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## Reflections on the Education of Psychotherapists

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Jack Martin

*The University of Western Ontario*

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I will not comment on the feasibility or possible mechanics of implementing the Mahrer and Boulet (1989) Plan (MBP). Rather, I will focus my remarks on whether or not the MBP makes sense — i.e., Does the MBP “commend itself to the understanding of being in accordance with reason and good judgment” (Funk & Wagnall, 1982, p. 1223).

### *Psychotherapy as an Identifiable Entity*

Throughout the MBP, it is assumed that there is some identifiable entity called psychotherapy (e.g., “Of all the words and terms, we suggest that the best word for it is ‘psychotherapy.’” But what is this “it”? Nowhere do Mahrer and Boulet provide or defend a set of properties and/or characteristics that might instantiate this assumed entity.

Confusion about the ontological status of psychotherapy greatly weakens the MBP, as currently formulated. For example, Mahrer and Boulet seem to hold simultaneously the three propositions that (1) there is a single, coherent “it” that is psychotherapy (see the foregoing quote), but that it somehow makes sense (2) to sanction postdoctoral education centres that might specialize in only a single approach to psychotherapy and (3) to admit postdoctoral students with no stated knowledge prerequisites other than the possession of a “doctorate in a psychotherapy-related profession.”

Now, if psychotherapy is a coherent entity, the sense of such simultaneously-held propositions must be that each and every approach to psychotherapy shares the essential features of psychotherapy, and that all psychotherapy-related professions prepare students equally well for a potential career as psychotherapists. I think it is an enormous challenge to show that some quintessential essence of psychotherapy can be extracted in common from therapeutic traditions as seemingly disparate as gestalt, psychoanalytic, strategic, bioenergetic, transpersonal, and behavioural approaches. All of these traditions display considerable subvariations within themselves. Even if such a psychotherapeutic essence could be extracted, the coherence of the MBP plan as stated would still require proof that some common set of knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes (dispositions) relevant to psychotherapy thus construed is present in professional doctoral programs as diverse as education, psychology, medicine, social work, and counselling.

Of course, the MBP might still make sense if some commonalities across different psychotherapies and professional preparation programs

could be located at the level of practice itself. That is, if some set of "helping" functions could be identified independently of quasi-theoretical, semantic, and contextual differences across schools of psychotherapy and programs of professional preparation. Unfortunately, as Mahrer and Boulet (p. ??) admit, "there are no generally recognized standards from the practice or speciality of psychotherapy."

Still another possibility is that psychotherapy is not a unitary, conjunctive concept. Rather, it may be a disjunctive, "family resemblance" concept in the sense that it might be this, or that, or something else, without any common sharing of essences across all such things (see Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1956; Wittgenstein, 1953). If this proves to be the case, then any references in the MBP to the "it" that is psychotherapy presumably must be taken as metaphorical or as simply constructions of convenience. If this is the intended sense of proposition 1 above, then proposition 2 and 3 might be seen as somewhat sensible.

In any event, the issues I raise here with respect to the ontological status of psychotherapy really reduce to whether or not we know what we mean when we talk about psychotherapy. We probably should address this basic matter explicitly when promoting social and institutional structures for the advanced education of psychotherapists.

### *The Relationship of Knowledge to Practice in Psychotherapy*

There are two important senses in which I welcome the central idea of the MBP that the education of psychotherapists be postdoctoral. The first sense has to do with the relationship of psychotherapeutic practice to relevant knowledge.

While it frequently is argued that there exists a more or less direct relationship between knowledge in the social and human sciences and professional therapeutic practice, there are several very good reasons for thinking otherwise. As I have argued elsewhere, (see, for example, Martin, 1989, in press), the essential and necessary uncertainty of the social and psychological consequences that attend any human action in "naturalistic" circumstances does not permit the formulation of tight, deterministic algorithms or prescriptions for therapeutic practice (see, also, Cziko, 1989). Consequently, any attempt to formulate therapy-relevant knowledge as procedural skills that can be acquired and applied outside of advanced knowledge of relevant psychological, educational, and human/social scientific theories is largely untenable as a model for the education of psychotherapists. Only with a comprehensive preparation in the knowledge and methods of these and related disciplines (including, perhaps some in-depth exposure to the arts and humanities) can one learn to distinguish patronizing from caring, lack of concern from tolerance, information from understanding, and be disposed to act on these and similar distinctions.

Consequently, I am sympathetic to the postdoctoral character of the MBP in so far as the kind of in-depth education to which I have alluded might issue from the kinds of professional doctoral programs mentioned by Mahrer and Boulet. Of course, it might be extremely helpful to identify some, perhaps core, elements in such prerequisite doctoral programs which are particularly germane to the study of psychotherapy at the postdoctoral level.

### *The Personal Qualities of Psychotherapists*

The second sense in which I strongly endorse the postdoctoral character of the MBP relates more to the attitudes and dispositions of aspiring psychotherapists than to the kind of knowledge they might possess. At a minimum, I think that the education of psychotherapists might involve a very personal, critical reflection not only on one's knowledge, but also upon one's experience of self, others, and social contexts as these necessarily relate to participation in psychotherapy. The development of genuine dispositions for helping oneself and others probably rests upon attitudes of deep respect for persons in all of their multilayered complexity, frailties as well as strengths.

Obviously, there can be no guarantees with respect to the levels of personal development that might permit further attainment of dispositions and attitudes such as these. Nonetheless, it is not unreasonable to assume that such levels of development are more likely to be manifest in the thoughts, emotions, and actions of well-educated individuals of an age that has permitted the accumulation of a representative range of personal experiences. It is precisely this sort of reasoning that purportedly led Plato to suggest that philosophers should reach an age of 40 before "being permitted to practice." Insofar as psychotherapy may be as much or more a form of disciplined, artistic and scientific inquiry into the experiences of others and oneself as it is a form of psychological or social scientific engineering, I believe the gist of Plato's suggestion (give or take a few years) might apply equally well to psychotherapists as to philosophers.

### *Concluding Comments*

I have been extremely selective in my reactions to the Mahrer and Boulet proposal for the postdoctoral education of psychotherapists. In focusing on the "sensibleness" of some of the ideas contained in the MBP, I do not wish to leave the impression that I consider unresolved issues of implementation to be unimportant. Rather, I believe that questions of sense and meaning necessarily must take precedence over actions based on the conceptualizations contained in any proposal of this sort.

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*About the Author*

Jack Martin is Professor of Education and Psychology, Althouse College, The University of Western Ontario. His writings and professional interests are in the fields of counselling psychology, applied cognitive psychology, educational psychology, and theoretical psychology.

Correspondence concerning this commentary should be directed to Jack Martin, Althouse College, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, N6G 1G7.

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## Reaction to: The Postdoctoral Plan

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R. Vance Peavy

*University of Victoria*

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My first reaction is to acknowledge that the authors of this proposal have made an extremely important distinction, in my opinion, by clearly stating that "... psychotherapy is best understood as a specialty within and across the various psychotherapy-related professions and disciplines" I find myself quite able to support this assertion, provided that the range of foundational professions and disciplines is sufficiently broad to include at least psychology, education, medicine, social work, nursing, sociology, anthropology and even philosophy and pastoral studies.

I think that the establishment of postgraduate centres for training and education in psychotherapy has these postential merits:

1. Encouragement of better and more deeply educated candidates for training in the practice of psychotherapy,
2. Removal of some of the ammunition from "turf" guarders in psychology, psychiatry and counselling psychology who are bent on "claiming" psychotherapy to be the possession of a particular discipline,