

aus: *Gruppendynamik*, 23. Jahrg., Heft 3, 1992, S. 315-325
from: "Group Dynamics," Vol. 23, Issue 3, 1992, pp. 315-325

"I'm Not a Gura!" Interview mit Ruth C. Cohn¹ (R.C.)

Interviewer: Horst Heidbrink (H.H.)

Ruth C. Cohn celebrated her 80th birthday on August 27, 1992. She is psychoanalyst and founder of Theme-Centered Interaction (TCI). The following interview, which I conducted with her on July 21, 1992 for "Group Dynamics" was actually much longer and comprehensive than the text which could be printed here. In agreement with her I have shortened it to a "printable" length.

H.H.: What do you feel was the most important impulse or the most decisive experience which led to the development of "Theme-Centered Interaction"?

R.C.: That act of courage which I consider the most essential event of my "professional," and partially of my personal life as well, was connected with my work as a teaching analyst. It came to my attention that the reason that candidates were failing at our institute was due, in nearly 80% of the cases, to their not being able to deal with counter-transference satisfactorily. They then had to return again to their own analysis in order to master this - which, of course, didn't help at all. Counter-transference and transference cannot be routed - at best they can be reduced. There are certain things, including early impressions, which are impossible to erase completely. The institute said that these persons had to return to their own analysis - that was all. I asked, "What happens in the meantime with their patients?" - "They have to wait, too," was the answer. Already at that time I was convinced that counter-transference was a quite normal phenomenon - there are even very diversified versions. Then one of the women candidates approached me and said that if the institute wouldn't provide it, she would organize eight or nine persons for a private seminar with me. That was the beginning. On the evening prior to the first session I gave considerable thought as to just how I was going to manage this, how I could be dealing with the subject "counter-transference." I had the idea that I would lie down on my own couch and let thoughts about my patients and my situation with them freely flow through my mind. I considered what I would then do when the thoughts were flowing, and nothing occurred to me except describing what was going on inside of me - in the here and now. I already believed at that time that learning is most efficient in the here and now. Then a patient came to my mind, a woman with whom I had the feeling that my own feelings were playing an important role. In the middle of freely associating in front of the group, I became aware of just which feeling it was: "She knows everything, she is so smart!" The patient was a famous chemist, who naturally knew much more about chemistry than I did, and I wasn't famous, either. Therefore - I kept quiet. An analyst is supposed to remain quiet, but I kept too quiet. It was as if I were sitting on a small stool, listening to my Papa. He knows everything, too. And the whole time they were listening, the feeling became stronger and stronger within me that they know exactly what is going on.

H.H.: The group which is sitting there?

R.C.: Yes, the group which is sitting there. This feeling became so powerful that the case I was describing disappeared and my reactions were directed solely at the group. I don't

¹ Translated from German by Mary Anne Kuebel

know how I finished. Probably: "I am now thinking only about you - and what is happening in you now?" Then they commenced talking about what they thought about the case. That wasn't restricted to what I had been saying, but was connected primarily to the interaction among the persons. "What you just said reminds me of S.," or "What you said angers me," "Yes, I thought so myself, sometimes." I was being referred to only occasionally. Something began to become apparent to me. At first not entirely clear. During the following session we became aware of the fact that the person who is freely associating is bringing the patient into the group through her or his representation. When I am speaking about the problems I am having, I am also identifying myself through my use of language, through my choice of what I say. And the group identifies itself with the patient or with me.

Within this one year we were able to establish a tremendous amount about what was going on in the group. Somewhat later I taught group therapy and did things that no one else was doing. Realizing exactly what it was that was different was a slow process - I have described this in detail in "Gelebten Geschichte."² When all the students wanted to come to me, the other teachers became somewhat jealous. They accused me personally of attracting positive transference, which they then had to deal with and couldn't. I knew I was doing something, but didn't realize what. Very, very slowly, it became clear to me: I pay attention to myself, I pay attention to the others, I keep quiet a lot, but not too much, I always direct them back to the theme - I, We and It.

H.H.: I, We and It remind me of the Freudian distinction of Ego, Super-Ego and Id.

R.C.: One should avoid using certain terms in another context. My "It" [Id] is naturally a totally different one than Freud's; it refers to the subject matter, whereas he regarded the Id as instinctual impulses. Originally it was formulated: I pay attention to myself, I pay attention to us and I pay attention to what we are doing, i.e., the theme. Thus the name "Theme-Centered Interaction," although the expression is not thoroughly adequate, because the "It" is task-oriented and interest-oriented as well as theme-oriented. Also, the idea of the Globe came somewhat later - my realization that the environment was not limited to the immediate environment, but extends back into history and also into the future. In the course of time, the concept of the Globe became more philosophical, more comprehensive. I don't have to explain that so much any more, since everyone now knows that the globe influences us. At that time we did not pay attention to the importance of what was going on in the world.

H.H.: You have related that you developed TCI basically out of the experiences in the counter-transference workshops, without being aware of it right away, and that you became conscious of this only in the course of time. Could one say that TCI is actually a daughter of psychoanalysis?

R.C.: If there is a living creature with more than one pair of parents, then one could say that. TCI is very much influenced by psychoanalysis and also very much influenced by the historical situation of national socialism. As for the method, I couldn't say that any one thing was so strongly influential. Existentialism was known by a number of practicing therapists in America, but I had no contact with them at that time. I first got in touch with these persons in 1961. In New York, where I live, I had no contact with non-Freudians, that meant particularly the existentialists. In addition, I hardly read anything at all during this period. This was due to my personal situation. I was divorced from my husband and lived

² Cohn, R.C. & Farau, A. "Gelebte Geschichte der Psychotherapie. Zwei Perspektiven." (Lived Histories in Psychotherapy. Two Perspectives) Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta Publishers, 1984.

alone with two small children. Aside from that, I suffered from a chronic infection, a consequence of a ruptured appendix which had happened when I was 16 years old. There were no antibiotics, no penicillin. I was not well, I had children, I had my practice and kept myself afloat with antibiotics after they appeared on the market. In spite of that, infections reoccurred, until I was rescued through macrobiotic nutrition. Two whole years I ate according to macrobiotic nutrition and afterwards the infections did not reoccur. These were the reasons why I never had time for reading nor for travelling. My education depended on what I had learned before that time. What I evolved, so to speak, was quite independent from other events in the world up until 1961. In 1960 or 1961 the American Academy of Psychotherapists (AAP) was founded - at least I attended for the first time in 1961. Everyone who had once been a psychoanalyst or had never been one met here, persons such as Carl Rogers and Virginia Satir. Perhaps they weren't there so often, but the others - Gestalt-Fritz (Perls), the experientialists Carl Whitaker and John Warkentin, the rational-emotive (now it's called something else, but I've forgotten) Albert Ellis, George Bach, these and others met together. The persons who are now well-known in Europe. I was attracted by the title of their first annual conference, "The Continued Growth of the Psychotherapist," and attended because of it, without knowing these persons before. It touched me considerably to discover that there were others persons interested in this subject. This first conference was even nearby New York. But the counter-transference workshop was before that, to be exact, ten years before.

H.H.: Is it really correct to say, as many already think, that TCI is a particular educational method? Or is it more than that?

R.C.: My original idea was politically motivated - it should be possible to do something to prevent national socialistic thinking. Of course, it is not possible to reach everyone, but at least teachers and pupils. The rudiments are very educational, but my motivation was strongly political.

H.H.: That is quite evident in the TCI axioms, which distinguish it from other directions in therapy and even other educational methods.

R.C.: Especially from psychoanalysis, which functions indeed as neutral to values. That it is impossible to remain neutral in regard to values was a revolutionary idea. In the course of the years I feel that more and more intensely.

H.H.: You understand TCI as a holistic approach.

R.C.: Feelings, thinking and the globe belonged together from the very beginning.

H.H.: Immanuel Kant said, "Be courageous and use your own power of reasoning," and Ruth Cohn added, "Be courageous and use your own power of feeling." A further additional which you made - and I was especially aware of it when you spoke about your illness - is to listen to your own body, too.

R.C.: I really was lucky. I don't agree with the notion that there are no coincidences. But it is true that it is necessary to "get ahold of" the coincidences which are suited to you. Quite accidentally I was treated for back aches by a student of Else Gindler's. Originally I had been referred to an ordinary physical therapist, who was pregnant and who in turn referred me to Gindler's student. I thus received training in awareness for my body without intending to do so and without even being interested. Actually I was interested in the woman, eleven years older than myself, who told me all sorts of things that no one else did. I kept the

appointments because I liked her very much and I thought it marvellous that someone was finally telling me “real” things. But of course later all of this became a part of my own analysis.

H.H.: But it must be terribly difficult really to combine, find a balance and equilibrium among those things which we traditionally separate - feelings, thinking, body. How is it possible to integrate my body, my mind and my feelings?

R.C.: You can't do it - it's completely impossible. You can merely possess a compass! My compass is: I don't want to neglect my body nor give up my soul and I definitely want to be using my mind. You know, today things are just the opposite to what they used to be. Today, when I am working with groups, they always say, “You're not speaking from your guts, you're speaking only from your head.” Then I always reply, “The head is also a beautiful part of the body.” Actually it's only the dynamic balance which is missing. The balance between head, body and spirit, between you and me, between me and us and the world, including the third world, etc. However, it is impossible to be aware of all factors at the same time - that's completely out of the question. We cannot be continually concerning ourselves with the fact that millions are now starving to death. And we possess a room wherein two persons could sleep and in the larger room perhaps even twenty. It's not true that there is not enough space. It's not true that there is not enough to eat. It is only true that the distribution is faulty. It is also true that we all share in the guilt. What am I doing, so that things improve gradually? So, I work with TCI and attempt not to eat meat and I don't, unless I want to avoid insulting certain persons. When leading groups, I find time to talk about this. Again and again it seems that people discover, as if by themselves, that it is possible to eat as a vegetarian. Naturally, plants has a certain right to life, too. Life lives from life. My choice is merely what I do not choose to eat - I can't eat inorganic matter. I am convinced that everything is living. Only I'm also convinced that levels of consciousness and the capacity to feel pain varies considerably. Stepping on an ant accidentally while I am walking along or killing mosquitoes purposefully so that they won't bite me are not problematical compared to killing a dog.

H.H.: You have a very comprehensive understanding of responsibility and accountability.

R.C.: Yes, of wholeness. This wholeness does not just refer to an individual, but to the individual in the universe.

H.H.: Could one say that TCI is an attempt to get people not to assume responsibility merely for themselves, but also for others - in ever widening concentric circles, from I to We to the Globe?

R.C.: No, not for others. I am only responsible for my part, not for the others. As a teacher, for example, my responsibility can consist in increasing the children's awareness, so that they are less cruel. As a teacher of mathematics - I'm presently writing a book about TCI didactics - it might be my contribution to learn about TCI. My message to teachers today is, “Don't be a special subject's idiot.” Children have to understand that, aside from mathematics, there exists the possibility that they and their parents will be killed and the world destroyed. God knows, you don't always have to be preaching that, or else they won't want to learn math or even ecology. You have to be aware of it yourself. Then you will be able to relate it to the children occasionally.

That is the step forward which I see in Jesus' teaching and a step backwards since it was recognized - and that is perhaps a step forward, too, because Jesus was wiser than I am - that human beings learn better when they have a human model, that they are better able to

yield to Jehova if there is a human model. I have never heard that Jesus said of himself that he was different from other human beings - he just represented godliness more. Human beings - I'm afraid to express this - wanted to make him into a god and have the capacity, however, to make him into a demagogue. TCI does not reject the religious element. Nowadays anyone can dare to say that they are religious. Just 25 years ago that was quite different. Now I am ashamed to say that at that time in New York I didn't speak with my patients about God. No one spoke about God. You spoke about the girl friend, about work - God, that was something for uneducated people. And now, everyone! I had always been pondering - have you seen my book of poetry,³ incidentally?

H.H.: Yes.

R.C.: God always played quite a significant role, even in the early poems. I always spoke about God, even though I didn't believe in Him any more, but I found no adequate expression.

H.H.: Trees also played a large role in your poetry!

R.C.: Dorothee Sölle emphasized that,⁴ but I didn't think so.

H.H.: Isn't that correct?

R.C.: After I read it through again, yes! A tree - it might be a rose, too, or anything which expresses life for us - is a religious symbol. The biblical legend of God giving his breath to another creature has at least a symbolic meaning. Human beings really possess something, which animals have at best on a much lower level of consciousness, so that we don't call it spirit, but instinct. We speak patronizingly about how the cat nurses her kittens so nicely, because otherwise her teats would ache - women have similar experiences when they first begin to nurse. But in the latter case, love is important, and I'm uncertain as to what extent cats experience this emotion. If I am the source of nutrition for my child, then there is this tremendous feeling of love, except - as in, for example, my poem "Mother" - I am no longer able to be experiencing on a holistic basis. If you are ill and don't have enough money and you have children, then love is a difficult thing. It's still there, but it is difficult to feel it and to feel it again and again. I cannot imagine that the mothers who bear their children in the desert, one after the other, that they are always capable of maintaining their love and that they gradually would be glad if there was one fewer.

H.H.: That reminds me of Maslow's pyramid of necessities - that certain basic necessities have to be satisfied first.

R.C.: First something to eat, then morality.

H.H.: Yes, exactly

R.C.: My views are somewhat different than his. I wouldn't put it in quite that way, but still it is true. Just as all symbols, it is true, too.

³ Cohn, R.C. "Zu wissen dass wir zählen. Gedichte." (To Know That We Count. Poems), Bern, Zygglogge Publishers, 1990.

⁴ In the forward to Ruth Cohn's book of poetry, D. Sölle writes, "Regardless of the language, all of the poems in this book seem to be concerned with the "walking tree." [Translator's note: from a line in one of the poems - "Let me know the ground and the heavens and be a walking tree."]

H.H.: And if we take a term of Maslow's, for example, self-fulfillment. .

R.C.: I changed that for my own institute - it's not called self-fulfillment, but the development of the personality. If I absolutely had to give a seminar such as that . . . then I would call it "Myself and Others." You can't fulfill yourself without other people - that's impossible. I described that in my book, "The Issue is Compassion."⁵ It's about both, about compassion and about being a part of the whole, whereas it's not necessary to mention being a part of the whole in the title. I am a part of society, part of the universe and I am compassionate with them and this compassion is partially biological in origin and what we have is partially, even if a small portion, autonomous.

I wanted to say something in addition. It is a matter of fact that everything keeps on developing. And I would like to relate an example concerning family therapy . At the time I arrived in New York, I was told by the chairperson of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute's review committee that I was not allowed to practice therapy or conduct analyses, because a law was drafted and would be in effect within six years, according to which all psychologists would be thrown out.

H.H.: Psychotherapy should be the sole domain for medical doctors.

R.C.: Yes. Then I asked: what would you do if that was all you had learned and that you liked doing it and also did it well, and then I was told that I should work with children, using analytic methods - "that might fall within education." The training which I received in Early Childhood Education at the Bankstreet School influenced me considerably more than anything else from psychology. They were radical in their respect and regard for children. Missing, however - just between us - was the respect for the teacher. But I learned a tremendous amount about children and child development. Since the founders of this school had at least read quite a bit about psychoanalysis, my idea that one should be able to work therapeutically with children was strengthened at that time . An interesting fact was that they were all women - there was an occasional male teacher, but my training teachers were all women. I learned a tremendous amount there and, most of all, I developed a completely different feeling for children. In my therapeutic work with the children, I noticed immediately that there were problems with the parents, if they didn't understand what was going on. Even if I only saw them once a month and also promised the child, "I am not telling your parents about what is going on here. And you don't have too, either." That is an anti-therapeutic element. Everybody who worked with children must have noticed that it is necessary to work with the family. By working with the family, the circle is opened: where are the relatives, where is the community, where is the society.

H.H.: You mentioned other persons who also founded psychotherapeutic schools. Connected with this, I would like to ask you a question I've had in mind for a long time. Last year I attended a public presentation of your volume of poetry and something occurred which seemed remarkable to me. There were a number of comments from those attending and I remember especially two women who were quite effusive in their expressions to you.

R.C.: Yes, guru, gura!

⁵ Ruth C. Cohn, "Es geht ums Anteilnehmen: Die Begründerin der TZI zur Persönlichkeits-entfaltung," ("The Issue is Compassion: The Founder of TCI about the Development of the Person") Herder Publishers, Freiburg, Germany, 1993.

H.H.: My impression was that you staved them off in a friendly but firm fashion.

R.C.: Yes, I reject the title of “gura,” I don’t care for it. At the time I began with TCI in New York, I did something very sensible. Norman Liberman, one of the co-founders, told me about it later, otherwise I wouldn’t have remembered. I had been working on a particular issue and nothing else for several months - I went up in the mountains for a while in order to find out what it was that I was doing that attracted the students so much. I had taught before, but without this effect. What was I doing now which was do different? And then the symbol, the triangle, occurred to me, originally in the form of an equilateral pyramid. Then I changed that to a triangle, because of silly considerations - “rational thoughts.” Yes, and then I went to my supervision group and cried out, “Now I have it - now we can teach it!” When we founded the institute, I continually had the thought that they were doing it to please me - that they were interested in the content, but not in an institute. I had no idea whether the institute had a chance. Then I discussed with them: very well, I will assume the costs (I never dreamed of income) for the first year, and I’ll take care of administration, but then we have to discuss the whole thing. At the end of the first year, we met to consider these issues and I asked, “Who will now be assuming what?” No one replied and I went to the bathroom - I always do that when I have to cry - and thought to myself, “Do I want this or not? - Yes, I do - anyway I started the whole thing! Now I have to keep on going!” Some persons who came in the third year thought, “She wants to do everything herself.” I can’t tell you how happy I was to hear that. From that moment on we were able to establish something resembling a democratic basis. But it still remained - my voice was the most important one.

After I began working in Europe, I didn’t mention WILL for the first year and a half - I just conducted workshops and observed what was happening. That was with persons who were interested in group therapy, not TCI. Then I noticed that if there was no institute, then first of all, my ideas, which I wanted to spread, would get lost and, secondly, I couldn’t and wouldn’t want to be here very often. I was commuting back and forth between America and Europe at that time, and I happened to mention WILL. I was sitting with Anita Ockel, one of the earliest graduates, on a hotel balcony in Arosa, and I began telling her about how everything had happened in New York. What I had done, what we had done, how things developed slowly, which courses were necessary, etc. That was my entire organizational activity. I have not actively influenced the organization, except through my writings and letters. I had the idea, but I never served on a committee, except during the first year in connections with the first graduates. But that was all I contributed - I was not active later in the organization. In my opinion, that was very good. When I die, the organization will continue on as before. Just as good or just as bad. And although I think it has many poor aspects.

H.H.: In the organization?

R.C.: In the organization. The difficulty of balancing between rigidity and chaos, which would I also experience, is something I would solve in a different way. I sometimes think it could be done in a different manner. But what would it be like if the training were not so rigid, then there might be even more chaos. I didn’t get mixed up in these matters. From the very beginning, I was never a member of the organization - I was “ex officio,” so to speak. And as “ex officio,” it is possible to have a spiritual influence. But I was never actively a part of it. And now I am hoping that it will continue.

H.H.: The classical example is, of course, Freud himself. The way he acted.

R.C.: He threw everyone out.

H.H.: Yes, he intervened in the organization continually and always tried to maintain control.

R.C.: I consider it a mistake if the founder of an idea or a method remains the primary father or mother for too long. Mankind's longing for a primeval mother or father is so tremendous that it cannot be avoided. When I was studying with Pearls, I made the mistake of writing in some connection that I was "a student of Fritz Pearls." Of course, I meant "of Gestalt therapy." And many persons thought he had too strong an influence on TCI. That is not the case - only insofar as I myself have been changed through Gestalt. For instance, I made a negative mistake - I used to say, "speak yourself," and then he said, "speak per I." Then I thought that that was much better, that people know what they should be doing. Slowly I noticed that this was not an improvement, but it couldn't be changed back. . . For Freud the term psychosynthese was impossible, so it stayed psychoanalyse. And I can't change the fact that Theme-Centered Interaction is questionable.

H.H.: You mean the name?

R.C.: Yes. All the names are false: psychoanalysis is psychosynthesis, individual psychology is social. Isn't that funny? All the names are totally crazy. The individual psychologist Adler was interested in society, the psychoanalyst Freud was interested in the unconscious and psychosynthesis and for Jung it was similar. WILL is good, above all because it is the same in German and English: "Workshop Institute for Living Learning." And that is a good name. It fits because it's educational - I want to be influential in the education of children and adults. There's no doubt about that. Because only then will I be able to influence politics. And together that effects the individual. That is my wish, that is the compass. I call it my "one-minibillionth part," which I would like to realize.

H.H.: Did you anticipate the success of TCI at the beginning?

R.C.: No, the success is much greater than I thought. Especially in Europe. I left America too soon - I realized that, too. TCI was not yet established. It is still, if at all, in an embryonic stage. Mainly because of the organization, which I took care of by myself until I left. Some people joined later, but they were not proficient enough. I had to make a decision, since I couldn't do everything. I closed my private practice in America and reduced my travelling to America. It was impossible for me to be doing more than one thing at a time. In the last few years I have been practicing privately again and doing less in TCI. Now I'm uncertain that I will be doing anything else except public relations for TCI.

H.H.: But you have been working recently?

R.C.: I have some private patients. I worked together with the Ecole d'Humanité⁶ and I am still working with them. In a reduced way I am continuing the same work, with my compass set for slowly changing over into public relations for TCI. Yes, but even more than that. What can I offer to the existing organizations, which have been established all over the world for the preservation of the planet - what can I contribute personally and through my influence. Yes, influence, but not in the sense of a guru, but in the sense of the method and in sense of the possibility of the individual. Without teaching the method myself - others do that much better. I can't do that any more. Except at the Ecole, because I live there. But

⁶ The Ecole d'Humanité is a boarding school in Goldern, Switzerland, where Ruth Cohn lives and works since 1974.

not really even there, because the teachers who have been there a long time do the majority of that teaching themselves. I provide the supervision.

H.H.: I read in your volume of poetry something about a situation which occurred while you were in Switzerland and there was a false alarm announcing that the Germans had crossed the border. Yesterday there were pictures in television of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina, most of them women and children who had been retained for 24 hours at the border. No one was willing to let them in. Don't events that this reawaken terrible memories for you and the feeling that actually very little has changed since then?

R.C.: Planetically speaking, nothing has changed. My friend, Alfred Farau, always maintained that Hitler had won. In this regard he was the pessimist and I was the optimist. I contested that and said it wasn't so. He was continually bringing further proof - they're doing that there and that somewhere else . . . Considering what sort of torture and idiocy exists today, I feel there has been an increase. Now ecology has joined in and made the torture of nature visible, which no one had considered at that time. That will probably continue to increase in intensity for a while. However, when I say "probably," then I'm merely a frog thrashing about in the cream. If I were alone, I would give up, but since I am one of millions who want to keep on going, I can be hopeful. I don't mean just TCI, but humanistic possibility inherent in many methods. I believe that the best "method" is connected with religion. I believe that there is something "good" in human beings. However you choose to define "good," it consists essentially in respecting life, respecting nature, respecting human beings. Then it is called "religious." And I believe that this method, this constructed method, is a systemizing of that which we always knew in a way appropriate to our day and age. I hold it for a possibility that this method which is presently appropriate, will no longer be so in 50 years. One per cent hope is justified, as long as there are human beings who have not been worsened through gene manipulation. I would say that I have five per cent hope, in furthering the world rather than destroying it.

H.H.: Thank you for this interview. Allow me to congratulate you on your birthday - also in the name of "Group Dynamics" - we wish you all the best, much sympathy and just as much being in sympathy!