

Review of
***The Relationship Paradigm:
Human Being Beyond Individualism***

By Godfrey T. Barrett-Lennard
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Godfrey Barrett-Lennard's *The Relationship Paradigm* is an explication of his "... relation-centred view that highlights the profound interdependency of life while also recognizing that each person's subjectively experienced world is distinctive and a precious part of being human" (p. viii). The book's major contribution for me is the stimulation it offers to further examine and inquire about "The Relationship Paradigm". I join the author in his central concern being: "... the anchorage of ideas through a roving search for deeper understanding" (p. x).

The book is about relationship. Barrett-Lennard's intentions are as follows: 1) Humans are understood as fundamentally relational in nature. 2) The main roots of the author's view are from humanistic psychology and counseling. But the discussion here extends further afield, including into relations with our animal relatives and the working of systems in nature. 3) Within a process of movement, change, and continuity, life is born with its own directional code and impetus. 4) The author is attentive to qualities of subjective or "lived" human experience while at the same time he searches into the working and interplay of relationship systems. 5) The book focuses more on gaining and presenting fresh understandings than on showing how to do things. (pp. viii-ix)

A reader might do well to read the author's final chapter summary and capture the fullness of the book before reading it in its entirety. Barrett-Lennard offers a backdrop for both the strength and weakness of the book when he asks in conclusion: "Will the paradigm . . . actually take hold?" The answer is: "There are some encouraging signs in a mixed picture..." (p. 170). The wide coverage of material provides encouraging signs but also adds to a mixed picture. Some signs are a bit nebulous and are periodically lost in the verbal mix of "facts", information, and tangential didactic meandering.

The strength of the book, in my view, is the potential odyssey it offers to readers as they are exposed to a wide swath of the relationship paradigm which opens up individualistic and/or "emergent dyadic relationship" ponderings of vast proportions. The weakness of the book is that its broad canvas of inquiry is laden with a lack of pragmatic clarity, an incomplete and inaccurate assessment of "Individualism", and a mix of esoteric speculation and aloof intellectualism.

While the book most likely meets the author's intention to identify and inspire others to think about relationship, the application of fresh understandings to life activities is a bit murky to me. My understanding of the author's view is that the human relationship is an emergent entity that unfolds to more core meanings and assumptions (p. 4). Humans are "... creatures of and co-creatures of relationships"(p. 16). Moreover, this is put forth as a new paradigm that is significantly different from the "individualistic" perspective of most other "Western" views.

Going "Beyond Individualism" is an implicit major assumption of the book; it is stated in the subtitle and Barrett-Lennard purports the book to be "... a counterbalance to the inheritance of individualistic thinking that has permeated Western culture" (p. viii). However, throughout the book, "individualism" is little more than a passing judgment. It is not explicitly defined, not referenced in the index, and not clearly expressed in the content. Only a narrow analysis of individualism is presented. The argument appears to be a bit lacking when ideas such as Adler's explicit reference to Social Interest (e.g. feeling part of a family, group, community), or the ideas related to "Relationship Therapy" by Rank, Taft, and Allen are simply ignored

It is confusing that the author, an early student of Rogers and significant contributor to Rogers' theory, concludes that in client-centered theory: "The relationship itself is *not* a force in its own right..." (p. 5). Quite contrary to this assertion, Rogers' earliest writings specifically referred to the underlying feature of the nondirective approach as one that stresses: "... the therapeutic relationship itself as a growth experience ... the therapeutic contact is itself a growth experience" (Rogers, 1942, p. 30). The author's assertion about client-centered theory is odd given that he acknowledged this basic assumption of Rogers in previous summaries of Rogers' theory and history (Barrett-Lennard, 1998; 2013). Rogers' (1957) emphasis on the relationship conditions of empathy and unconditional acceptance for all therapies as being "necessary and sufficient" embraces the importance of the relationship regardless of what the therapist might be doing. Clearly, the relationship paradigm is present in Rogers' theory of therapy, and more so in his theory of interpersonal relations and human connection in multiple areas (Rogers, 1959; 1977).

Barrett-Lennard argues that the therapeutic relationship in “Western” Individualism, including Rogers’ theory “...is the structure and process of in-between activity” (p. 4). Thus, the process is not an emergent process of relationship. Unfortunately, the emergent process of relationship is never clearly explained.

This criticism is, perhaps, accurate for “Western” psychotherapy theories that operate out of the assumption that there are specific treatments for certain diagnoses or dysfunctions. However, the extension of this observation to all Western theories is misleading, especially regarding Rogers’ theory. Perhaps the author dislikes that Rogers went further with the construct of relationship when he identified specific relationship variables as critical in relationships (i.e., nonjudgmental acceptance, prizing others, and empathy). These variables are referred to in this book in a way that does not seem to consider them to be essential to a relationship being therapeutic. I believe that one weakness of the book, contrary to the author’s stated intentions, is the little actual importance given to the phenomenological world of each individual. Perhaps in the press to elevate the dynamics of the emergent relationship to the level of being essential for therapy, or the level of being its own necessary (and sufficient?) condition for therapy, the phenomenology of the individual is demoted.

Likewise, it is disappointing that the attitude of empathy as having major importance in the relationship paradigm is not given more attention. The importance of empathy within relationship is summarized by Rifkin (2010):

... if reality is experience and
experience is always in relationship
to the other, then the more extensive the relationships, t
he deeper we
penetrate the various layers of reality and the closer we
come to
understanding the meaning of
existence. (p. 155)

The question that emerges for the “Relationship Paradigm” is “What does emergence of the relationship really mean or what does it really look like?” Isn’t the relationship in any given setting a changing, emerging, dynamic interaction? Notably, in therapy, client therapist interactions, informed by a therapist’s particular orientation and attitude in the relationship, alter the relationships of the client within self and with others. The relationship is determined by what the therapist and client are doing, feeling, thinking, and experiencing with each other along with their perceptions of the world (an emergence of relationships with others). In essence, it is the task of the therapist to be in relationship. How, then, is the conceptualization of relationship in this book different? A key to this difference might lie within the statement of the author that the research suggests that Rogers’ theory “...is not the whole truth. (p. 153). This is always an accurate statement about theories. However, the shortcomings of Rogers’ client-centered theory are said by Barrett-Lennard to be “... that this (Rogers’ theory) approach does not focus on the *emergent dyadic relationship system*, the theory does not take into account client expectancy, the relational life of clients outside therapy or the therapy relation seen in its practice context” (p. 153).

This reader is left with confusion about how the emergent dyadic relationship is determined. Classifying relationship by type in order to improve/deepen/ and make more emergent the relationship appears contradictory to the very essence of the notion of client directivity. Does this mean that the therapist assesses the type of relationship in order to achieve this goal? If this is the intent, is it consistent with “The Relationship Paradigm” being an emerging process in and of itself?

The book is worth reading for stimulation and pondering as well as for examining a broad canvas of thought about relationships. The author clearly offers a touchstone for all to find “... the anchorage of ideas through a roving search for deeper understanding” (p. x).

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