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Foundational principles of psychotherapy: A response to Al Mahrer

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Mahrer has presented us with 74 beliefs, assumed to underpin current research paradigms used by the international community of researchers in psychotherapy. Most of these beliefs are not foundational, nor are they currently endorsed by the majority of researchers in this field. The following arguments are briefly put forward: (a) Mahrer's view of a conventional philosophy of science is culturally encapsulated and reflects the Euro-American ideology that has its roots in the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries; (b) the beliefs he has articulated reflect derivative questions, rather than foundational questions, the latter of which were addressed in the classical philosophical literature of 2200 and more years ago; (c) the beliefs he attacks are, among researchers in the social sciences, largely archaic and no longer rigorously endorsed; (d) a canonical knowledge base bearing on philosophical principles of research in psychology does not exist. The first and the twelfth beliefs posited by Mahrer are, by way of example, briefly examined.

Key words: History of psychotherapy, Modernist bias, Philosophy of science.

The problem that many serious psychologists will have with this article is that there are no demonstrations of the principles that the author proposes. Long discarded beliefs about objectivity in research and the passionless pursuit of Truth are presented as if they were still current. When they are disputed, gratuitous counter-arguments are presented, often with reference to the personal experiential psychotherapy that Dr. Mahrer has developed. He has replaced archaic beliefs with undemonstrated novel beliefs of his own. This is not a cogent epistemic strategy. Before, however, I present a critique of Dr. Mahrer's article, I'd like to state what I find useful and positive about it.

He has presented us with a breathtakingly iconoclastic view of the field of psychotherapy. It is a view grounded in the traditions of Western

psychiatry and the secular approaches to healing that have blossomed in Europe and North America since the Enlightenment. I concede from the outset that it is always a laudable service to review the underpinning principles of a discipline and to encourage practitioners to critically examine the assumptions and the clinical principles that are operative in their daily practice. This Al Mahrer has done. That he refers to the principles he disputes as *beliefs* reveals the relativism and skepticism with which he approaches this entire field of inquiry.

Cultural encapsulation

Having acknowledged that, it must be noted that there is an ahistoric character to this

analysis. We are presented a decontextualized set of beliefs that few scholars would endorse today. It is always useful to place a field of inquiry into a historical and cultural framework. So let it be said from the outset that Mahrer's framework is a Western one, and in varying stages of disrepair. As our students (and multiculturalists, generally) do not tire of reminding us, there are more philosophies and psychotherapies operative in the world than were dreamt of by the culturally encapsulated theoreticians of the 19th and 20th century. Multicultural approaches to psychotherapy have flourished in the past generation. It is for this reason, for example, that Corsini and Wedding (2000), the editors of *Current Psychotherapies*, (the best selling English-language textbook in the world on psychotherapy) have added a chapter on Asian psychotherapy to their latest edition. And the popularity of the works of Al Ivey and his associates (Ivey, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 1993) or of Paul Pedersen (2000) attests to the multicultural spin that large numbers of clinical educators give to their training programs. There are few books on the philosophy of science as it relates to our field that do not integrate multicultural principles in their exposition of the subject matter. But all the "foundational beliefs" that Mahrer refers to, and disputes, are derivative largely of mid-20th century Euro-American research, practice, and training. And the research principles that he refers to are predominately logico-positivistic, springing from a (Auguste) Comtian philosophy of science.

Historical grounding

If one is going to expatiate on "foundational beliefs" one needs to ask foundational questions. Examples are: Is change possible? Can individuals freely will to change? Can one person help another person change his or her personality or character? Indeed, what is personality, the matter the therapist presumes to

want to change or collaborate in changing? What are the dynamics of change? To what extent is human personality shaped by physiological variables (let's say, modern analogs of phlegm, yellow bile, black bile, and blood). Does the capability for change diminish with age? Is character largely crystallized by pre-pubescence? Does rationality have primacy and dominion over emotionality, the neocortex over the reptilian complex and the endocrinological? Just what is the role of the unconscious or the praeter-conscious in the governance of human behavior? If we answer these questions, how will our answers influence our psychotherapeutic treatment plans?

The answers to some of these truly foundational questions were addressed by Plato and Aristotle and the Sophists, Epicureans, Megareans, and Cynics of Hellenistic Greece (cf. Wolman, 1968, p. 3). Relative to the historical background of the "beliefs" that Mahrer disputes, one can trace them back to the *aesklepeia* of this period. Temple medicine and philosophical psychotherapy of that period are mirrored in the 19th century psychiatry that is epitomized by the science that took root in the Renaissance Europe of the 17th century and continued to the middle of the 20th century. The scholars of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance who revived the study of Aristotle, thanks largely to the influence of Arab philosophers, most importantly Ibn Rushd (Averroës), gave an impulse to the empirical approach to establishing scientific "truths." The logic of Western Civilization, largely of pre-Socratic and Aristotelian inspiration, is reflected in the nascent scientism of Roger Bacon and, later, Francis Bacon, Blaise Pascal, and René Descartes. In brief, if one wishes to address the foundational beliefs of contemporary scientific research, one needs to understand what it derives from. If one fails to place an investigation into a historical perspective one is engaging in a uni-culturalism of a temporal sort – the culture of the present.

Myths of science

Philosophers and sociologists of science have long recognized that science – and the research that generates it – are highly politicized (e.g., Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Mannheim, 1936). Research responds to the social and political imperatives of the society that supports and funds it. Though it enrages some scientists to hear it (e.g., Levitt, 1999) there is much evidence that science *is* socially constructed. The science that conforms to social expectations and economic needs is believed and fostered. The science that is inconsistent with such needs and expectations is neglected or does not get funded in the first place. Successful scientists rarely understand that principle. John Dupré (2000) reminds us that “Imre Lakatos once remarked that scientists typically understand science about as well as fish understand hydrodynamics.” Ask the typical scientist to define science and they will enunciate a logico-positivistic doctrine that comes straight from Auguste Comte. Scientists’ exaggerated confidence in their ability to view the world “as it is in itself” leads them to think that they are qualified to define the public policy of the societies in which they live, indeed, of the entire planet. It is this scientific and superannuated ethos that is the stalking horse for Al Mahrer.

The very first principle that Mahrer articulates is *not* generally accepted. Indeed, it is not one principle but two principles. He states “there is a cumulative body of psychotherapeutic knowledge; research is a primary gatekeeper for what is admitted into or withdrawn out of the cumulative body of knowledge.” p. 10. In fact, both of these principles ignore the most current and widely accepted framework for understanding scientific progress, to wit, Thomas S. Kuhn’s (1970) theory of paradigm shifts. Truth by accretion is a myth, which he disabled. Normal science by accumulation of findings works only within specific paradigms. When a crisis occurs within a paradigm, a scientific revolution, that is a

paradigm shift, takes place, and what previously had been accumulated is largely thrown on the rubbish heap of history. If this is true of the so-called natural sciences, it is all the more true of the social sciences, and psychotherapy in particular. Relative to the second element of this first principle, Max Planck stated in 1949 that “a new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it” (pp. 33-34). This statement of 54 years ago is amply supported by history, especially in the field of psychotherapy.

Is there a canonical knowledge base in psychotherapy?

A word about psychotherapeutic knowledge needs to be stated at this point. A common base that is promulgated in official proceedings of professional associations, is reflected in textbooks, receives official approbation in paragon governmental accrediting societies, and goes unchallenged by the general membership of a profession is often referred to as a “canonical knowledge base.” It is considered the base on which further inquiry in a field is conducted. Unfortunately, such a base is narrow in our field. There are hundreds of psychotherapies, of varying degrees of credibility, many supported by immense amount of research. And the operative dynamics explaining change in human interpersonal skills and in personality itself still finds little consensus. In fact the innumerable therapies that are practiced today frequently contradict each other. Part of the explanation for this is that they are based on divergent theories of developmental psychology. And even where the developmental psychology underpinning one or the other is discredited, the practitioners of such therapies are not, as Planck suggests, moved to change their practice. Psychoanalysis is one such system. The Duhem-

Quine principle (see Lakatos, 1970) suggests that as one feature after another of a flawed system is invalidated, the model is patched up until it resembles a rickety structure with many tangled-up stays. It runs the risk in the long term of collapsing under the weight of these improvisations.

The preceding paragraph contradicts belief #1 in Mahrer's paper. One could write an entire book just on that single idea. It is not possible to give attention to the other 74 in this short commentary. Let me just allude to one more, which I choose more or less at random. I do this to make the point that at least these two beliefs are not widely accepted and that they are typical of most of the remaining ones that have been articulated – to provide a contrast, I suspect, with Mahrer's special brand of experiential therapy. Belief #12 states that "psychotherapy researchers are to be essentially unbiased, objective, free of theory-driven expectations, observations, prejudgements." Whether this is a statement of fact or simply a desideratum is not clear. It corresponds, in any event, to journalistic stereotypes of researchers. There is little evidence that it characterizes the community of research psychologists who ply their trade in a fiercely competitive discipline (see Dumont & Lecomte, 1985) – nor is it believed by them to do so. Michael Mahoney (1976) has referred to the scientist as "Homo Scientus: the biased and passionate truth spinner." (p. 6). He continued to list the attributes of the typical scientist as "often illogical," of modest intelligence, the most passionate of professionals, "dogmatically tenacious in his opinions," "an ambitious and petulant defender of personal recognition and territoriality," in short, "a truth spinner who rushes to hypotheses and theories long before the data would warrant." (p. 6).

The late Frank Lloyd Wright, renowned as one of America's greatest architects, said that "an expert is one who does not have to think. He knows." If this is true, this poses a problem for the many researchers, practitioners, and

educators who address themselves to the challenges of our discipline (Dumont, 1991). The statement does not match with Mahrer's own that there is a belief that psychologists are largely free of "theory-driven expectations, observations, prejudgments." We know that experts routinely invoke habitual schemas as they make their diagnoses, formulate their research hypotheses, and develop their training modules. Even Dr. Mahrer does this, as I have personally witnessed, in his own clinical work.

Conclusion

There is no canon of scientific research methodologies. There are several disparate and respectable ones, which do not all fit in the belief systems reflected in Mahrer's 74 principles. Indeed, they are in contradiction to many of the "beliefs" posited in Mahrer's paper. The multiplicity of research methods, founded on different philosophical principles, is evident in contemporary science. The research methods of a lepidopterist are certainly different from those of a particle physicist. The methods of a political scientist are quite different from those of a neuropsychologist. And they are all different from the various methodologies, based on conflicting foundational beliefs, that are used by Al Mahrer – and other researchers in psychotherapy. For that reason it may be futile to attempt to devise a canon of beliefs bearing on research in psychotherapy. The same may be said, but with some reservations, of foundational beliefs bearing on "psychotherapeutic practice," and "education and training." There is little doubt that the empiricist revolution that took place in late-Renaissance Europe gave a powerful fillip to the secularizing forces of the mercantile and bourgeois classes that supported the sciences of the 17th century. That Europe and then North America tilted toward Aristotle (who showed a preference for hard evidence) and away from Plato (who fixated on mathematics and ideal

forms) certainly accounts for much of the progress in psychology that was made in the 19th and 20th century.

In any event, the invitation that Mahrer has given to us to rethink our intellectual assizes was useful. It provided us with the opportunity to renew our skepticism with reference to canonical knowledge bases and to rethink the basis for many of the inferences we make about the motives for people's behavior and the means we dispose of for helping them to change and actualize them.

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