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Psychological Contact Reconsidered

Brian Rodgers



Nau mai, haere mai...

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Where I come from...

- Born in Leeston but left when I was 3
- Grew up in Auckland but left when I was about 33



Where I come from...

- Travelled a bit...



Where I come from...

- Went to Glasgow for a 1 year course...
- and stayed there for 15 years!





Where I come from...

- Trained at University of Strathclyde in Glasgow with Prof Dave Mearns, Prof Mick Cooper, and Prof Robert Elliott
- Completed a PhD in 2010 supervised by Prof John McLeod
- Returned to NZ in 2015 to work with Prof Keith Tudor
- Hosting PCE2020 in Auckland (www.pce2020.com)



This presentation...

- The significance of the cultural context within which we work...
- Something “different” about being in Aotearoa:
 - “Southern Theory” perspective (Connell, 2007).
 - “one person” vs “two person” psychology (Stark, 1999; Tudor, 2011)
 - Implications of colonisation
 - Te Ao Māori
 - And more...



This presentation...

- My “first attempt” to articulate the implications of this in relation to person-centred/experiential theory
- Seemed like a good idea at the time...
- ... but underestimated the magnitude of the task!
- A tentative offering to stimulate discussion and debate



Rogers' (1957) necessary and sufficient conditions

1. Two persons are in psychological contact.
2. The first, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable or anxious.
3. The second person, whom we shall term the therapist, is congruent or integrated in the relationship.
4. The therapist experiences unconditional positive regard for the client.
5. The therapist experiences an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and endeavors to communicate this experience to the client.
6. The communication to the client of the therapist's empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved.



Rogers' (1957) necessary and sufficient conditions

- Often the focus is on conditions 3, 4, and 5, the so called “core conditions” of Congruence, UPR and Empathy.
- The first condition, that "Two persons are in psychological contact" is often taken for granted and over looked.
- But what if we take a closer look at what Rogers said



Rogers' (1957) Psychological Contact

- “The first condition specifies that a minimal relationship, a psychological contact, must exist”
- “significant positive personality change does not occur except in a relationship”
- “All that is intended by this first condition is to specify that the two people are to some degree in contact”
- “that each makes some **perceived** difference in the experiential field of the other”
- “This first condition of therapeutic change is such a **simple** one that perhaps it should be labeled an **assumption**”



Rogers' (1957) Psychological Contact

- Note though that Rogers himself was careful to frame his theory tentatively, that it was not a fixed, rigid idea...
 - “This is of course an hypothesis, and it may be disproved”
- And hinted at further complexity...
 - “Probably it is sufficient if each makes some "subceived" difference, even though the individual may not be consciously aware of this impact.”



My contention:

- that Rogers privileges a Western view which has inherent biases and blind spots.
- "Two persons" – frames “persons” as individuals, and decontextualizes them from systems of context, family, whanau, place etc
- Rarefies “persons” as being the only therapeutic agent, discounting the significance of other living and non living entities.
- “contact” is defined cognitively, reinforcing the split between mind, body, spirit, environment etc



My invitation:

- To consider “contact” in a broader, more inclusive way.
- In moments of contact, we do not just bringing our current psychological cognitions
- We also bring all our personal histories and learnings from our life... all our personal “knowings”...
- Of love, of loss, of joy, of despair, of hope, of shame... and how we survive and thrive alongside these.
- Plus our knowings of being in families/whanua, of institutions, of society, of being in this world...



My invitation:

- Not just our individual knowings, but also the knowings of our societies and cultures...
- The cultural knowings that existed long before us and have been transmitted to us by others...
- All our society's wisdoms, all our biases and bigotry, all our hatreds, all our wars, all our defeats, all our victories...
- The knowings that have shaped the world around us, that are infused in the physical spaces we inhabit...



My invitation:

- Even the room itself is an expression of society and culture...
- Take a look around, how has this room been constructed?
- What does it communicate?
- What “knowings” does it bring us into contact with?
- How does it shape our moments of contact in this room?



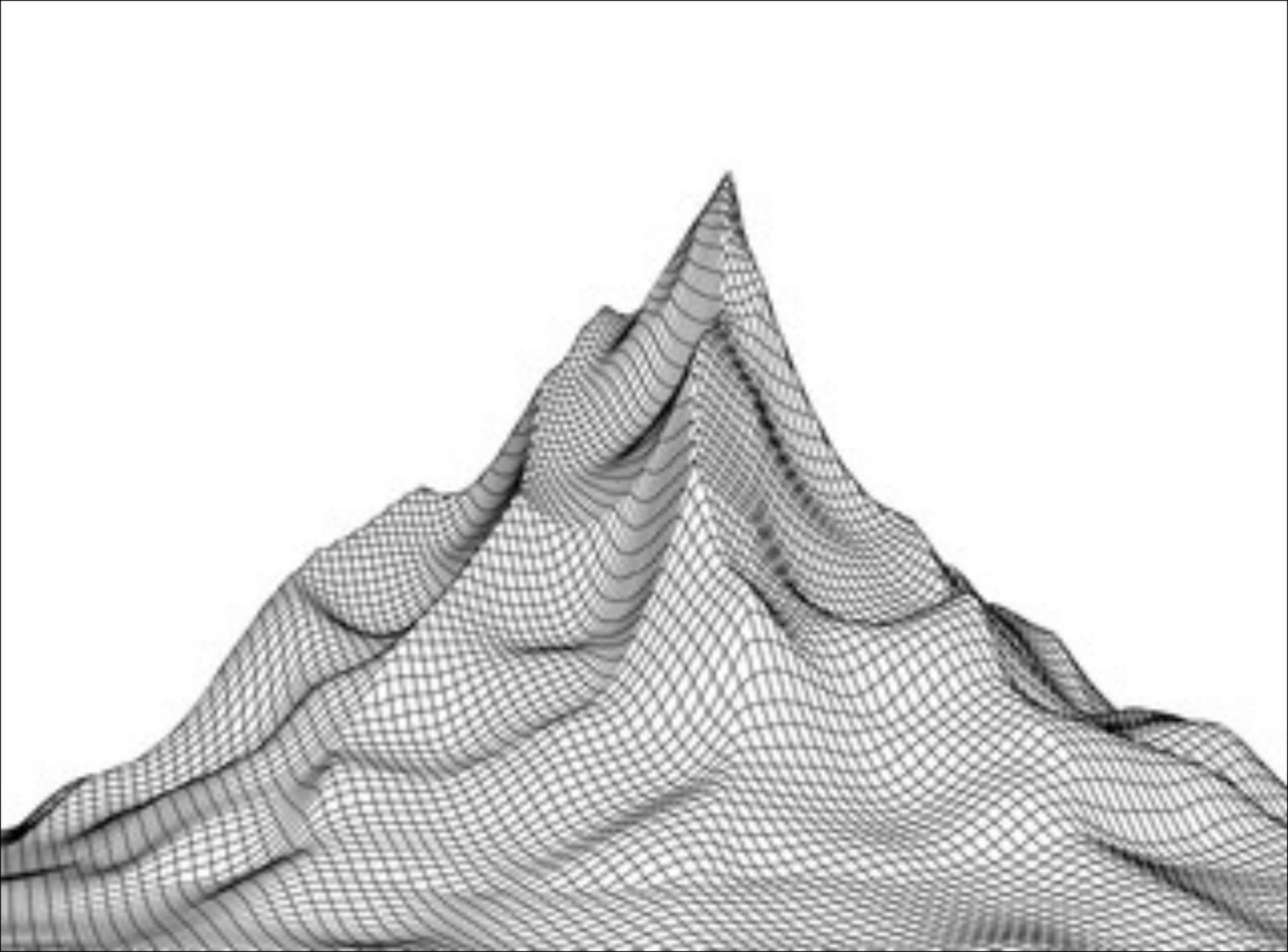
Psychological Contact Reconsidered

- From this perspective, “psychological contact” can be seen as an artificially narrow concept that excludes and dismisses multiple dimensions of “being”
- A dull parody of profound moments of meeting that misses the essence of "life meeting life"
- It is but a small portion of the overall “field of contact”, overly simplified and out of context...



A field of contact

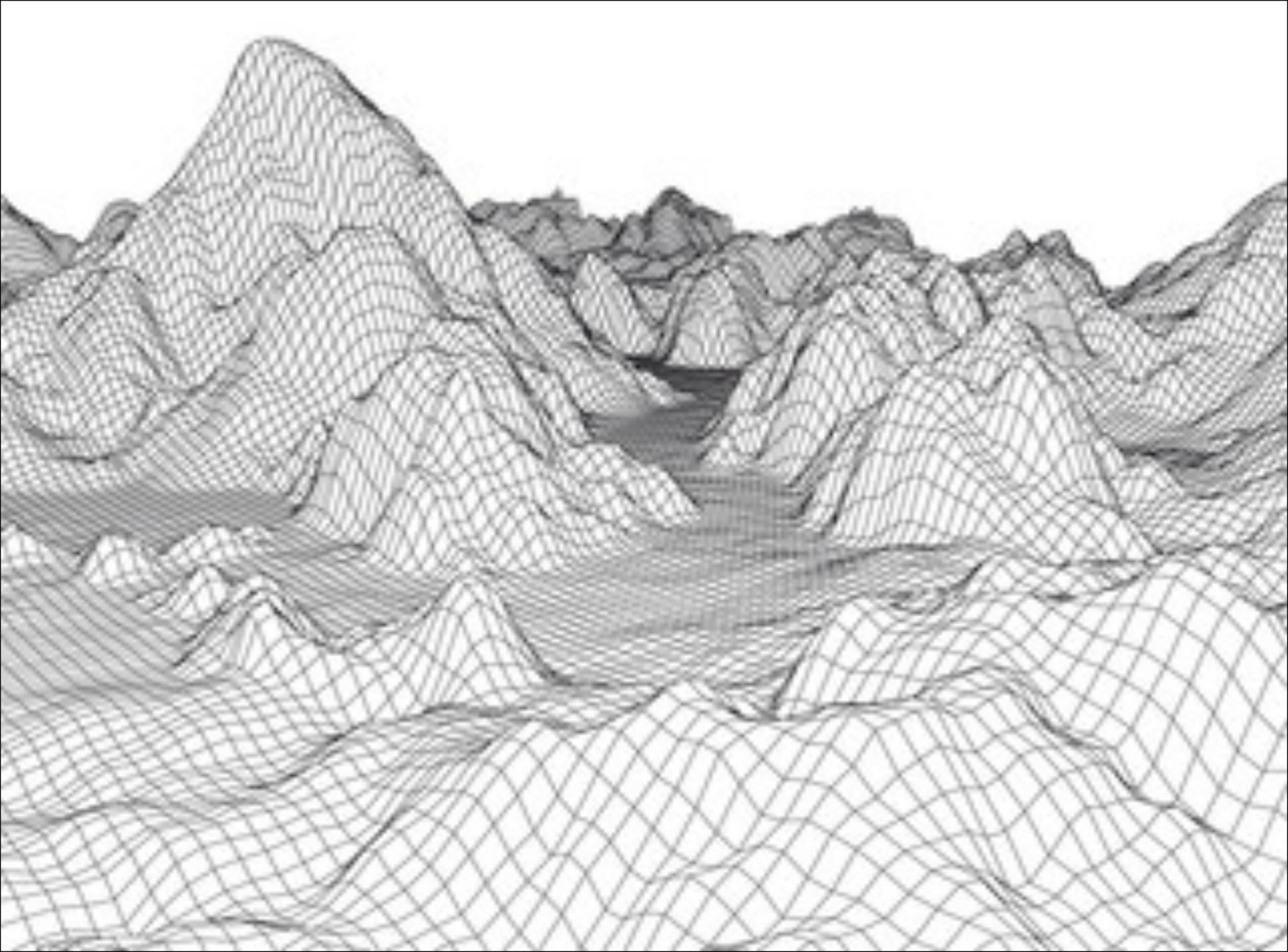
- Think about a 3D topological map, with hills and other features that “stand out” from the ground.
- We “see” these hills as separate, we can give each a name, each has unique attributes and qualities, shapes etc.
- Yet we know that a hill is never separate from the land it inhabits... it is a projection out of this very land, shaped by the elements, intimately connected with the world around it.
- We can consider different people as being different hills, projections out of the shared field...
- But still inherently interconnected and shaped by similar forces / dynamics





A field of contact

- And now the complex bit...
- That individuals are not really separate hills, but more features on a mound which is part of a hill which is part of a mountain which is part of the planet...
- That we emerge as a “feature” out of the “mound” of our family / whanau, which itself is located and shaped by the “hill” of the community / hapu, that is but one of many on the “mountain” of our society, which are all inseparable from our world...





A field of contact

- And now the really complex bit...
- Imagine these “hills” as being movable, and able to come into closer contact with other “hills” ...
- As these “hills” come into contact, there are multiple points of interaction and mutual reshaping of each other...
- A complex interconnecting with moments of resistance, alignment, merger, tension, reaction...



So what does this mean?

- The shared “field” we inhabit is a complex interweaving of dynamically interacting entities...
- Some entities are identified as “people”, some as “culture”, some as “society”, some as “objects”, some as “the planet” etc...
- Different entities may have different momentums and directionality, and may “come together” in moments of contact
- These moments of contact may have different qualities and effects, potentially “enhancing” or “destructive”
- Each moment of contact will inherently be mutually influencing and shaping.



So what does this mean for therapy?

- The “problems” people bring to therapy are inherently an “expression” of this shared field...
- “Problems” are never really individual, but more a result of the complex interactions between entities within the field...
- Moments of contact between “client” and “counsellor” are also moments of contact with society, culture and the planet.
- Both “client” and “counsellor” will inherently be influenced and shaped by these moments of contact.
- Defining what a “therapeutic” moment of contact looks like is an incredibly challenging task!



So what next?

- Consider the implications of this “field” perspective for the other 5 conditions.
- Reframing congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathy in terms of mutually influential moments of contact within a dynamic, interconnected, interdependent field
- Wish me luck!