

Editorial: Explaining Psychotherapy and Psychotherapeutic Explanation

Abstract *The Editorial shows how all four papers move in their different ways from a narrower to a more extended notion of explanation in the human realm, which is named in the last of the papers, moving from explanation in terms of causes to explanation in terms of reasons, and how we have to encompass both to work with our full humanity as practitioners,—whether in the realm of trauma work; thinking about human existential development; the use of humour in our work; or causes and reasons themselves; the themes of the four papers.*

What is psychotherapy and what kind of ‘causality’ does it involve?

All four papers in this issue discuss and analyse issues which are on the boundary between causal explanation, and reasons or motives for action, and we close with a paper which, in a context of clinical relevance, succinctly analyses the relationship between these. This tension between causes, and reasons or motives, is at the heart of the issue of the kinds of causality or causalities which are intrinsic to psychotherapy, and this in turn fundamentally affects both our sense of what we do, and, in consequence, what we actually do, (which is itself an expression of the relevant kind of reflexive causality).

If we seek clarity about what psychotherapy does, and in what sense, one way forward is to identify a minimal definition of what is common to all forms of psychotherapy. Such a minimal definition would not be the whole of the description of psychotherapy; even if the strategy was successful, further work would of course have to be done on the *specifics* and differentiating elements of the modalities. With that proviso, we might nevertheless say:

Psychotherapy is a self-reflexive technical process, which enables personal change through bringing about emotional change, and which of its very nature works on the boundaries between causes, and reasons or motives.

If we were to add in the provisos, it would become more clumsily:

Psychotherapy is a self-reflexive technical process, but not merely technique, which enables personal change through bringing about emotional change, though not confined in its process to that, and that of its very nature works on the boundaries between causes, and reasons or motives. All approaches will draw on additional elements, cognitive and volitional elements for instance, in a special way relevant to their modalities.

(In this definition we are not to think of ‘emotion’ as an isolated mode of ‘mere feeling’ but as a form of being in the world, which carries the full range of intentional and belief-informed significance, attributed to it by people with visions as apparently different as those of Bowlby, Lacan, Heidegger, and Aaron Beck.)

If we think now about the kinds of ‘technique’ and ‘technical understanding’ which are relevant to psychotherapy,—such things as listening, mirroring, psychodramatic enactment, interpretation, suggestion, and so on,—it is clear that, in their influence upon emotion and its related elements, the elements of ordinary linear causation, and of the intention-embedded reasons for action, are utterly interwoven, (as I argued some time ago, Wilkinson, 1998).

What is pertinent to our papers, is that one might even analyse the spectrum of different ideological and ontological positions in psychotherapy in terms of how far they approximate to a 'causal explanation' model, and how far to a 'reasons and motives explanation' model. For instance, the question how far one believes in the 'reality' of 'diagnostic categories' such as those of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) is a question in major part of how far one upholds a causal and predictive reality in those categories, and those who object that they are purely constructs which miss the existential reality and richness of being a person (e.g., Mahrer, 1996) will be implicitly arguing that human categories of being function as reasons and motives, which can be indefinitely reshaped and reframed, and not as causes. As we shall see when we turn to Carl Goldberg's paper, this is a modern version of the old 'freewill/determinism' argument.

Straker *et al*

Thus again, for instance, Straker *et al.*, in their paper on trauma and disconnection, are engaged in a mainly implicit debate with Ian Hacking's thesis in *Rewriting the soul* (Hacking, 1995), that 'trauma' is a *metaphor* for our world and our epoch, analogous to that of demonic possession in the Middle Ages, and that therefore its functioning and validity are those of a social construct. That would be a primarily 'reasons and motives' model, which, in Hacking's thesis, forms the base for a kind of constructivist reductionism of a sort with which we are becoming fairly familiar nowadays. In response, they say:

While all this may be true, it still seems credible to suggest that exposure to trauma is predictive of psychopathology, given cumulative evidence from longitudinal and predictive studies.

This clearly invokes 'causality' in the 'causal explanation' sense.

But in fact they offer a richly layered integrative account of both the network of the causalities involved,—trauma viewed in relation to: biological theory; information processing theory; cognitive theories; psychodynamic theories; self-psychological theories; and Lacanian theory relating to the Real, all of which they view as primarily supplementing not contradicting one another,—and the appropriate forms of intervention which follow from our understanding of these, which are integrative intervention systems in the sense of developing distinct modalities of interventions in relation to different layers of the difficulties. In respect of these networks of causality they emphasise the Breuer/Janet tradition of disconnection, rather than the Freudian concept of overwhelmment of the stimulus barrier, though (for example in their use of the Lacanian conception of the Real, which relates to the Freudian notions of overwhelmment) it is clear these are not mutually contradictory. But the integrative and synthesising thrust of the paper, which is drawn together in the clinical example they describe, makes it also approximate to the dimension of 'reasons and motives' and, in an implicit integrative gesture towards Ian Hacking's position from which they began, they end by emphasising individual extraordinariness:

An integration into popular trauma discourses of notions not only of resilience but even of extraordinariness would seem at this point to be important. Such an integration might help mental health professionals to reconnect with their clients in more open ways, as the evidence builds that trauma may have outcomes other than or in addition to psychopathology.

Goldberg

Dr Goldberg's paper gives the whole question a new twist. The whole emphasis of Carl Goldberg's work, in the light of our distinction between causal explanation, and reasons or

motives for action, might be described as being to explore the question *how human beings learn to transform themselves from beings driven by causes, to beings responsive to reasons and intelligible motives*. In other words, it is the question of how human beings *acquire* freewill and the capacity for freedom. The present paper is a rich exploration of certain dimensions of this, which moves transformingly from the classical psychoanalytic position on the dialectics of self-deception, a position predicated by Freud upon the basis of psychic determinism, i.e., classical causality, to a creative understanding of the dialectics of self-discovery and self-examination, which is then explored in terms of the full human and existential basis of human moral and emotional development. In line, I think, with the implicit recognition of the centrality of fully human intentionality, based upon reasons and motives not causes, his view of this brings the work of psychotherapists much nearer to the traditional understandings (such as those of Dr Samuel Johnson, Wordsworth, or Goethe) of the helper (who is nowadays designated as a professional) as a befriender and companion, not merely a facilitator. Drawing from West and East, ancient and modern, science and literature, he construes this in terms of the development of the self, which he clarifies as an existential journey of realisation of possibilities, neither merely inner and archetypal, in Jungian mode, nor merely to do with the resolution of polarised demand responses to the human social world, in Eriksonian mode, but an indissoluble conjunction of both:

—at our core we desire to participate intimately in the happenings of each of our option selves no less than we intend to participate in the external world

In this subtle and enlarged view of development he touches upon the dimensions of the sensory-cognitive; the courageous-creative; the intuitive emotional; the passionate social; and the volitional-spiritual, in terms of the dialectics of: Certainty versus Curiosity; Discovery versus Industriousness; Vulnerability versus Power; Self-Awareness versus Peer Influence; and Compassion versus Accountability. These, then, are the categories of the fully human. (All of this looks onward to another paper from Dr Goldberg, to be published soon, which examines the human developmental process of those who became Nazi functionaries, and their opponents, in the extermination culture of the Nazi state.)

Friedler

Rasia Freidler's brief but delightful paper takes all this in another highly relevant direction when she calls our attention to the role of humour in both our work and in modern life. Humour is part of the fully human, and, as Freud saw, has quite powerful instinctual components, yet it is clearly a major paradigm of what makes us human, we being the animal that laughs as well as cries, of what enables us both to enjoy and to endure life, and to transform it, and yet it is massively neglected in psychotherapy, even seen as a deflection from its serious task. Freidler calls attention to the explosion of humour in our world, especially on the Internet:

—through the smile produced by those slight quips that modify the meaning of a statement, the ordinary is turned into a revelation.

And she notes

When the therapist limits him or herself to barely pointing out the possible subconscious meanings present in the joke or mechanism in play, it is because in one way or another, theory has imposed itself as both truth and death of the imagination.

Again, we see the break out, through humour this time, into the fully human realm, implicitly transcending mechanistic models of causality. This paper is a breath of fresh air.

Tantam

In effect I have been drawing upon and using Professor Tantam's succinct paper in the whole of this editorial, for his paper addresses the whole dimension of causality in the human realm, not only addressing the dimension of the polarity between ordinary causal explanation, and explanation in terms of reasons or motives, but also drawing out the implications of the reflexive element in the latter, whereby what, when not named as a factor in motivation, is a dubious and conjectural reason, may become itself a reason in motivation, once it is named and articulated as a belief. Thus, if I construe myself as a member of a victimised or stigmatised group, then this belief system itself has a role in changing my position in relation to the world, even if it is not true, or not true in the sense I believe it is.

Thus Tantam brings out in his own way the subtle dialectic process of cause and reason which constitutes our humanity, and he neatly illustrates it with a therapy situation familiar to us all, where someone comes to believe the 'cause' of their behaviour is childhood sexual abuse. With this we return to the many layered understanding of trauma as presented by Straker et al. In a particular instance, whatever the 'facts' in the realm of what may be regarded as fact, the 'truth' will always be an indissoluble compound of event and belief, past and present, cause and reason. As psychotherapists we must inhabit our full humanity:

Psychiatrists and psychologists might specialise in memory, or perception or some facet of human action. However, if they are really to study people, then they must manage to have a binocular vision which gives place to explanations in terms of cause and in terms of reason.

New Developments

We are in a transitional phase and there are no book reviews in this issue. I would like to thank Lesley Murdin for her fine contribution over the years as Book Reviews Editor. She will be hard to replace but burdens of her work have made it necessary for her to stand down. In our next issue we shall prepare for significant developments in both the character of the journal, which will nevertheless be based upon its core character, and in its presentation, price and marketing.

References

- HACKING, I. (1995). *Rewriting the soul*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
 MAHRER, A.R. (1996). *The complete guide to experiential psychotherapy*. New York: Wiley.
 WILKINSON, H. (1998). 'Phenomenological causality: and why we avoid examining the nature of causality in psychotherapy: a dialogue', *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, 3, 2, pp. 147-164.

Résumé *L'éditorial démontre comment les 4 articles, chacun à leur façon, passent d'une notion d'explication étroite du domaine humain, à une notion plus large qui est nommé dans le dernier article, passant d'une explication en termes de causes à une en termes de raisons, et comment en tant que praticiens, si nous voulons travailler avec toute notre humanité, nous devons intégrer ces deux approches—que ce soit dans le domaine du travail du trauma; quand nous pensons au développement existentiel humain; lorsque nous utilisons l'humour dans notre travail; quand nous examinons les causes et raisons elles mêmes; qui sont les thème de ces 4 articles.*

Zusammenfassung *Der Leitartikel zeigt wie alle vier Artikel sich auf verschiedene Art von einer verengten hin zu einer erweiterten Vorstellung von Erklärung in der menschlichen Welt bewegen. Die Bewegung erfolgt von der Erklärung der Ursachen bis zur Erklärung von Gründen und wie wir beide verinnerlichen müssen, um mit unserer ganzen Humanität als Therapeuten zu arbeiten, -ob im Bereich der Arbeit mit Trauma, dem Gedanken über die Entwicklung von menschlicher Existenz, dem Einsatz von Humor in unserer Arbeit oder Ursachen und Gründe selbst, welches die Themen der vier Artikel umfasst.*

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