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Title: On Being Somewhat "Person Centered"

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Many individuals, agencies and even systems claim that they are in some manner or other entirely focused on the well being of the people they support i.e. that they are “person centered”. This would normally be something to welcome and admire, were it true. Many such claims may be offered with good intentions, insofar as the party responsible believes themselves to be in a deep and significant relationship of apparently bountiful assistance to the persons they support. Nonetheless, wiser souls would be well cautioned to be wary of announcing that their every thought, concern and effort is inspired and guided only by the wants and needs of the people they support. The reason for this is that it is humanly impossible to be completely centered on another and their best interests and needs.

Human beings can “be there” for others, but there are always limitations, constraints, competing interests, priorities and responsibilities that condition any involvement with another person. A more accurate depiction of our innate capacities would be that, when we are able to be attentive to others, we can sometimes do so sincerely and with respectable amounts of fidelity, commitment and quality. In this regard, being “person centered” is a moment-by-moment matter and, clearly, there must be many moments during which we are very much not centered on others. We may be surprised to discover that such “non-person centered” moments are quite plentiful, and the moments when we are deeply attentive, responsive and committed to others may be somewhat rarer than we might first imagine them to be. We are flattered by the idea that we are committed to people, but is this really the case, and to what degree?

A better approach might be to not be so quick define ourselves as being wholeheartedly “person centered”, as so many individuals and agencies these days have conspicuously announced themselves as being, but rather to recognize that when the conditions are right, we might well do and be things that are very “person centered”. Albeit that these would be highly conditioned and qualified by the many limitations any of bring to our roles in regards to the support of others. The advantage of this approach is that we can examine and improve on our available capacity to be there for others without having to take the fatal and immodestly grandiose step of declaring ourselves to be comprehensively an ally of others, when the chances are quite high that we are anything but that a good amount of the time.

It is really in doing “what we can with what we have” on behalf of another person that makes us momentarily “person centered”, because this claim of attempted incidental “person centered acts” better illustrates that we are genuinely devoting our modest contributions to the advantage of others, because there is no pretense that something of limited benefit to others is somehow automatically of great benefit to them. In fact, even when we think

we are making a good contribution to others, we may need to remember that this may only be our sense of what has transpired and will need to be verified by evidence other than our own self-affirming opinion that we have been useful to another. Nonetheless, the fact that a genuine attempt to serve and support others has taken place is valid, irrespective of whether such acts ultimately proved to be beneficial.

“Person centeredness” is revealed not simply by the intentions to be of assistance to others, but rather by the genuineness of the efforts taken to do so. Though it would be better if such acts were always fruitful, such acts can be meaningful simply because they are taken for the right reason. However, this alone is insufficient if there is inadequate regard for the person to be assisted. This “person centered regard” is a complex ethic, but it essentially means that the person seeking to assist be deeply committed to the person, their autonomy, their well being, their dreams and the meaningful address of their needs and potential.

The capacity for any person or organization to “be there” in this highly demanding way for another person is predictably quite variable. In fact, some people may be woefully unsuited to such roles and others may be quite inspired, gifted and effective. However, even if one has the evident capacity to “be there” for another person, it would be a stretch to suggest that in any given moment one is maximally doing so.

This understandable variability in the ability of people to “be there” in an enhanced way is not a fixed matter, as it is quite possible for people to concentrate themselves on the task and thereby conceivably extend their ability to be responsive to people. So, the question of “being there” is not simply one of innate aptitude, but also of the degree to which one applies oneself in terms of the ethics of being person centered. This is essentially a moral or ethical accomplishment that could be seen as being somewhat separate from whether one has been effective.

When the effectiveness of one’s “acts of person centeredness” are critically evaluated, it could provide an opportunity for becoming much more relevant to what the person needs, through both one’s own efforts and those of others. A thorough and abiding commitment to the person should result in the kind of soul searching and critical evaluation of what has and has not been helpful for the person, so that scarce energies can be most fruitfully deployed.

In reality, it is inevitable that most everyone involved in trying to be meaningfully “person centered” will have to conclude that they are only “*somewhat person centered*”. On the face of it, such a declaration may seem a

bit disappointing, at least in contrast to the rather improbable claims from many persons and agencies that they are comprehensively “person centered”. Nonetheless, if in those moments when one is actually trying to be genuinely person centered, one is doing so with admirable intent and effort to “be there”, then at least one has been authentic, even if the meaningful differences made in people’s lives have been elusive.