

Psychology on a Page 9: Otto Rank

With the previous two posts on Gestalt and Rogers I have started to focus in on the psychologists who have most influence on my contemporary thinking and practice. Another such is Otto Rank, the first non-medical practitioner of psycho-analysis.

Like many of Freud's followers, Rank's perspective on our nature and the developmental steps that shape us differed from Freud's – and on a topic that was central to Freud - the importance of the Oedipal Conflict in shaping our personality.

Rank believed that the influence of early experience made its impact long before the Oedipal period (usually said to last from 3 to 6 years). Rank cited the Birth Trauma as the experience that did most to shape our character. The essential effect of birth was, to Rank's mind, the creation of something he called *separation anxiety*, the shadow of which followed us throughout life:

"Life in itself is a mere succession of separations. Beginning with birth, going through several weaning periods and the development of the individual personality, and finally culminating in death – which represents the final separation."

We are then, to suffer 'separation anxiety' from birth against which we struggle by seeking to merge with or relate to others. This anxiety takes shape as a creative tension throughout life around whether to seek new untried paths or to follow tried and tested routes (e.g. buying and doing things we've done before) or simply to mimic others. In this sense Rank's is a relational model of the human psyche, rather than a drive or instinct model in classic Freudian terms.

To summarise, we can understand Rank's early thoughts of human life lived between competing desires, on the one hand to separate, to individuate, while on the other to merge and surrender to the whole, to fall into the arms of another or our community. The point is that **both** these desires are present in the moment. This also translates to an orientation to time and process:

'...the fear of both going forward and of going backward'

(Rank, 1929–31, p. 124).

When we translate this thinking into work and everyday life we can sense this dilemma for ourselves, especially in any moment of choice or anxiety. Shall I go forward or backwards here – adopt a progressive approach or rely on ideas I have used before? Shall I go it alone or band together with others for support?

At any moment then, in any choice, the creative tension between merging (or repeating known patterns) and individuating (striking out on a new path) is a core influence on personal, professional or consumer decisions. For me it is vital that we encourage participants to explore these issues –

and arrive at a considered appraisal of where the community stands in weighing the 'individuating' or separating, versus 'merging' or joining properties of any attitude or activity, now and in future. The role of goods, services and brands also figures strongly in these decisions, as people choose products that help them stand out or fit in.

I have visualized this tension here, which will appear if you click on this link: [Creative Tension, after Rank](#)

If you would like a pdf of this post, complete with illustrations of the core dilemma, it is here: