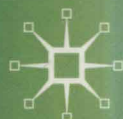


foundations  
of psychotherapy  
an introduction to  
individual therapy

roger horrocks



# Foundations of Psychotherapy

## An Introduction to Individual Therapy

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**Roger Horrocks**

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First published 2005 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN  
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010  
Companies and representatives throughout the world

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ISBN-13: 978-1-4039-2189-5

ISBN-10: 1-4039-2189-X

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Horrocks, Roger

Foundations of psychotherapy : an introduction to individual therapy / Roger Horrocks.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-4039-2189-X (paper)

1. Psychotherapy. I. Title.

RC480.H645 2005

616.89'14-dc22

2005047564

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05

Printed and bound in China

## FOUNDATIONS OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

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*For my father,  
Frank Horrocks,  
1920-2003*

# Acknowledgements

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Many thanks go to Jo Campling who helped me throughout the writing of this book; and thanks also to Andrew McAleer at Palgrave Macmillan.

I am very grateful to those colleagues and their clients who gave permission for vignettes from their work to be used; and also to my clients, likewise.

Psychotherapists cannot work in isolation: I am very conscious of many colleagues and friends who have helped me over many years both as a therapist and writer. In particular, I thank Alan Danks, Sybilla Madigan, Simon Jackson, Victoria Zinovieff.

A big thank you to my clients over many years: they have been good teachers.

Roger Horrocks

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# I Introduction

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Psychotherapy can be seen as a huge continent, with many countries in it, some of which are on speaking terms, and have historical roots in common, and some of which seem almost alien and unintelligible to each other. Another metaphor that comes to mind is one of those massive rivers like the Amazon, which has many tributaries, and which seems to divide at times into many rivers, and at other times, seems to stretch from shore to shore as one huge movement of water. In more prosaic language, I am saying that psychotherapy is not a unified field of knowledge or practice; that it contains many different schools, some of which are inter-related. None the less we are able to recognize that there is such a thing as psychotherapy, which is delimited from other social phenomena such as medicine and psychiatry.

But the vastness of psychotherapy, and the complexity of its history, precludes any one book giving a satisfactorily comprehensive account of it. Rather one must be selective; and the selection is partly subjective and partly objective, by which I mean that this book in part deals with those topics which interest me as a psychotherapist, and also with certain topics which it would be very odd to leave out, for example psychoanalysis and Jungian psychotherapy.

It is worthwhile looking at psychotherapy in an historical context. It strikes me that it has emerged as the Western world became secularized and individualistic. No doubt human beings in all cultures have had their problems in facing the vicissitudes of life, but therapy is a comparatively recent way of dealing with these problems. Previously one can argue that a wide-ranging religious framework, such as existed in medieval Europe, subsumed individual problems, or one might even argue that the notion of the individual having problems would have seemed odd if not alien to the medieval mind.

To put this more metaphysically, if one argues that psychotherapy brings the client into contact with a relatively unknown Other (the therapist), upon whom all manner of fantasies and projections are heaped, and from whom all manner of solutions are sought, then it is surely not an exaggeration to say that a thousand years ago the Other could only have been conceived of as God. It is often said that with the 'death of God' the lot of human beings became intolerably lonely, and again it is possible to argue that psychotherapy, along with all the self-help and self-development movements which exist today, has partly filled that void.<sup>1</sup>

Therapy instead of confession? The comparison may seem trite, but maybe there is something in it. There is an element of confession in the 'talking cure', in the sense that the client often arrives in a pent-up state, desperate to unburden him or herself with their own story; at the same time, is there not an element of absolution also? I don't mean that the therapist forgives the client or offers pardon, but does offer acceptance of all the oddities and the shameful secrets which we all possess and which press upon us, daring to be told to someone. The unbearable becomes bearable in the telling of it.

The psychotherapist is that ideal person to confess to: unknown, professional, rather distant, not normally condemning. In other words, there is no pay-off in one's ordinary life – you don't expect to see your therapist in your local pub or hob-nobbing with your friends. It's not just a question of confidentiality; clients expect more than that – they expect a large degree of separation between the therapist's life and the client's, and of course when this separation is breached in various ways, all kinds of disruption to the therapy can ensue.

I have sometimes also seen psychotherapy as an off-shoot of the Romantic movement, in the sense that the therapy hour places great value on the individual client, not for any great performance that they may enact, not for any great insights or intellectual feats, but simply for being who and what they are. I see this as an inheritance of Romanticism because the individual is valued highly, and surely this is partly a reaction to the alienating and dehumanizing aspects of modern society.

## **Unity and disunity**

The modern psychotherapist has an extraordinary body of knowledge to draw upon in his or her work. For over a hundred years now there have been many theoretical refinements, much working over of strategies and techniques for working with different kinds of clients. Of course, one of the problems that arises here is that psychotherapy is divided into many schools, and the student

therapist cannot be expected to study all of them. In any case, we are all drawn to certain ways of thinking about human beings, and these correspond in many ways to the schools of psychotherapy.

Some critics of therapy have seen this disunity as a fatal flaw, and have pointed out a damning comparison with disciplines such as biology or physics, which have a higher degree of intellectual unity. But this criticism strikes me as ill-founded, since psychotherapy is dealing above all with human subjectivity or with subjectivities. Hence it is clear that different people, with different personalities, and with different needs from therapy, are going to require very different approaches from their therapists. I recall many years ago meeting a therapist who struck me as a very cold person, and in my idealistic youth and fervour, I felt that this could not be valuable for clients, but later I came to realize that some clients actually need someone like that, who gives them very secure boundaries and a degree of distance that is quite safe.

One can make a parallel point here with the place where therapy takes place. I have always worked at home, in a room set aside for therapy, but I have come to realize that for some clients, this is far too intimate and 'warm' and unsafe, and they require something more distant, perhaps someone who sits behind a desk, in an institutional setting, and so on.

Psychotherapy therefore is not like biology or physics, since it is dealing with the astonishing variety of human personality and human existence. We need Kleinian and Jungian and Reichian psychotherapists, and many other kinds as well.

But as well as this fissiparous tendency in psychotherapy, there is the opposite – a tendency to draw together, to integrate insights and theories from different backgrounds. One of the best examples of this is the way in which post-war Jungian groups in Britain integrated some of the ideas from psychoanalysis, particularly to do with infantile development. It was felt that this was a theoretical lacuna within 'classical' Jungian theory, and analysts such as Michael Fordham were not afraid to cross the divide which seemed to separate them from the psychoanalytic world.<sup>2</sup>

One can also cite the many humanistic groups and training courses which now as a matter of fact incorporate the study of object relations, transference, psychic conflict, and so on, into their studies. Yet thirty years ago the humanistic movement had partly arisen in revolt against the perceived aridity and intellectualism of psychoanalysis.

It is easy to see the splits in the therapy world, but there are also signs of connection and rejoining, so that the contemporary psychotherapist is able to take ideas and practical techniques from different sources. We see connections being made between psychotherapy and neuroscience, between therapy and spirituality and so on.<sup>3</sup>

Yet this new era of connectedness presents some problems for the trainee, and indeed for all therapists, who are required to keep an ongoing professional development, and one of them concerns selectivity. Psychotherapy is such a vast area that it might seem daunting to pick and choose among the various intellectual movements and technical repertoires which can be found. However, this is in some ways a very mechanical way of looking at it: none of us sits down and intellectually decides which ideas suit us best. We are all emotionally and intellectually drawn to certain areas and not to others. For example, when we select a therapist for ourselves, we may do it in an apparent blind way, but I am sure that normally there is a kind of intuitive sensor at work, which guides us. Some people are drawn to Kleinian analysis; others to Jungian; others to bio-energetics; others to Gestalt. These are deep choices, one might almost say unconscious choices, which connect with quite hidden parts of ourselves.

The same is true once one has begun training; everyone finds that certain areas of the landscape of psychotherapy are attractive, others are not. Gradually one builds up a kind of portfolio of one's own predilections and interests, and later in one's career, these can be synthesized into one's own unique style of therapy.

## **Old and new**

One has to strike a balance in a book like this between the old and the new. On the one hand, trainees and inexperienced therapists and those wanting to find out more about therapy are interested in key ideas, the intellectual landmarks of the psychotherapy paradigm. Of course, one should really say 'paradigms', since we are dealing with a number of interlocking but sometimes opposed views of the psyche and ways in which to work with it.

On the other hand, I believe one should always challenge and provoke students to think for themselves, as they will have to as therapists. One certainly cannot practise psychotherapy by rote, or from memory. It is an improvisational art, not a set of recipes or rules. There are rules, but as in many games, one learns to play creatively within the rules, and at times to bend or break them.

It is also important to think about old concepts in a fresh way, so that we do not fall into the trap of parroting ideas. Take the example of the unconscious – familiar enough outside as well as inside therapy. It is instructive to do a mind experiment where one has to explain it to Martians in everyday English, without recourse to psychological jargon. For example: is the unconscious that which is not known? Clearly that is not true, since there are many things I don't know – for example, my exact weight, or the capital of Peru – which would not be said to be unconscious.

But this is only a beginning. Is the unconscious that which has been repressed or that which has never been known? Could it include both? Is the unconscious an intelligence, with a 'mind of its own'? If so, what does that tell us about the nature of human persons? Are we divided against ourselves? Is the ego partly unconscious?

Of course this discussion could rapidly expand to become a book in itself, but I hope the point is clear – that learning a skill and an art such as psychotherapy is not a matter of rote learning but of thinking things through for oneself. After all, one hopes that one's clients will be able to do that, and will not simply accept one's own words and ideas as papal dicta.

In fact, merely to list the accepted teachings of various schools of therapy would be not only inert and lifeless, but mendacious, as in the living moment of therapy, such formulae will be worse than useless. They must be brought to life, in case studies and vignettes, and in discussion, in argument, in thinking through. One can even say that one must be prepared not to know about them, to feel confused, or in a state of contradiction. That is surely much healthier than some kind of 'examination' correctness. In fact, such a state of mind about the psyche would be very odd, since so often one simply doesn't understand something, or something is mysterious, and one has to wait for clarification.

So I hope this book does not provide pat 'answers' and 'solutions', but rather shows ways in which we can all struggle for insight and understanding, and can see the value in those times when they are elusive. Some mystics have argued that God is present in his absence – similarly I believe that intellectual correctness may miss out on something of great value – the living moment.

## **The main tool: myself**

Psychotherapy is an extraordinary profession. Its aim is self-knowledge, acquired through a variety of exploratory techniques, but in the main mediated through a relationship between two people. This gives it its uniqueness, for it is a subjective exploration, whose goal is one's own subjectivity, and whose medium is also the subjective experience of the two people. Thus there are no objective recipe books for psychotherapy – one cannot simply list a set of problems or psychological conditions and lay down a related group of 'solutions'. This works with machines, but not with human beings. For one thing, we find that what works with one person doesn't work with another, even though their problems may appear to be similar. There is something marvellous about this – that human variety and individuality is reflected directly in psychotherapy, in that every client, every session, has to be

approached as if it was the first, as if it was unprecedented. In other words, one cannot become blasé or hackneyed as a therapist; one cannot 'go through the motions', for if one does that, then the relationship between therapist and client suffers, and the aliveness that we are looking for has been subverted.

One might say that the chief tool of the psychotherapist is his or her own person – their personality, their inner resources, their own self-knowledge, their experience of life, as well as their knowledge of human psychology. This is partly because clients come to therapy seeking someone they can trust, someone they can open up to, and one might have a tremendous amount of book knowledge, but lack the authenticity and ability to be present which gives clients that sense of confidence and trust. No doubt clients also look for someone who has also struggled with life, and with their own neurotic tendencies, and therefore understands something of sadness, anger, fear, despair, guilt, and so on.

How unnerving this is! Most beginning therapists feel considerable apprehension at daring to present themselves in this way, and probably most experienced therapists still have times when they wonder at the audacity of this enterprise. How does it work? One might say ultimately that there is a healing power in the human relationship itself, but obviously this is not enough, since one might seek this with friends, lovers, spouses, and so on. The therapeutic relationship is quite different, since the therapist withdraws their own personality to a large extent, thus permitting the client maximum attention. It is a one-sided relationship in many ways – we are not here to attend to the therapist's problems! Or at any rate, this goes on only in the most covert and subtle manner, since one can assume that being a therapist does help the therapist in many ways.

The therapist therefore combines several talents – an expertise in human psychology, or certainly some branch of it, a personal ability to be intimate without being intrusive, an ability to be non-judgmental and allow clients to find their own solutions, and probably an understanding of the human struggle for understanding and meaning. This last quality is the most nebulous, since it refers to a grasp of our perennial attempt to find meaning in life, and many clients come to therapy because they have lost meaning or never had it.

Perhaps the most important quality is humility – a sense that the client is the real expert, that their life is their life, and is not ours to play with or intrude on.

In therapy we range from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the tiniest detail of daily life to the most transcendent issues of our place in the universe; from how to pay the mortgage to the question of the existence of love, or God, or self.

As well as unnerving, it can be seen how attractive a profession this is, since it combines a remarkable intimacy with people with an ongoing quest for life's significance, a quest which obviously allows for an infinite number of answers.

## Structure of the book

This book is devoted entirely to one-to-one psychotherapy. It therefore does not consider couples work, family therapy, group therapy, group analysis and so on, and the interested reader can find many books on those subjects. But individual psychotherapy deserves its own treatment, since it is a vast and complex discipline.

The book is divided into two sections. In Part I, I have looked at some of the important schools of psychotherapy, in particular, Freud and Jung, humanistic psychology, cognitive therapy, and neuroscience. Finally in this section, there is a chapter on the nature of psychotherapy as a profession, including issues to do with accreditation, ethics and so on.

In Part II, I have examined more practical issues in therapy. Thus Chapter Seven looks at the basic parameters of time, space and money, which provide a basic structure to therapy. Chapter Eight examines some of the ways in which therapists work with clients; and Chapter Nine looks more closely at the important issue of the relationship between therapist and client.

Chapter Ten looks at the basic elements of thinking, feeling and the body, and how they are dealt with in therapy; Eleven considers the negativity which is found in therapy, in both therapist and client, and how it can be worked with and through. Chapter Twelve takes up the issue of symbolism, including dreams, fantasies and other kinds of symbolic structures, and what role this has in therapy. Finally, Chapter Thirteen looks at some of the particular problems met with in psychotherapy, particularly difficult clients such as borderline clients, narcissistic clients, and those who are very depressed.

## Notes

- 1 See Masud Khan, 'Freud and the Crises of Psychotherapeutic Responsibility', in *Hidden Selves: Between Theory and Practice in Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac, 1989).
- 2 See Andrew Samuels, *Jung and the post-Jungians* (London: Routledge, 1985).
- 3 On neuroscience, see J. Corrigan and H. Wilkinson (eds), *Revolutionary Connections: Psychotherapy and Neuroscience* (London: Karnac, 2003); on spirituality and psychoanalysis, see *British Journal of Psychotherapy* (2002) **18:3**.





# Part I

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## Theoretical Foundations