

## WE-RHYTHM THERAPY

**David J. Alpert**

**ABSTRACT.** *The author presents a new model of psychotherapy which is in the person-centered tradition, but which is especially distinctive in its affirmation of the We-Experience (genuine mutual connectedness between the client and the psychotherapist) as the most therapeutically potent component of the psychotherapeutic relationship. The author posits that a high level of psychotherapist integration can enable the psychotherapist to have sufficient sensitivity to the more and less subtle sources of information in the psychotherapeutic relationship. Then through the psychotherapist's actions based on this sensitivity, the client may preponderantly experience this psychotherapeutic relationship as flowing, as an on-going We-Experience, rather than as being disjointed. This new psychotherapeutic model has been named "We-Rhythm Therapy."*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper is an initial attempt to present the We-Rhythm Therapy model formally to an audience for whom it may be of interest. Although the concepts of "We" and "Rhythm," as I use them, are inseparable in psychotherapy, I will first try to provide them separate attention so that the essence of each term might be conveyed before the theory and practice of We-Rhythm Therapy, as here explicated, focuses on their somewhat narrowed application in psychotherapy. We-Rhythm Therapy will then be briefly situated in the context of the history of psychotherapy, and have its aim identified.

### WE

The concept of "We," as I use it here, refers to a mutually concurrent, although not necessarily conscious, intrapsychic/interpsychic experience which arises from the authentic meeting or the authentic connecting of two or more persons. I sense that O'Hara (1984) was speaking of the We which I have just described when she noted that "There is a specialness in moments of empathic contact, but I believe the specialness resides in the willingness to surrender an individualistic world view in order to 'belong' to a relationship and be attuned to its purposes" (p. 215), and "The therapist is not inside the skin of the client (a frequent description of empathy), but inside the skin of the dyad, of which he is a part" (pp. 216-217).

I have come to the use of "We" as a psychological term from the work of Kunkel and

Dickerson (1947). In their work (1947), they coined the terms "We Experience" and "We-Feeling" (p. 5). By "We-Experience," Kunkel and Dickerson meant, for example, "You are connected with him to a new unit, since you have looked together with him into the depths of human life" (p. 6). As I see it, the term "We-Experience" matches my term "connecting." Kunkel and Dickerson (1947) call consciousness of the We-Experience "We-Feeling" (p. 5). I consider the term "We-Feeling" to match my term "meeting."

## **RHYTHM**

As I see it, there are subtle, varied, and changing rhythms in interpersonal relationships and in all of life. I perceive these rhythms as being ultimately unified through a core basic rhythm. In interpersonal relationships, through respectfully responding to these rhythms and their underlying unity one person can be of positive value to another. It is my view that the greater the psychological integration ("authenticity," "beingness," "congruence," or "wholeness") of the psychotherapist at any given moment with a client in a psychotherapeutic relationship, the greater the sensitive responsiveness to these subtle and unified rhythms the psychotherapist will exhibit at that point in time.

Leonard (1986) may be seen to have spoken on the mystical aspect of rhythm in a manner at least somewhat similar to mine when he stipulated that "At the heart of each of us, whatever our imperfections, there exists a silent pulse of perfect rhythm ... which is absolutely individual and unique, and yet which connects us to everything in the universe" (p. xii). And fitting well, as I see it, with my conception of sensitive responsiveness towards these rhythms, is Moustakas (cited in Mearns & Thorne, 1988) who noted "I saw that I must . . . allow my potentials, talents and skills, my total experience as a human being to blend naturally into the relationship with the child" (pp. 75-76).

## **WE-RHYTHM THERAPY**

Operationally I define We-Rhythm Therapy as a model of psychotherapy in which the psychotherapist consistently responds respectfully to the moment to moment aspects that the client and the psychotherapeutic relationship with the client exhibit more and less subtly throughout the relationship. Such aspects include the timing or nature of client communications and the therapist's sense of the degree of emotional closeness (intimacy) which the client is expressing towards the psychotherapist at any moment during the psychotherapeutic relationship. Respectful responsiveness on the part of the psychotherapist includes great sensitivity to the timing and nature of psychotherapist to client communications during the psychotherapeutic relationship. The psychotherapist's actions in We-Rhythm Therapy can make it possible for a We-Experience to permeate the psychotherapeutic relationship.

I believe that it is the We-Experience in psychotherapy that is therapeutically potent, that is, that brings the client into greater beingness; I consider relationality to be an essential component of beingness. By "relationality," I mean that there is an authentic connection for an individual with the core basic rhythm of life and with whomever or whatever persons, places, and things that individual is in contact with at that given moment. I further believe that interpersonal disconnection and ongoing lack of connection between the psychotherapist and the client are each counter-therapeutic.

## **THE PRACTICE OF WE-RHYTHM THERAPY**

The highly capable We-Rhythm Therapist will, without significant self-harm, exhibit enormous flexibility in the psychotherapeutic relationship. At one moment in the psychotherapeutic relationship, for example, the We-Rhythm Therapist may sense that the client is feeling crowded, and so the psychotherapist may hold back intimacy-wise, verbally, and/or in his or her action.

Potentially, in so doing, the psychotherapist may enhance the mutual connection that he or she has with the client at that time. At another moment in the psychotherapeutic relationship, the We-Rhythm Therapist may sense that a non-sexual warm embrace with this client is what's being called for. There is this "destiny" quality that's palpable for the psychotherapist when the response to the client is "right on."

The We-Rhythm Therapist who is more likely to be effective allows both the more and less subtle "data" available at each moment of the psychotherapeutic relationship to synergistically generate the best response at the time. In practice, the highly functioning We-Rhythm Therapist's "data" processing operations are fairly thorough, although not totally conscious, rapid, and ongoing, bringing forth repeatedly reformulated arrangements of the response to the client.

### **THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING A WE-RHYTHM THERAPIST**

There are several facets of the psychotherapist's personal experiences as a We-Rhythm Therapist which I feel can best be introduced through subjective report. So I shall proceed to share some of what is still with me from previous encounters in which I was taking the role of We-Rhythm Therapist.

I can recall a moment in an encounter when I held myself back from speaking too soon after a pause in the conversation. What allowed me to hold back was my sense, then, that it would be better to wait until I felt the way I do when a wave in the ocean crests and someone in the water is riding a surfboard, jumping, or swimming in sync with it. And I recollect another moment in an encounter when I felt down on myself due to concern for the harm that I just may have done to the client's process and the connection with the client, sensing that I had spoken prematurely. Additionally, I remember a moment in one encounter when I felt very certain that that particular encounter had reached completion, that, in a sense, the tide was now going out to sea.

### **WE-RHYTHM THERAPY AND THE HISTORY OF PSYCHOTHERAPY: A FIRST LOOK**

It is my impression that We-Rhythm Therapy would best be classified as a person-centered theory of psychotherapy. I believe that its major differences from client-centered/person-centered psychotherapy are: 1) We-Rhythm Therapy's conception of the We-Experience (rather than one of its manifestations such as client perceived empathic understanding or client perceived unconditional positive regard) as the healing agent of change for the client, and 2) We-Rhythm Therapy's requirement of a very high level of psychotherapist congruence for the likelihood of successful psychotherapy.

Furthermore, We-Rhythm Therapy invites research on several new variables in psychotherapeutic theory. One variable, which includes some component variables, would consider both the consistency and degree of genuine mutual connection between the psychotherapist and the client in segments as well as throughout the psychotherapeutic relationship. Another variable would consider the consistency and degree of genuine mutual connection between the client and the various contexts of his or her world outside of the psychotherapeutic relationship prior to, during, and following the psychotherapeutic relationship. These two variables, as well as their component variables, would be measures of relationality during and outside of psychotherapy. Regarding the concept of degree of mutual connection, I wish to suggest that meeting (We-Feeling) is a more therapeutically potent form of connecting (We-Experience) than any amount of connection without consciousness of that connection. In no way, however, am I suggesting that We-Feeling be forced or sought after in the psychotherapeutic relationship.

The variables of relationality may greatly correlate with that of the stages of client process as expressed in "A Process Conception Of Psychotherapy" (Rogers, 1961, pp. 125-159). They may as well correlate to the variable of client perception of therapist attitudinal qualities towards

them in the psychotherapeutic relationship, another classic conception, I would say, in the client-centered/person-centered tradition. Nevertheless, the variables of relationality are unique to We-Rhythm Therapy in terms of the client-centered/person-centered approach.

#### **WE-RHYTHM THERAPY AND THE HISTORY OF PSYCHOTHERAPY: A SECOND LOOK**

I wish to note here that the situating of We-Rhythm Therapy within the person-centered tradition reflects, in part, the fact of that tradition's having exerted greatest degree of direct professional influence on my psychotherapeutic thinking. While writing and revising this paper, I have become aware of the fairly recent emergence of three other "relational" models of psychotherapy. The self-in-relation theory expressed by Jean Baker Miller, Janet L. Surrey, and other members of the Stone Center at Wellesley College; the intersubjectivity theory associated most with the Self psychology influenced Robert D. Stolorow; and the dialogical perspective held by the Buber scholar Maurice Friedman and his colleagues at the Institute For Dialogical Psychotherapy, of San Diego, may each have significant overlaps with We-Rhythm Therapy. Further studies on We-Rhythm Therapy may consider any such overlaps with a degree of thoroughness worthy of those respective relational models.

#### **THE GOAL OF WE-RHYTHM THERAPY**

The goal of psychotherapy from the We-Rhythm perspective is the client's maintenance or enhancement of his or her relational capacity in the various contexts of his or her life.

#### **REFERENCES**

- Kunkel, F., & Dickerson, R. E. (1947) *How character develops: A psychological interpretation*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons (First published 1940).
- Leonard, G. (1986) *The silent pause: A search for the perfect rhythm that exists in each of us*. New York: E. P. Dutton (First published 1978).
- Mearns, D. & Thome, B. (1988) *Person-Centered counseling in action*. London: Sage Publications.
- O'Hara, M.M. (1984). Person-Centered gestalt: Toward a holistic synthesis. In Levant, R. F., & Shlien, J. M., Eds. *Client-Centered therapy and the person-centered approach : New directions in theory, research, and practice*. New York: Praeger Publishers
- Rogers, C.R., (1961). *On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.