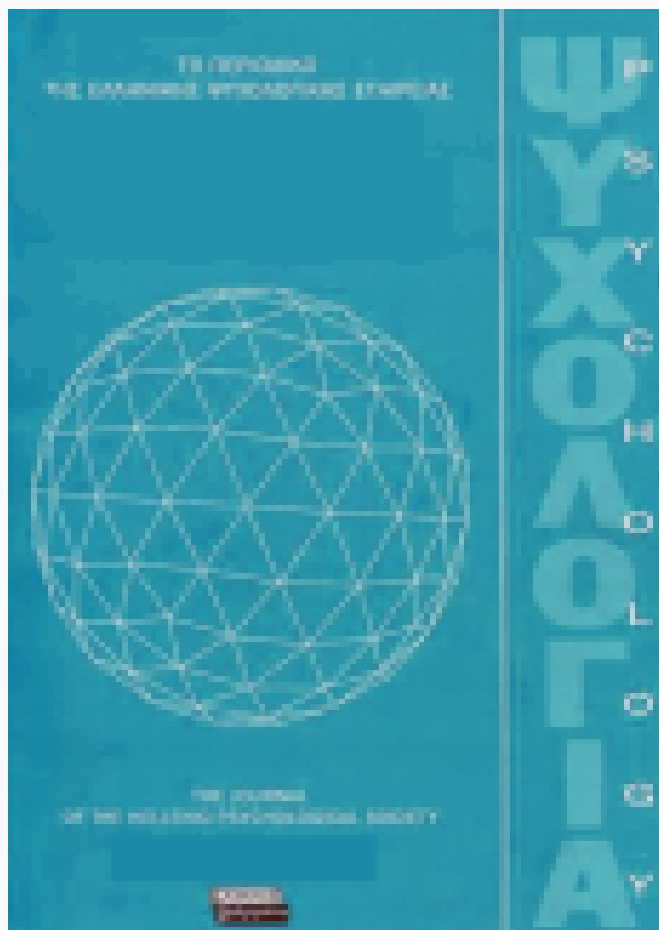


Psychology: the Journal of the Hellenic Psychological Society

Vol 10, No 1 (2003)



What are some clever plays psychotherapists use to avoid knowing their own "foundational beliefs"?

Alvin R. Mahrer

doi: [10.12681/psy_hps.23941](https://doi.org/10.12681/psy_hps.23941)

Copyright © 2020, Alvin R. Mahrer



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

R. Mahrer, A. (2020). What are some clever plays psychotherapists use to avoid knowing their own "foundational beliefs"? *Psychology: The Journal of the Hellenic Psychological Society*, 10(1), 45–51.
https://doi.org/10.12681/psy_hps.23941

What are some clever ploys psychotherapists use to avoid knowing their own “foundational beliefs”?

ALVIN R. MAHRER

University of Ottawa, Canada

ABSTRACT

A number of distinguished psychotherapists were graciously willing to comment on my article on the foundational beliefs in the field of psychotherapy. In my response to these comments, it seemed to me that most of the comments illustrated that the common mind-set of “fundamental truths” will not especially tolerate close examination of its “fundamental truths.” It also seemed to me that many of the comments illustrated some of the common ploys that psychotherapists use to avoid knowing their own “foundational beliefs.” Nevertheless, the invitation was extended to psychotherapists to discover one’s own “foundational beliefs.”

Key words: Foundational beliefs, Fundamental truths.

I was so pleased to read the commentaries on my article, partly because it means that at least these colleagues actually read the article, and partly because I have a naive faith that good things can happen when psychotherapists seriously study and talk together about each other’s work.

In this response to their comments, I tried to avoid opportunities to argue, to squeal and complain, to defend the virtue of whatever I said in the article. Instead, I do believe that I may have learned something from studying their comments, and the purpose of this response is to spell out what I think I may have learned.

The invitation was simple: Do you accept or do you decline?

The main purpose of my article was, I hope, relatively simple: If you have a readiness, a spark of interest, in digging out, identifying, knowing,

spelling out, discovering your own foundational beliefs, then here are some helpful guidelines for doing so. That is it. Are you interested or not? Do you accept or decline the invitation?

The invitation was simple

If you are interested, then read the provisional list of “foundational beliefs” one by one, and follow the few guidelines for how to accept the given foundational belief, how to modify its wording to make it acceptable, or how to replace it with one that is more acceptable to you. To make it easier for you, I tried to play the game, and, below each of the provisional foundational beliefs I included the foundational belief that I came up with.

The invitation was to go ahead or not, to play the game or not, to accept the invitation or to decline.

The responses were not so simple

One response was to accept the invitation and to go ahead and uncover or discover or simply spell out his "foundational beliefs." In his own words, Dr. Neimeyer said, "rather than quibble... I would prefer to take up his challenge, and attempt to use his list as a prompt to articulate some foundational beliefs of my own." Bless you, Dr. Neimeyer. With our respective sets of foundational beliefs in hand, we can have rich times talking together.

The others did not accept the invitation. Neither did they simply decline. I studied their responses to see what I could learn. The balance of this paper tells what I think I may have learned.

The common mind-set of "fundamental truths" will not tolerate examination of its "fundamental truths"

Most psychotherapists have a mind-set that is not especially welcoming to exploring what is taken for granted, studying basic principles, identifying foundational beliefs, examining the fundamental truths. Indeed, the idea is ominous. Who knows what might happen? Examining what one trusts as the fundamental truths is somehow dangerous, unnatural, blasphemous. Instead of knowing what your foundational beliefs are, the common mind-set warns that it is much better to stay away from examining one's fundamental truths.

The common mind-set knows there are "fundamental truths"

Most psychotherapists know that the field of psychotherapy rests on basic truths, that there are taken-for-granted fundamental truths, that there are cornerstones, basic certainties, fundamental truths. Psychotherapy is a sound and solid field whose foundation consists of foundational truths.

Some fundamental truths are true because they are simply true. The common mind-set knows that there are grand truths about human beings, eternal verities about life, fundamental truths about human growth and human suffering and human change. These fundamental truths have been enunciated by great philosophers, by the great thinkers and theorists in the field of psychotherapy. Our authorities know these truths and present them in our texts, in our basic literature. Here are a few of our fundamental truths that are true because they are simply true:

- Theories of psychotherapy are judged, examined, and tested by deriving hypotheses that are subjected to scientific verification, confirmation, disconfirmation, refutation, and falsification.
- Biological, neurological, physiological, and chemical events and variables are basic to psychological events and variables.
- The brain is a basic determinant of human behavior.
- Human beings have inborn, intrinsic, biological and psychological needs, drives, instincts, and motivations.
- The person and the external world are integral independent agencies that interact and affect one another.
- There are mental illnesses, diseases, and disorders.
- Clients seek psychotherapy for, and psychotherapy is, treatment of psychological-psychiatric problems, distress, mental disorders, personal difficulties, and problems in living.

Some fundamental truths are true because researchers say so. Psychotherapists with the common mind-set know that researchers study things rigorously, and when enough researchers say that something is probably true, then it is probably true. The common mind-set knows that empirically controlled research can and does come up with basic laws, with a cumulative body of research-based knowledge. Many fundamental truths are true because researchers say so. Here are a few examples.

- Responses followed by satisfying consequences tend to be strengthened, responses followed by unsatisfying consequences tend to be weakened.

- The therapist-client relationship is prerequisite to successful psychotherapy.

- Client expressiveness is an important factor in client productivity and involvement in successful psychotherapy.

- Insight and understanding are prerequisite to successful psychotherapy.

- Most psychotherapies yield generally equivalent outcomes.

- Behavioral therapies are the treatment of choice for simple phobias.

- There is typically a recrudescence of initial symptomatology in the termination phase of intensive, long-term psychotherapy.

They are fundamental truths, not mere "beliefs." The common mind-set knows that there are fundamental truths. They are true because they are true, or they are true because research pronounces them as true. They are theorems, assumptions, postulates, basic truths, dictums, the cornerstones on which the field rests.

The common mind-set may not be too sure that there are fundamental truths for the field of psychotherapy. There probably are, but it is hard to find formal displays of the official lists of fundamental truths for the whole field. However, there almost certainly are fundamental truths in the larger field of which psychotherapy is just the applied wing, larger fields such as experimental psychology or psychology as a whole. Furthermore, it is quite certain that each approach or conceptual system has its own official, available, authoritative set of fundamental truths. Check with cognitive psychotherapy, behavioral psychotherapy, psychodynamic psychotherapy, integrative-eclectic psychotherapy. Of course there are fundamental truths.

But make sure that they are respected as truths, not beliefs. Do not call them beliefs. Calling them beliefs sounds as if we aren't quite

sure if they are true, or as if we somehow think of them as mere beliefs, mere things we intellectually hold as possibilities, or, even worse, as things we know are not really true but we still manage to believe in them. Differentiating fundamental truths from foundational beliefs puts the common mind-set on shaky and slippery grounds, and that can be ominous, dangerous, perhaps even blasphemous.

Searching for "foundational beliefs" can be ominous, dangerous, blasphemous

Psychotherapists who hold to the common mind-set are inclined to back away from accepting the invitation to search for their own foundational beliefs. They sense that there is something bothersome, not right, about the invitation. Searching for one's own foundational beliefs seems ominous, dangerous, perhaps even blasphemous. It can violate the common mind-set.

Maybe it is best to keep them loosely unspecified. We know we have fundamental truths about stages of development, the laws of behavior, childhood causation, unconscious processes, psychopathology, cognitions, but perhaps it is better to leave them loose and unspecified. For one thing, it is easier to agree with one another when the fundamental truths are not too carefully spelled out. For another, maybe it is easier to discuss them when they are vaguely general. We can discuss psychopathology at length, and it may help that we are not too specific about precisely what we are talking about. For a third thing, trying to spell out our precise fundamental truths or foundational beliefs is just a baby step from questioning them, studying them with an eye to changing them, and that can be scary, even blasphemous. How can we dare to question what we know are fundamental truths?

Don't push us. Don't make us nervous. Let's keep them loosely unspecific.

We may not know what our foundational beliefs are, but we spring into action if they are violated. Most psychotherapists cannot point to a spelled out list of their own foundational beliefs or fundamental truths or the basic principles that they take for granted, but they certainly can become nervous and twitchy if someone starts examining them, scrutinizing them, taking careful looks at them.

Even further, even if most psychotherapists do not know exactly what their own foundational beliefs are, they almost automatically recoil against the presence of alien foundational beliefs. It is as if these psychotherapists have been personally violated. They may not be able to spell out their formal foundational beliefs about how to do research or about mental illnesses and disorders or about the therapist-client relationship, but they have a knee-jerk reaction against those who violate what they do not know they believe. They will attack the alien intruders, marginalize them, refuse to publish their work, force them to recant, discipline them.

It is perhaps safer to leave one's own foundational beliefs be. Don't question them. Don't study them. Don't even try to know exactly what they may be. Doing these things can endanger the common mind-set of fundamental truths, whatever they are precisely.

We work hard to keep our foundational beliefs immune from careful scrutiny. Most psychotherapists, as individuals and as a collective group, work very hard at insuring that their foundational beliefs are kept safely immune from clarification, from scrutiny, from inspection, from challenge, from study, and therefore from modification and improvement and especially from replacement. Mahrer (2000) has identified at least six ways that many psychotherapists successfully use to keep their foundational beliefs immune.

First and foremost among these ways is to steadfastly avoid searching for one's own

foundational beliefs. Keep them implicit and unknown, hidden and unclarified. Do not poke into what they are. Keep them vague and cloudy. Make sure that the very idea of searching for one's own foundational beliefs is something ominous, dangerous, perhaps even blasphemous.

The common mind-set can squash the search for one's own "foundational beliefs"

Most psychotherapists are inclined to share in the common mind-set that believes in the existence of fundamental truths. The common mind-set may not be precise about exactly what these fundamental truths are, but the common mind-set knows that they exist, and that searching for one's own precise and specific foundational beliefs is ominous, dangerous, and perhaps even blasphemous.

The net result is that most psychotherapists aggressively avoid knowing their own foundational beliefs. If anyone dares to invite them to explore their own foundational beliefs, to see clearly what their foundational beliefs might be, these psychotherapists can use a number of clever ploys to avoid doing so.

What are some clever ploys psychotherapists use to avoid knowing their own "foundational beliefs"?

Some of these ploys seem to have been used, more or less directly, in the previous commentaries. Some of these ploys were used softly, or were hinted at, in the previous commentaries. Some of these ploys were not used at all in the previous commentaries. However, I do believe that all of these ploys are clever and are effective in making sure that psychotherapists do not accept the invitation to search for their own foundational beliefs, and instead avoid knowing their own foundational beliefs.

Replace the main point with an altogether different main point, and then critique the altogether different main point

Here is what I believe was the main point of my article: If psychotherapists have a spark of genuine interest in digging out, discovering, finding, knowing their own "foundational beliefs," then here is a suggested way to go ahead and do it.

The clever ploy is to turn away from the main point, replace it with an altogether different main point, and then engage in a hefty critique of what was not the main point of the article. First find a substitute main point that the author did not make, and then discuss it in detail.

Here are some substitute main points, none of which were the main point of the article, most of which I do not accept even as minor points:

- "Psychotherapy is a genuine science." Proclaim that this is the main point of the article, and then assemble cogent arguments against this proposition which is absolutely not the main point of the article, quite aside from whether or not the author of the article would agree or disagree with the proposition.

- "Here are the formal, official, authoritative foundational beliefs in the field of psychotherapy." Even though this is not the main point, even though the author would flatly disagree with this proposition, elevate this proposition into being the main point of the article. Then critique the substitute main point. Show how weak and indefensible it is.

- "There is a single organized field of psychotherapy." This is neither the main point of the article nor is it a proposition that the author holds. Nevertheless, first proclaim that this is the main point of the article, and then make a solid case that psychotherapy is the applied wing of some other larger field, and that the field is more disorganized and fragmented than it is organized and integrated.

- "There are no formal statements of the foundational beliefs in the field of psycho-

therapy." There is a clever substitute main point because it is not the main point, but rather a clever modification of what is not the main point of the article. Nevertheless, make a case that there are indeed some statements of some of the foundational beliefs in some approaches such as psychoanalytic-psychodynamic approaches, cognitive behavioral approaches, humanistic-existential approaches, and integrative-eclectic approaches. Pick an approach and list some of their foundational beliefs.

- "It is important that the field of psychotherapy have a single set of generally accepted foundational beliefs." This is neither the main point of the article nor a proposition that the author holds. First substitute this as the main point, and then assemble arguments why it is not necessarily important that the field of psychotherapy have a single set of generally accepted foundational beliefs.

Proclaim that the article falls under some larger topic, and then critique the author's knowledge and expertise in the larger topic

The first part of the clever ploy is to proclaim that the article falls under some larger topic such as hermeneutics or epistemology or research design and methodology or philosophy of science. The next part of the clever ploy is to critique the author's knowledge of the larger topic, the author's expertise in the larger topic, the author's own approach to the larger topic, the author's presentation of the larger topic.

For example, proclaim that the article falls under a larger topic called philosophy of science. Then make a case that the author does not know much about that topic, or does not represent a traditional approach to philosophy of science, or does a questionable job of citing the major figures in philosophy of science.

Go from the article to some related issue, and then discuss that related issue

Instead of accepting the invitation, use the article as a springboard to some related issue or matter. Find something in the article, some point or matter or theme or topic, and go to some related issue such as the sociology of knowledge, theory-construction, or the role of research in the challenging of basic principles.

Then discuss the related issue in some detail. Wax eloquent about the sociology of knowledge. Elaborate your ideas about theory-construction. Show how research can be helpful in digging out and challenging basic principles in the field of psychotherapy.

Proclaim that the article rests on certain presumptions or assumptions, and then critique those presumptions or assumptions

Instead of accepting the main point and the invitation, look for and identify some underlying presumption or assumption. For example, proclaim that the underlying presumption or assumption is that there is a field of psychotherapy, or that the field of psychotherapy does not have a track record of challenging and improving its foundational beliefs, or that most practitioners do not know their own basic principles and foundational beliefs.

Then show how those presumptions or assumptions are wrong, unfounded, not true, misguided, poor, mistaken, indefensible. The clever play is effective, whether or not the target presumption or assumption is indeed an underlying presumption or assumption, and whether or not the critique is worthy and sound.

Select a minor point, and then give it a major discussion

Instead of focusing on the main point and

accepting or declining the invitation, select a marvellously minor point. Select a minor point that perhaps was mentioned in the article, a point that may have been dropped from the article without any noticeable loss in the article itself. For example, select a minor point having to do with getting articles published in journals, or the growing popularity of the loose family of experiential psychotherapies, or the pleasure-pain principle.

Then proceed to discuss the selected minor point. Make the minor point the major centerpiece of a major discussion, a full-fledged critique.

Instead of accepting the suggested method, critique the method

The article offered a suggested method for being able to identify one's own foundational beliefs. The method included some guidelines to follow, a provisional set of foundational beliefs as starting points, and the author's own emerged set of foundational beliefs from following the suggested method.

Instead of following the method, the clever play consists of mounting a critique of the method itself. For example, critique the provisional set of foundational beliefs. Or raise questions about whether the method can be carried out. Or wonder whether there might be better, more effective methods.

Critique the author

Instead of accepting the invitation, the clever play is to critique the author himself. Raise questions about the author's motivations and intents in writing the article. Go beyond the author's stated purposes and aims, and speculate about what might be the author's covert or hidden or deeper motivations and intents. Show that the author's way of thinking is

wrong-headed, contradictory and inconsistent, misleading, unsupported by the mainstream, lacking in what the field knows is fundamental and basically true.

The invitation is still offered: Are you ready to discover your own foundational beliefs?

You may prefer to think of them as something other than foundational beliefs. You may prefer to think of them as basic principles, fundamental truths, your own cornerstone notions and ideas, the underlying principles that you take for granted.

The invitation stands. You are invited to go ahead and to find, to spell out, to discover your own foundational beliefs or whatever word or phrase you prefer to use. Follow the suggested method. Use your own better method.

Of course you are quite free to decline the invitation, or you can use clever ploys to avoid knowing your own foundational beliefs. The

choice is yours, but I honestly hope that you accept the invitation and discover your own foundational beliefs. I am impressed that Professor Neimeyer accepted the invitation, and I find myself almost ending with his words: "I hope that others will take up the challenge, and that the resulting dialogue with ourselves, with our colleagues, and between different theory groups will invigorate the discipline we call psychotherapy."

Speaking of that dialogue, and because I believe the issue of digging out and knowing our own foundational beliefs deserves much more attention, I hope that some readers will contact me with your own thoughts on the matter, even your own clever ploys!

References

- Mahrer, A. R. (2000). Philosophy of science and the foundations of psychotherapy. *American Psychologist*, 55, 1117-1125.