

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Mahrer, A. (2006). *The creation of new ideas in psychotherapy: A guidebook*. Herefordshire, UK: PCCS Books. ISBN 101-8980-5977-2, 183 pages.

Reviewed by: Anne Thériault, Ph.D., Educational Counselling, University of Ottawa

The Creation of New Ideas in Psychotherapy: A Guidebook is a BIG small book by Alvin Mahrer that contains some very bold ideas. Within its 183 pages he attempts to set an entirely new course for progress in the science and practice of psychotherapy. The damning conclusion that psychotherapy as we know it is not effective, first voiced by Eysenck (1952) and since reiterated and reworded by Dawes (1996) in his book *House of Cards: Psychology and Psychotherapy Built on Myths*, is the basic premise and launching pad for Mahrer's new vision of the science of psychotherapy. The author, however, does not bother with deconstruction nor does he discuss the past flaws of psychotherapy. Rather, he adopts a forward-looking approach and proposes a roadmap for reaching an improved science of psychotherapy.

Given that the field of psychotherapy appears to be stalemated, Mahrer audaciously and passionately urges thinkers to abandon accepted knowledge and catapult themselves into the "utterly unknown" in attempts to usher in a scientific revolution. Mahrer's thesis is that a revolution in psychotherapy is imperative, and he develops compelling arguments that are grounded in the philosophy of science. The author's aim, however, is not merely to give scientist thinkers an intellectual *douche froide* (cold shower). Rather, Mahrer's treatise offers a cogent and persuasive argument for the discovery of alternatives to psychotherapy practice, research, and training as we know them. His is a very compelling answer to the field's unspoken BIG small question: *Now what?*

The deceptively simple answer, of course, takes up the rest of the book: We need creative new ideas! We need to have them, and lots of them. But how? In a sing-song tone that is reminiscent of catchy self-help manuals, Mahrer proposes himself as a paragon of creativity, one who can lead us through the impasse and toward a paradigm shift. To help us begin this movement he simplifies the process and packages it into eight separate chapters, each replete with advice and useful methods to stimulate creative new ideas (CNI).

The first chapter outlines the type of person you need to be (come) in order to be ready for CNI to flow through you. These include having a "bad" attitude (i.e., being somewhat rebellious, sceptical of the mainstream, and adversarial) and cultivating the "right kind of skills," which comprise the remaining chapters of the book.

Chapter 2 divides the world into us versus them: the creative thinkers (us) and the commoners, "the crowd," the uncreative flock of sheep (them). The methods proposed to stimulate CNI have to do with positioning oneself inside and outside the crowd. In Chapter 3, Mahrer proposes seven perspective-altering ways of seeing the field of psychotherapy. What these seven perception shifts have in common is that they invite the brave thinkers to abandon some of the shackles that have rendered the field

of psychotherapy rigid and stale. Among the binding frames of mind that he would like us to loose include looking for truth rather than looking for usefulness, and being interested in general rules rather than valuing exceptions. Mahrer encourages us to boil down the cumulative body of knowledge in the field of psychotherapy to its most basic foundational elements. This process of distilling helps achieve a healthy distance from conventional psychotherapy, one that is conducive to CNI.

Chapter 4 coaches us through the interpretation and acceptance of felt bodily sensations as clues to the recognition that CNI are happening. A major assumption here is that when we are in the vicinity of CNI, our bodies will respond with either excitement and arousal or threat and fear. In other words, CNI produce identifiable physiological responses that can serve as cues to the presence of CNI. Chapter 5 focuses on ways to study “the problem” that are conducive to CNI, including not defining the problem prematurely, being sensitized to breakthrough problems, and simply being open to seeing the problem in a new way. Other novel aspects of studying the problem include valuing the inexplicable and paying attention to the peripheral phases of research, such as the before and after phase. In the sixth chapter, Mahrer proposes five steps that can help us to manipulate an idea in order to transform it from a mundane thought process into a “big bang” of an idea. The main point of Chapter 7 is that CNI can result from creative forces acting upon us. In other words, Mahrer proposes a role reversal where we are the objects of creative forces. Instead of producing CNI we are coached as to how to become conduits through which CNI can be channelled. Once the reader makes it to Chapter 8, instructions for entering into a creative relationship with what they are studying await.

Throughout *The Creation of New Ideas in Psychotherapy*, Mahrer boldly tries to singlehandedly jolt the field of psychotherapy from a self-contented slumber. Mahrer believes that there is something fundamental that needs to change in the way we do psychotherapy, and he courageously spells out the mechanisms that will catalyze a new order. In a way, this is vintage Al Mahrer: his new agenda is to do away with agendas! His proposed structure is to abandon structure. He is not suggesting that we push the frontiers of knowledge beyond what is known. Rather, he wants a whole new playing field. The cornerstone in Mahrer’s construction is individual intellectual independence (i.e., creative new ideas). His mission throughout the book is to incite readers away from convention and conformity and to impel them toward discovery and divergence. In his no-holds-barred approach, Mahrer uses repetition, simplification, pontification, exaggeration, and all manner of unorthodox literary machinations. While these come across as redundant at times, they are in keeping with Mahrer’s saccadic and over-the-top style. This relentless style can make reading Chapter 8 very arduous and at times makes one want to scream, “Is this guy for real?”

Mahrer is attempting to incite a scientific revolution using a writing style that seems more fitting for a book outlining 10 easy steps to building a bird house. The contradictions are striking, not the least of which is the use of the phrase “creative new ideas” in practically every second sentence, which is as uncreative as it gets. No accident here, though. One gets the sense that this is intentional. This is Mahrer at his best: provocative, mischievous, and playful. The very paradox of structuring the

process of serendipity evident from the title onwards contributes to the humorous tone and pegs Al Mahrer as a brilliant “bad boy” on the list of geniuses in the field of psychotherapy. Because he has written 17 books, contributed to over 300 publications, and won numerous prestigious awards such as the *Rollo May Award for the Pursuit of New Frontiers* awarded in 2005 by the American Psychological Association (APA) and the *Living Legend in Psychotherapy Award* in 2002, also by the APA, we trust him. Merrily, we go along for the ride as he “in many ways turns the world upside down” (Corsini, 2005, p. xi).

References

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