understanding, such Rogers' (2007) necessary and sufficient conditions as operable through subject, environment, and relationship, with results that are consistent (actualising tendency is engaged), while specific outcomes are not identical for each person. Furthermore, this is consistent with the conceptualisation of personhood as constituted by a fundamental *we*, implied by Rogers (2007) and described by Schmid (2003), which states it is only through relating that a person can exist, be known, and can change, as opposed to being an a-contextual, independent entity.

Society is made of much more than transfactual objects, and Bhaskar (1998a) concludes that ontology is stratified into three domains– the real, the actual and the empirical. Stratified ontology indicates different categories of being which comprise knowable reality, but refer to different levels of subject-independence. The 'real' refers to intransitive, unchanging features that structure reality or independently existent objects. The 'actual' is the transitive realm where real objects or structures are enacted or engaged into event or processual action. Finally, the 'empirical' is the slice of the other two domains that are experienced by subjects, the knowledge/experiencing of which may then impact dynamics within social systems (Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer 2004). This stratifying of reality is essential to Critical Realism's ontological model as it meets social interaction; it explicitly uncouples experiencing/observation by a human agent as necessary for existence of an object, while maintaining the existential position of a person's uniqueness through empirical experiencing. It also allows for the existence of intransitive processes in human relations alongside a logical formulation of agency, freedom, and self-determinism in the open system of society (Collier 1998, p.263). This encourages a historically embedded understanding of contingent social-relational dynamics that may imply or affect contingent outcomes (i.e. the history of a group can impact its future inter/intra-relational dynamics).

Bhaskar's conceptualisation of explanatory critique was initially acknowledged in *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1998a), but not fully developed until later in *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (1986). Bhaskar leverages explanatory critique as a means of engaging social claims and evaluating their correlation with reality. Bhaskar asserts that philosophical argument and understanding can be a mechanism for *discovering* intransitive social truths through the rational presentation and critical engagement with social phenomena. This 'discovery' process is not direct or evident

through observation; while we don't have direct access to truth in our subjective experiencing, logic presents a frame for what *can* be true and what *cannot* without having access to truth in empirical experience. In this sense, explanatory critique helps to a form what might be imagined as a means of silhouetting of truth; by making negative space apparent, we can make more accurate knowledge claims regarding what that truth can or cannot be without actually having unadulterated access to the truth itself through our empirical experience. The case example of this is Marx's *Capital* that used formal logic and social science to expose aspects of capitalism that are systemically misrepresented (and potentially deliberately obscured) by inspecting the object itself: capitalism. *Capital* was a revolutionary socialist text not by advocating ideology, but observing features of capitalism that inherently undermined both capitalism's premises and reality. Critical-logical engagement with social science's objects is the essence of explanatory critique, and implies a capacity to discover intransitive properties rationally. It also invites this reflexive process of judgement and critical engagement as one that is ongoing; Marx did not dialogue with Adam Smith himself, but rather the system as it continued to play out after the theoretical propositions of capitalism were put forth and enacted in reality. We engage with such aspects of evaluation continuously and as a community – rather than any singular individual having the power to declare a knowledge claim as true.

This process is not fool-proof; humans are prone to basing logic on knowledge which is not correlated with truth, ending up with false conclusions (for example, geocentric models of the universe being logically derived from a felt-sense that the earth is static and stable, while the sun appears to move in the sky). In other words, simply because something feels or appears 'true', that does not mean that it is; truth-immediacy is not an aspect of critical realism, and so there will always be doubt in knowledge

claims' correlation with truth. All claims must be critically evaluated and are subject to explanatory critique as we acquire more knowledge to re-evaluate such positions with. Nevertheless, this process' efficacy when premises are relatively sound yields for Bhaskar a limited form of moral realism, where some ethical/moral positions are intransitive in social systems. Central to Bhaskar's moral position in applying explanatory critique is an assumed inherent value to truth and elimination of false belief (1998a), as both enable agents freedom within social systems.

Shifting to Critical Realism in Person-Centred Psychotherapy

Critical realism, if accepted, has a number of applications within the person-centred approach. Particularly, critical realism provides a more congruent onto-epistemic foundation than the interpretivist-phenomenological alternative for fundamental theories and practices that underpin person-centred psychotherapy. Furthermore, I posit critical realism makes sense of how theory, research and practice meet, and relieves tensions in understanding how a person-centred practitioner might approach knowledge-generation regarding therapeutic practice. The next sections will expand upon these applications in greater detail.

Towards a Philosophy Congruent with the Person-Centred Approach

Rogers explored congruence from many angles, but his articulation in "The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Personality Change" covers the essentials: '[Congruence] means that within the relationship he is freely and deeply himself, with his actual experience accurately represented by his awareness of himself. It is the opposite of presenting a façade, either knowingly or unknowingly' (2007, p.243). Rogers explained that a therapist should be, as much as possible, integrated, genuine, and being in accordance with their feelings and experience. I agree with Schmid (2003) that striving

for congruence extends beyond the therapeutic hour; we must wonder about our practice's philosophical foundations, and evaluate whether they are congruent with who and how we are as person-centred practitioners. The congruence I am reaching for in exploring critical realism is the type Rogers describes when invoking Kierkegaard's words: "'to be that self which one truly is'" (Rogers 1961, p.166, citing Kierkegaard 1941, p.29).

To that end, even the idea of congruence as presented, that the way that one acts is in alignment with how they *are*, implies an ontology where how one is has separate components of experiencing and being, contradicting interpretivist-phenomenological ideas. Even as I accept the person as in process rather than fixed (Rogers 1961, p.186-187), and that the Other's internal world is unknowable and to some degree ineffable as conceived through the *Thou-I* relationship (Schmid 2003, p.111), being congruent requires alignment of one's inner experiencing/process with externalised being/process. Psychotherapy permits opportunity for the client to empirically encounter disconnect between these realities as the therapist openly attempts to understand the client. However, a interpretivist-phenemonological understanding of experience as being confounds this dynamic; how can I experience, feel, or believe myself to exist in a certain way, but, in reality, *not be* in that way if all that fulfils the requirement for being is experiencing?

Critical realism's ontological stratification between the real, actual and empirical gives us a language to better locate congruence as a phenomenon. In critical realism, truth and experience are disentangled, so that one might experience something, even about themselves, without it necessarily being *true*. The therapist is not truth's arbiter, but rather the therapeutic relationship becomes inherently occupied with the nature of the client with openness to reality (Rogers 1961, p.284-285) accessed by the relational

en-counter (Schmid 2019). In this model, the subjective experiencing of self is neither denied nor wholesale accepted, but rather the quality we might call congruence is an alignment of the empirical domain (self-experience) with the actual domain (the relationship with Other, including the therapist) through a mechanism of the real domain (the actualising tendency). This stratification permits us the possibility to retain interpretivist-phenomenological conceptualisations within the empirical domain encountered in session, if we so choose. I stated previously the ideas of the fundamental *we*, *en-counter*, and the *Thou-I* relationship all are immensely enriching conceptualisations in person-centred psychotherapeutic practice; it is this stratified ontological model allows me to endorse Schmid's conceptions, which make incredible sense within the empirical domain through which we encounter the world, while also challenging an interpretivist-phenomenological onto-epistemic position as it relates to other ontological domains.

Critical realism's actual domain conceptualisation supports the idea that a being-self cannot be limited only to experiencing, but is inherently relational and transitive, contingent on how one engages with other subjects and objects in the world to substantiate being, inclusive of the client's encounter with the therapist (i.e. the fundamental *we)*Acknowledging the significance of the shared reality between *Thou-I* requires reality to be constituted by something greater than one's experiencing, and critical realism offers the tools for conceptualising this intelligibly with the subjectivity of each person still respected in the encounter.

Thus far, I have established that critical realism can make similar sense of such propositions as interpretive-phenomenology. However, critical realism offers something beyond this – namely a way to congruently align acceptance of the alien nature of Other while also positing relational conditions that might foster therapeutic change. This can

be done by stratifying such knowledge as relating to the real domain. Through this ontological model, we can accept commonalities in the fostering of therapeutic change and growth as *intransitive* elements of human relating. This supports rationally the simultaneous unknowability of the Other empirically alongside presupposition that offering the necessary and sufficient conditions will provide therapeutic change, or that all living organisms have an actualising tendency that fosters such change. These are no longer incongruent conclusions to hold together; they simply operate on different ontological strata which we seek to represent through applicable knowledge claims. This means we can put forward and discover these fundamental understanding of the properties of human relationships and therapeutic work without claiming expertise through empirical experiencing or over an actual relationship.

Openness to More than My Experience in Research

Earlier, I acknowledged that both positivist and constructivist perspectives, including interpretivist-phenomenology, approach knowledge generation in a manner that is truth-immediate. This means ontology and epistemology are conflated, committing Bhaskar's epistemic fallacy; truth is reduced to perspectives and becomes untranslatable beyond the experiencing of truth.

Framing person-centred research in a critical realist framework changes this. Instead of yielding truth, experience constitutes but one aspect of generating knowledge. The subjective encounter can connect with transitive and intransitive aspects of the studied object about which claims and metatheories can be developed regarding how that knowledge might connect with aspects of reality. However, this knowledge is not burdened with the expectation that it constitutes 'truth' itself. Instead, it is expected that multiple contradictory perspectives and experiences of the same event or phenomena may occur, and that these differences are inherent to human subjectivity. These

contradictions present opportunity for genuine en-*counter*, inclusive of the wonder such a position invites (Bazzano 2014; Schmid 2019), with the actual and real objects or structures at play in the relational process in which empirical difference arises. Rather than making an epistemic impasse, such differences become easily recognised opportunities for dialogue and discovery.

The implication of this is three-fold. Firstly, this allows person-centred practitioners to dialogue in a meaningful way with other epistemic modalities without viewing the self-experience as wholly constitutive of truth - even if one might regard it as primary and the greatest authority in our learning (Rogers 1961, p.23). This aligns with Rogers' previous reflection on the use of science as a means of preventing self-deception: the empirical becomes one aspect of encountering validity, but empirical experience itself is not tantamount to validity. In the dialogical meeting we bring our own experience, but this framing gives us good reason to approach other's research that is counter to our own with openness about what might be learned from difference (just as we do with our clients). Critical realism, therefore, gives a more robust framework than interpretive-phenomenology of how we might achieve Rogers "new integration".

Secondly, this means that research claims can be made without having to assume the expert role over the subjects or objects we are inquire about. Abdication of expert-ness on any experience other than our own is an essential aspect of person-centred ethics (Schmid 2003, p.113; Ong, Murphy, and Joseph 2020 p.172-173). Making our claims softer (pertaining to knowledge, rather than truth), means that we can collaborate in knowledge-generation processes without taking a role that is misaligned with our approach's ethics. Thus, we are invited to press forward in inquiry without fear of later being "wrong" as we are critically engaged (by self or Other) regarding the knowledge we have previously formulated. If in time we find past knowledge incongruent with new

information, we can re-evaluate, revise, and strive towards formulating new knowledge that hopefully aligns better with the truth we have veiled access to through empirical experience - –embracing our researcher-self process as ever-changing and fluid, rather than fixed, just as we accept our personhood to be.

Abdicating claims to truth/expertise naturally permits a wider scope of what knowledge can be generated from person-centred work on the understanding such claims will be engaged critically in efforts to better align knowledge with truth. Rather than being intractable in the subjective experience of Other (which is still constituent in the therapeutic process), knowledge generated is something understood to be encountering a potential silhouette of a real phenomenon or structure in human relating. By untying truth from experience, we are freed to wonder about how the person-centred approach can or should be practiced in light of observations formulated with respect to different ontological strata as they inflect with practice, without seizing expertise/authority in such claims. The knowledge produced cannot constitute the real object itself, but allows curiosity about the transitive and intransitive properties we may be encountering in the relational space as our knowledge base grows.

Finally, the stratified ontology of real, actual and empirical enables us to formulate how our empirical encounter of those structures may be transitively framed in the cultural milieus of particular societies, rather than regarding *my* experience as *the* experience. Serra Underruga critically observes that psychotherapy is a practice developed within a particular socio-cultural context of ideology, taboo, custom, and social phenomena, is 'produced and is productive' (2023, p.7). We should not dole out treatment in a rigid, decontextualized manner, but practice 'cultural empathy' (Crisp 2023, p.131) to develop person-centred practice in collaboration with diverse client groups, learning how to usefully engage knowledge of therapeutic structures for them. It

is not enough to acknowledge, as Schmid (2003) does, that encountering the Other means that there *are* always Other Others; we need to be able to consider *how* we engage and make sense of the Other Others in therapeutic practice, how we can ground our decisions and judgements therein. We need philosophical means to acknowledge context and work critically, informing how we meet difference and the implications on previously accepted knowledge of the person-centred approach. Critical realism enables us the possibility of generating knowledge while maintaining critical reflexivity towards foundational theories and practices as they intersect with research in different cultural contexts. This allows us, as Serra Underruga invites, 'to interrogate what are our theories and practices doing and not to simply sing their praises' (2023, pp.10) without sacrificing the ability to develop knowledge claims within our field.

Establishing Real Frameworks in the Relational Encounter

Finally, critical realism offers a means of conceiving of the relational encounter that honours the self and Other's subjective experiencing, while still rationalising psychotherapy as boundaries by real, external frameworks.

As stated prior, Pocock (2016) claims that as the practitioner nears the edges of therapeutic practice, it is difficult to meaningfully consider potential action without adopting covert realism. By adopting critical realism, however, this tension is resolved, as realism is expected and can be maintained congruently; we arrive through rational judgement at maxims for meeting the Other in such scenarios, embedded within socio-cultural and professional systems which frame the encounter. In the previously presented thought-experiment, implementing a congruent response based on western culture's conceptualisation of informed consent as a relational exchange that cannot be provided by a child is no longer problematic. The client's experience of that exchange as appropriate exists empirically, but can be false in the actual ontological domain; we

can meaningfully empathise with them as a victim of the self-deception Rogers described, and offer them unconditional positive regard without accepting their experience as naively true. This simultaneously holds in acceptance the client's experiencing, while offering philosophical grounds that it cannot be permitted to continue ethically for the child's safety as understood through professional and socio-cultural ethical frameworks.

Being able to incorporate this stratified ontology has powerful implications on not just relational dilemmas in session, but on the meta-practice of person-centred psychotherapy. Making use of informed, multidisciplinary means of auditing aspects of the counselling relationship, such as risk assessment measures, no longer becomes a challenge to the subjective engagement with the therapeutic relationship – instead they become useful contributing knowledge sources that can inform decision-making. The therapist's experience of the relational encounter is still the primary constituent of knowledge (Rogers 1961, p. 23), but it need not be isolated in this quality.

Similarly, ethical developments and implementation into practice can become considered in realist terms; we can discover practicable ways of offering therapeutic intervention which promotes safety and beneficence to our clients in the specific context in which it is being implemented, open for critical evaluation by our peers. This philosophically frames the practicalities of therapeutic service delivery as based in, ideally, something greater than arbitrary perspective or authoritarian dogma, neither solely based in nor completely extracted from the experience in the room. I've found this framing particularly valuable for person-centred trainee therapists   at the beginnings of developing their awareness of self and others. These practitioners need boundaries and guidelines that can provide stability to the trainee without contradicting

the onto-epistemic philosophical foundations of congruent, relational person-centred practice.

Critical realism allows us to continue to engage in the subjectivity of the therapeutic relationship while also holding socio-cultural narratives of oppression and historicity in mind that might present in the therapeutic context. Much work is being done in decolonising the curricula and knowledge in which psychotherapy is framed, and critical realism offers a formulation of knowledge that facilitates this process. Critical realism allows the incorporation of not just the here-and-now experiencing of the therapeutic relationship, but also invites us to consider transitive aspects of what plays out between therapist and client in the embedded socio-cultural framing between the identities and contexts of *Thou* and *I*.

Conclusion

I have presented a challenge to the dominant interpretivist-phenomenological approach to person-centred therapy. This challenge largely stems in the difficulty this philosophy presents in establishing a congruence between practice, research, and theory in our field. As an alternative, I propose framing person-centred work within a critical realist lens – accepting ontological realism alongside epistemic relativism. This permits a more robust framing of the 'real' as it meets person-centred theory (esp. ideas regarding congruence) that both holds the subjectivity of Other while acknowledging other stratifications of reality. Critical realism provides a means for us to continue generating knowledge without assuming expertise over the other, a lens by which to continually critically evaluate our intervention's position as it is implemented in other socio-cultural contexts, and a path to inquire into the nature of real objects that might facilitate engagement of our clients actualising tendencies without a continuous questioning of our theoretical underpinning. Finally, critical realism gives us a means to meaningfully

wonder about how we might relationally meet our clients, and to bring our philosophy of theory and research in line with the practicalities of holding, maintaining and facilitating the therapeutic relationship in an ethical manner when we encounter the other.

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