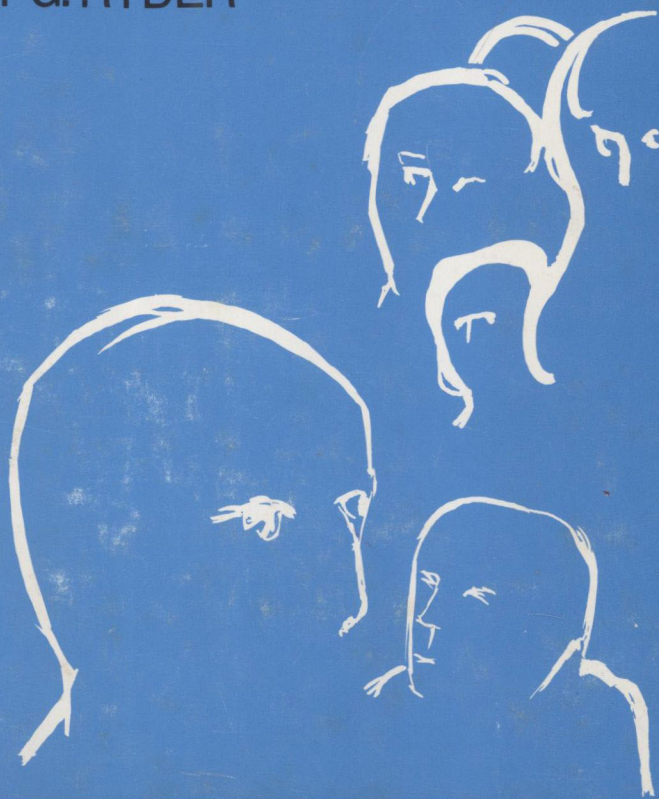


# The Realistic Therapist

Modesty and Relativism  
in Therapy and Research

ROBERT G. RYDER



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## PREFACE

Acknowledging all those who have helped with this work is not easy. The number of people involved is quite large, with any listing bound to slight some, either by a sin of omission or by burying them in a long list. Some people have helped greatly without being aware of the fact. The thoughtful adages I used to hear from Mary Ryder, and her wisdom about the world, have much influenced my thinking. My children have taught me more than they might realize, and one of them will find herself mentioned if she reads carefully enough.

All those who have disturbed my complacency over the years have helped, although it is an open question as to whether they will now prefer thanks or apologies. Like it or not, thanks is what they get. Many people must remain unmentioned, but a few should be named. Reaching back some years, these include John Kafka; and in a very different way, Linda Brandt; and in a still different way, David Olson. More recent additions to this list include Leslie Strong and Carol Love, Kevin Donohue, William Doherty and Robert Ravich, and Sandra Kronsberg. Leslie will find himself the subject of an anecdotal remark if he looks for it, but under another name.

Here in Connecticut, there is a rather lengthy list of colleagues, friends, and graduate students—these several categories overlap quite a bit—who have commented in one way or another, and who have been most helpful. My thanks here include Stephen Anderson, Suzanne Fieldman, Frederick Humphrey, and Ronald Sabatelli, as well as many others.

Particular thanks are due to Cecilia Forgione. She has read and reread, and reread again, offering intelligent criticism gently and patiently.

Colleagues who have had the kindness to offer constructive comments also include Kenneth Gergen and David Kantor. David Kantor has helped both as an individual and as a member of a regularly meeting



seminar organized by Donald Bloch and Salvatore Minuchin. I want to thank the organizers of this group and all its members for considering my work. I should be careful to add that my thanks is not intended to imply that everyone actually liked what I have written.

It is customary to thank one's spouse for emotional support and assistance. I would not want it thought that mine is thanked here merely in observance of custom. Jeri Hepworth has richly earned such thanks, many times over. She is also a colleague, and would deserve special thanks were this our only relationship. She has challenged me to think more clearly and to write more simply. Sometimes she has even succeeded. In many ways, she made this work possible.

As one can see, this list includes those I love most, and some known only casually or professionally. To all of them, thank you.

## INTRODUCTION

From technique to affection, from fact to commitment. From narrow instrumentalism to a broader, more realistic approach to therapy and research. Realism does not just mean attending to those aspects of the external world that have an unarguable existence. It also means attending to ambiguities, to such phenomena as warmth and tenderness, and to ourselves. It means attending to relativism, used here in the general sense of indicating the extent to which observed reality depends on the location of the observer. It thus means noticing that there are very few things, external or not, that have a genuinely unarguable existence.

Observation is in part an act of creation and hence in a way an act of change. We might then wish not only to observe warmth and tenderness, but to observe with warmth and tenderness. Realism, but not necessarily simple realism, suggests that we adopt an attitude of modesty toward what we can or should do.

It is one thing to notice that there are a number of alternative ways to view the world. In order then to go ahead and view the world, much less do anything else, one must actually choose among the alternatives. Thus the relativism to be considered is one that can look like its opposite, and the modesty is an odd one that urges assertiveness. The intended message is that expanded opportunities for accomplishment are available for social scientists and therapists, if conceptual straightjackets are loosened and self-imposed frustrations are relinquished, and if necessities to choose are faced realistically.

No road map for the future is provided nor shopping list of tasks to be completed. This work is only intended to suggest ways of thinking about tasks, or perhaps it is more accurate to say ways of thinking about thinking about tasks. It is intended, in part, for social scientists who may be troubled by the slow rate of forward motion in social science, for socially oriented therapists who are troubled by impersonal, technique-oriented therapies, and for anyone who is troubled by appeals to objective facts in situations that seem to call for personal and subjective

stands. It is also intended for those who value highly most of the work that has been done and is currently being done. For the most part, the suggestions to be made will attempt to trim icons a bit rather than to smash them, and to learn from the past rather than to renounce it.

The emphasis on examples is influenced by my background in the area of marriage and the family, but the main points to be made are more general. They may have some pertinence (not to say impertinence) for anyone concerned with how one can know about human activity, and with how much one can know. Social science and socially oriented therapy refer here primarily to social psychology and clinical psychology, some aspects of sociology, socially as contrasted with chemically oriented psychiatry, and to family studies and family therapy.

Again, one theme of this work is our diminutive size, as professionals, relative to certain tasks that might seem important. A modest attitude toward professional capabilities is advocated, and a realistic appreciation of limits. Some questions may demand answers and yet have no determinate answers. Some goals might seem valuable and yet might best be abandoned or moved to a lower priority. Some ways of achieving goals might be both available and effective but have costs that are too high.

This theme, therefore, expresses a particular point of view. Whether that point of view is idiosyncratic or widely shared in these times is uncertain. Perhaps it is a little bit of each.

A more fundamental theme of this work is point of view itself and its importance. Several sections address this primary theme directly, and others do so by implication.

One repeatedly stated limit is that any understanding of reality, certainly in social science and in the socially oriented therapies, depends unavoidably on the collection of points of view taken by the observer. Personal stands taken by observers are characterized as central, and not as interfering factors to be replaced by the facts. Therefore, in expressing a point of view about limits, the chapters in this book take a particular point of view about point of view.

Other things being equal, the ability to achieve goals depends on the difficulty of the goals attempted. In social science and therapy, the difficulty of goals depends partly on how complex and subtle is the reality to be comprehended and partly on how ambitious is the scientist or therapist. The chapters to come will suggest that it is easy, but unwise, to be tempted by certain unreachable goals. If we aim too high, the projectile we fire might land on our own heads. It might be tempting

also, and equally unwise, to redefine reality in ways that make professional tasks seem easier without the tasks actually being easier. When serious human conflict is discussed as if it could be fixed by learning simple verbal skills, or when concepts that hundreds of thinkers have labored over for millennia are defined by a questionnaire of a dozen items, professionals begin to seem like the midwestern state that thought to simplify life by legislating  $\pi$  to be exactly  $3^{1/7}$ .

It will be argued that modesty and attention to limits, particularly to the centrality of stands taken by observers, are in professionals' self-interest. At least they serve the avowed interests of several relevant professions. If there are choices to be made in how the world is regarded, there is a sense in which acknowledging these choices makes the world better understood. If attempting some tasks accomplishes nothing, it seems likely that taking other directions might accomplish more. If fostering expectations that cannot be met reduces professional credibility, fostering more limited expectations might enhance it. If some vigorous clinical work has costs that outweigh gains, there might be greater benefit in not doing some things.

Several aspects of this work may differ stylistically from what professionals have come to expect. Some apparently simple things are thought to be more complicated than they seem, and the prose reflects this. On the other hand, the style of writing is quite relaxed when it seems appropriate, more so than some may like. It will become clear that adherence to professional forms and procedures for their own sakes is not highly valued here.

One chapter will deal explicitly with values, and how they might best be approached. At that point some arguments will be made relating to openness of values. For now, it may be enough to note that little effort has been made to conceal the values of this author.

Social science and socially oriented therapy have within them many people of imagination, dedication, and competence. They are being joined continuously by new people with fresh ideas. Rather than attempt to tell such people what they should do, this book attempts primarily only to point to some cautions. These cautions are intended to be more liberating than restrictive. Not being able to know something, or noticing that something is not a matter of factual knowledge, does limit the range of one's certainty, but it also opens up the range of one's choices.

With some exceptions, there seems little sense in urging people to concentrate their efforts in some particular direction or other. Some day, perhaps, someone will happen upon the royal road to disciplinary

success, making achievements so spectacular that other paths are soon forgotten. In the meantime, it seems preferable to emphasize the broad range of available choices, along with the unavoidable uncertainties and the necessity to choose that are part and parcel of free choice. With a few exceptions, it would be nice if attention to the ideas expressed here led some to branch out into a wider range of directions than might otherwise be attempted.

Greater diversity or not, criticism of some efforts or not, it will be argued that the more overt aspects of professional work (research or therapy) are not usually of paramount importance. There are some exceptions, but generally the ways in which work is regarded, and perhaps the purposes it serves, are of greater importance. As was said earlier, this work is primarily about attitude.

There is some similarity and some difference between the views expressed here and those to be found in other recent commentaries.<sup>1</sup> Few ideas are really new, probably including all of the more basic aspects of the views that will be expressed here. Many readers will find at least some points that seem familiar. However, putting this particular set of ideas in one place, emphasizing the essential unity of the results, and calling them to the attention of those who might be receptive can perhaps have some positive effect.

### *Note*

1. For example, relativism is emphasized here and is also the keystone of Gergen's recent critique of social science (Gergen, 1982). Gergen, however, uses relativism in support of rather different arguments. Gergen's attack on logical empiricism seems most comparable to the chapter in the present work on objectivity and behavior, although his conclusions are more extreme. Gergen almost seems to accept the logical empiricist claim to *be* science, in that he construes an argument against extreme logical empiricism to be tantamount to an argument against all objectivity. Noticing that objectivity depends on the taking of stands that are not themselves objective, he seems to conclude that no objectivity is possible, and turns to a view of social science as a mingling of art and social influence.

I

## A VIEW OF THE WOODS



## A VIEW OF THE WOODS

The trees in this woods are made up of the social science and clinical efforts with which I have had some nodding acquaintanceship in the course of my professional lifetime. I do not plan to list what I have read in my lifetime, or the clinicians I have spoken to, so that an interested person might count or classify these trees. Instead, I mean to step back far enough from the trees that the general outlines of woods begin to take shape and to present some admittedly and necessarily subjective impressions about the woods. The reader is invited also to step back from the trees, at least enough to consider whether the shapes described seem something like reality.

Trees make up woods, but when considered one at a time can easily suggest a view of the woods that is just wrong. One example of such a process is the well-known and even possibly true idea regarding the charts that are sometimes written about long-term patients. Gains are recorded on a regular basis, perhaps for years, but then somehow the patient seems as ill at the end of this process as at the beginning. The Vietnam War is a most celebrated example. During most of the conflict, newspapers carried box-scores of how many people were killed by each side and other information that suggested one success after another. Yet somehow it became apparent that all these successes added up to a monumental failure.

Before getting carried away with examples of positive trees and negative woods, it should be added that I do not believe the social science and therapy woods to have been a smashing failure. I do believe that it has failed dramatically at being a smashing success and that greater success is readily available, particularly for research. To anticipate, I think that a laudable determination to be scientific and to accomplish great things has had some effects opposite to those intended. The apparent weaknesses in research, as I see them, have been greater than those in therapy.



There are thousands of intelligent and competent therapists around the country, even though they vary widely in disciplinary and theoretical allegiances. Although I cannot prove it (and doubt that anyone can), I believe that many people's lives are better because of the existence of these therapists. There are also a certain number of superficial and simplistic therapists at work, who do little good, in my opinion. Unfortunately, the latter group may be composed largely of people trained recently with an orientation to performing easy techniques that are said to lead to quick results. Finally, I think that the administration of therapy, where it is done in agency settings, may have some negative effects on the work that the administration is supposed to support.

As far as research is concerned, while it might be said that the general level of methodological skill is better than it was some years ago, there is still some distance to go. Substantive results that can be depended on, are interesting, and are cumulative, have not been the norm. To switch metaphors, while many people seem to be stepping forward, the army does not seem to be moving very far.

Thus, social science has seemed not enormously successful, although it may have achieved some gains. Psychotherapy has seemed more successful in some ways but may now be changing in the wrong direction, from my point of view. If these views seem too negative, perhaps it should be reiterated that success and failure are not just reflections of actual accomplishments but reflections of relationships between accomplishments and goals. The woods at hand would seem much better if compared to sufficiently modest standards.

For the moment, however, let us take an even more dim view. Let us suppose that the ultimate social goal of social science and the widespread provision of some form of therapylike services is to end or much reduce the severity of at least some social problems. It may be accurate, if not fair, to say that social science has led to the solution of no serious social problem whatever. Similarly, large-scale efforts at providing mental health and counseling services, functional education, and related activities have not produced a noticeable increment in the mental health, marital happiness, or general positive feeling to be found in the population of this country. These same efforts have not produced a noticeable reduction in substance abuse, divorce, violence within the family, or violence and unpleasantness in general.

If subjective impressions are to be trusted, the general ambience of this country is more caught up with violence now than it was when we were actually killing large numbers of people in Southeast Asia. For