

## **An Interview with Jürgen Kriz**

**on the topic of Self-Actualization and Rogerian Person Centered Psychotherapy**

David Van Nuys, Ph.D.: Sun, Feb 1st 2009 - 08:00:00 AM

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or, alternatively,

<http://www.gracepointwellness.org/91-psychotherapy/article/29024-an-interview-with-jurgen-kriz-on-the-topic-of-self-actualization-and-rogerian-person-centered-psychotherapy>



**The Wise Counsel Podcast - Hosted by David Van Nuys, Ph.D.**



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Audio interviews on topics in Mental Health, Wellness and Psychotherapy



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In this edition of the Wise Counsel Podcast, Dr. Van Nuys interviews Jürgen Kriz on the topic of Self-Actualization, a concept central to the humanistic school of psychotherapy, and central to the work of Dr. Carl Rogers who was (and remains) arguably the most important psychologist of that school. Also present as co-interviewer is Charles Merrill, Ph.D, a psychologist and former colleague of Dr. Van Nuy at Sonoma State University, and a friend of

Dr. Kriz.

Many readers may have previously encountered the concept of self-actualization before in the work of psychologist Abraham Maslow where it occupies the pinnacle position in his hierarchy of needs. In this view, self-actualization is what remains for people when all of their needs have been met and they are free to pursue their likes and desires. Accordingly, many people think of self-actualization as a drive people have towards self-perfection and self-improvement. Dr. Kriz is not really talking about self-actualization as self-improvement, however. Instead, self-actualization for Kriz is another term for the self-organization principle, which is the idea that people are first and foremost intrinsically (internally) motivated, according to their desires, but that they adapt themselves according to social (external) demands. Maslow's description of self-actualization as what happens when all other needs are met is not wrong, but the concept is not about self-improvement so much

as it is about the way that a person will start to self-organize according to intrinsic, internal motivations in the absence of external pressures that demand otherwise. It's not about making yourself better so much as it is about becoming free to pursue your own interests. According to Kriz, people are always monitoring their environment and adapting to the demands of the (social) environment. Accordingly, if you want to help them to change, you have to help them to come to a new relationship with their environment which enables them to reorganize. This, in essence, is the task of psychotherapy, according to Dr. Kriz.

Dr. Kriz has recently written a book about self-actualization as the idea was developed by Dr. Carl Rogers as part of Rogers' person centered psychotherapy. The purpose of the book is to bring Rogers' ideas up to date by integrating them with modern insights from systems theory, which forms the basis for the family systems psychotherapy approach as historically exemplified by Virginia Satir, Jay Haley and Salvador Minuchin. You can best think of systems theory and family systems psychotherapy as ecological in nature. Where other forms of psychotherapy focus on the health of the individual, family systems psychotherapies focus on the health of the group in which various individuals are embedded. Individuals are understood to always be in relationship to other individuals within groups, such that it is impossible to understand an individual in isolation. Examples of important groups include the family and the workplace. When individuals within groups are observed to have problems, family systems psychotherapists look for the sources of those problems in the interactions between group members.

Kriz views Rogers as an early example of a systems theorist. Even though Rogers' psychotherapy focused on individuals, Rogers was, Kriz suggests, very attuned to the role that relationships play in creating and alleviating psychological problems. Kriz believes that if Rogers had lived long enough, he would have himself integrated much systems theory into his person (or client) centered psychotherapy.

Kriz has been researching Rogerian psychotherapy for approximately 30 years. He has published numerous works in his native German language. His recent book on Self-Actualization was conceived as an English language work, though based on book chapters and articles he originally wrote in German. Kriz has a strong background in astrophysics, computer science and statistics as well as psychology. He was originally attracted to Rogers' work because he recognized parallels to concepts like self-actualization (or self-organizing systems) from physical sciences like physics and chemistry. He admired Rogers' willingness to address the true complexity inherent in the mind and psyche, and rejects the reductionist impulse that has become increasingly prevalent in European (and American) psychology which seeks to reduce mental events to biology or mechanistically conceived behavioral analyses.

Dr. Kriz is asked to define systems theory. He responds by describing three basic principles that define this approach. First, systems theory understands that everything is a dynamic process, constantly changing, rather than something fixed and static. Second, systems theory understands that most things in the world participate in and interact with networks of other things, and that you cannot understand the nature of those things without paying close attention to the networks (or systems) in which they participate. Third, systems theory understands that opposed sets of concepts like input/output, independence/dependence and cause/effect arise as a consequence of the perspective of the person looking at a system. These are not actual or fixed features of the relationships between elements in a system. Because all things are interconnected and interactive, things can function as an input (or a cause) in one context, and as an output (or an effect) in another. The final observation that defines modern systems theory is the recognition that systems are, for the most part, self-organizing; that left to their own devices, systems will take on shapes of their own devising. It is not necessary for external forces to shape these systems in order for them to become what they are supposed to be.

The self-organizing principle has direct ramifications for the conduct of psychotherapy. Prior to Rogers most forms of psychotherapy were therapist-focused, in that the healing action of therapy flowed from what the therapist offered to the client. For instance, psychodynamic psychotherapy depended on the skill of the therapist or analyst as an interpreter of the patient's behavior and hidden motives. The client could not heal on her own, but rather was dependent on the intervention of the therapist. Many modern forms of psychotherapy are similarly therapist or technique oriented, for instance, cognitive behavioral therapy in which the healing power of the therapy is derived from the practice of cognitive reframing techniques. Rogers was the first mainstream therapist to suggest that clients did not need techniques or masterful therapists in order to heal, but that instead, they could heal themselves (or self-organize) if only the things in their environment that were keeping them from doing that healing could be identified and addressed. In Rogerian therapy, there is no specific goal other than the goals that emerge intrinsically from the client, and there is no attempt on the part of the therapist to control or otherwise guide the client towards a predetermined goal. Instead, Rogerian therapists work to provide their clients with the support they need to recognize and act upon their own intrinsically present goals. As Kriz says, "You do not need to impose order. You can just help people to facilitate their inherent possibilities".

Rogerian person centered therapists facilitate client change by providing a supportive environment, and thus altering their clients' relationship to the environment. This support comes in the form of the therapeutic relationship. There are three important conditions that need to be present before any given therapy relationship will become genuinely supportive. First, the therapist must be able to truly empathize with the client. Second, the relationship must exhibit congruence, meaning that the therapist must be aware and attentive regarding the client, and psychologically healthy enough to not be distracted by personal concerns. Third, unconditional positive regard must be present.

Unconditional positive regard is a frequently misunderstood concept, Kriz believes. Many people think that it is present when a therapist expresses warmth and acceptance to the client but this is not necessarily the case. It is easily possible that clients are fearful of being rejected by the therapist and are not willing to share parts of themselves that they believe are unacceptable. If this situation is allowed to persist, it is possible that the therapy remains superficial and what appears to be unconditional positive regard is not really unconditional at all. To deepen the therapy and allow for the emergence of true unconditional regard it is necessary that therapists must act in ways that help their clients understand that their unacceptable parts will be respected.

Kriz talks about how Rogerian therapists must necessarily be thinking in systems terms if they are to best help their clients. People are heavily influenced by familial, social and societal demands and interdependent with these systems; it is not possible to understand someone's situation without also intimately understanding their relationships. People's self-concepts emerge from an "interwoven structure of narratives" comprised of "small stories connected not logically, but instead psychologically". In Kriz' view, self-concept and symptoms as well can only be understood in the context of this narrative web, which necessarily requires therapists to attend to the systems level of analysis.

Kriz's book "Self-Actualization: Person Centered Approach and Systems Theory", in which these ideas are discussed in detail, is available online through Amazon's UK website. It is also available through the American website, but it is far more expensive there for some reason. Kriz has written this book with professional therapists in mind, but believes that it is appropriate for anyone who wants to "find better metaphors for understanding their own life". Dr. Merrill, who has read the book, suggests that it is "very readable".

Dr. Van Nuys asks what the common errors are that student therapists make when learning the person centered therapy approach. Dr. Kriz mentions two frequent mistakes, the first being that many beginning therapists find it difficult and anxiety-provoking to relinquish their urge to 'fix', or

guide or otherwise exercise control over their clients. The other frequent mistake is for therapists to try to do the therapy as though it was a set of methods. While there are methods involved in person centered therapy, fundamentally, these methods are in the service of a genuine committed therapy relationship which is respectful and curious about the uniqueness of the client and the therapy process. This therapy involves a trust that things will work out, and a willingness to relinquish control over outcomes.

Kriz notes that the Rogerian approach to therapy has declined in popularity in German over recent decades (also the case in the United States). Dr. Van Nuys closes the interview by asking Dr. Kriz about his sense of the future of Rogerian psychotherapy. Dr. Kriz responds that in the short term, he expects further decline of interest stemming from the present day reductionist therapy zeitgeist, and the economic difficulties of funding people to have ongoing psychotherapy. In the long term, going out 15 to 25 years, however, Kriz is bullish on the approach, which he suggests will ultimately enjoy renewed interest on account of it offering a more accurate and respectful vision of human problems and how to best fix them than other therapies afford.

- There are several ways to obtain Dr. Kriz's book in the United States. [Self-Actualization](#) can be purchased for an overly large sum of money from American websites such as Amazon.com. It can be purchased for a more reasonable sum of money from the UK company [PCCS Books](#) or the [Amazon UK website](#), but shipping may become expensive.
- Dr. Kriz and Dr. Merrill know each other through mutual membership in the Association for the Development of the Person Centered Approach, which maintains a website at [www.adpca.org](http://www.adpca.org)
- You can visit Dr. Kriz's website at [www.jkriz.de/](http://www.jkriz.de/)



### **About Jürgen Kriz**

Jürgen Kriz is professor of psychotherapy and clinical psychology at the University of Osnabrück and guest-professor at several universities in Europe and the USA. He is the author of many books, papers, and chapters in the German language. He is also the author of the 2008 book published in English, *Self-Actualization: Person-Centered Approach and Systems Theory*. He is a practicing psychotherapist, supervisor and chairman of the scientific council of the Person-centred Society in Germany (GwG). Among other honours, Kriz received the 'Grand Viktor Frankl Award of the City of Vienna' for his life work which has won international acclaim in the field of humanistic psychotherapy.

### **About Charles Merrill, Ed.D.**

Dr. Merrill is professor of psychology at Sonoma State University, and a long time friend and colleague of Dr. Van Nuys. After earning his doctorate at the University of Florida, Dr. Merrill came to Sonoma State University where he was Director of the Counseling Center for many years. Later, he became a member of the psychology department, eventually serving as department chair and Chair of the Faculty Senate. He was one of the co-founders of the psychology department's

M.A. in Organization Development program. He regularly teaches courses on counseling theory and practices, family psychology from a systems perspective, group process, and a seminar on myth, dream and symbol based on the psychology of Carl Jung. His teaching has been strongly influenced by the writing of such theorists as Martin Buber, Ted Landsman, Sidney Jourard, R.D. Laing, James Hillman, and Carl Rogers. In recent years, Dr. Merrill has been active in the Association for the Development of the Person-Centered Approach, which focuses on research and practice of person-centered, and Rogerian principles and practices in psychotherapy, education and groups for world peace.

## Reader Comments

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### **inspiring podcast - Anne Harrisburg - Feb 11th 2009**

Thank you so much for interviewing Dr. Kriz. It was great to hear about the unconditional regard in that way. I really appreciated the systems theory points. I strongly agree that narrative meaning structures and cultural relationships are underestimated in the PCA approach.

As therapists we benefit from taking the influence of metaphors and belief systems (beyond RET therapy) into account. Moreover I agree to the importance of transitions, which are changes in the process of environment (developmental tasks for the system, as Dr. Kriz called it).

Interpersonal life does not only refer to the action of others but also to meaning structures, expectations, and new interpretations. Becoming pregnant, meeting a new partner with different ideas, starting a new job are real developmental tasks which we have to adopt to. So called symptoms tell us that this adaptation wasn't successful. A fascination interpretation by Dr. Kriz.

I found Dr. Kriz' contribution to psychotherapy very insightful. Thank you so much!

### **challenging - stephenson - Feb 5th 2009**

I agree with Branton: an inspiring interview! Working as a psychotherapist also with couples and families on a PCA background, Dr Kriz remarks about what is missing in Rogers approach were very helpful for me. Indeed, not only the relationship between a therapist and a client is important but also the relationship between the cultural and personal structures of thought, for example. I liked particularly the part in the interview in which the different levels of the process were explained. Thanks!

### **Great Interview - Sally Atkins, Ed.D., Professor of Human Development & Psychological Counseling, Appalachian State University - Feb 5th 2009**

Thank you for hosting Dr. Juergen Kriz. His ideas are so important and not very well known here in the US. This was an informative and inspiring interview.

### **Great interview - Brandon - Feb 3rd 2009**

I am a Librarian of a mental health library in New Zealand, as well as a PCC in training and found this interview insightful, particularly Kriz's comment and example of unconditional positive regard. By listening to this interview I have just identified where I have been conditional with a client of mine, I have been enthusiastic about the client's strengths while ignoring or

minimizing weaknesses. Although this sounds fine, I have not included the whole person, which is important in PCC theory. I have just purchased Kriz's book Self-Actualization through Amazon.com, the last copy that they have at this time, he he, I can't wait to bite into it. An A+++ Interview.

*Editor's Note: I'm very glad you enjoyed it! I learned from this one too.*