LETTER · 2010

Letter in Response to 'The Rise of Human Givens'

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Published in *Therapy Today* Vol. 21 Issue 1 (2010). A critical response to Julia Bueno's article on the Human Givens approach, arguing that several of the approach's central claims represent reinventions of earlier integrative work without acknowledgement — and that its boastful claims to uniqueness and superiority betray an ignorance of the field's shared history.

KEY THEMES

— Critical engagement with the Human Givens approach
— Reinvention without acknowledgement in the therapy field
— The importance of historical awareness in integration
— Claims to uniqueness and what they reveal
— Professional dialogue and the ethics of acknowledgement

The Problem with the Claims

The Human Givens approach has achieved wide-spread uptake in a range of contexts, which must attest to its practical usefulness. The article by Julia Bueno was, therefore, of genuine interest — particularly given some workshops attended at various conferences. But as Bueno herself indicates, some of the approach's presentation and style has alienated and put people off. This letter engages with why.

The central problem is not the validity or usefulness of aspects of the Human Givens model. What deserves challenge is that central and significant elements of the model appear to be re-inventions and re-combinations of earlier ideas which the proponents seem oblivious of and consistently fail to acknowledge. On various websites, Human Givens is presented as original, unique and superior — as an integration of those elements of all other approaches that are useful, valid and evidence-backed, leaving behind the 'preconceived fantastical notions, myths and strange ideas'.

In making such claims, the proponents betray nothing so much as their own ignorance of the shared history as a field, and a profound lack of appreciation for those on whose shoulders we all stand.

What Has Been Reinvented

In researching the Human Givens claim to 'integrate', there are no instances of acknowledgement of the various integrative endeavours and advances made in the therapeutic field over the last twenty years — nor recognition of the pitfalls already encountered and described during this process. The elements of the model which are presented as original discoveries — the centrality of relationship, the significance of emotional needs, the role of metaphor and narrative, the importance of the therapist's own congruence — all have substantial prior histories in other integrative traditions.

This matters not as a point of academic priority, but as a matter of professional honesty. A field which cannot acknowledge its own history — which constantly reinvents itself without recognising what it is reinventing — cannot develop genuine wisdom. It can only produce an endless succession of apparently new approaches, each claiming to supersede everything that came before, each carrying the same unexamined assumptions.

The Human Givens approach would benefit from an awareness of its place in the history and plurality of the field, from which it seems quite disconnected.

The Value of Historical Awareness

This criticism is offered not to dismiss the Human Givens approach but to invite it into a more genuine dialogue with the field it claims to have integrated. Such dialogue requires, above all, historical awareness — the willingness to acknowledge that the questions one is grappling with have been grappled with before, that the answers one has found have been found before (sometimes in better form), and that the mistakes one might be making have already been made and documented.

This historical awareness is itself a form of intellectual honesty. It is what distinguishes genuine integration from reinvention — the capacity to learn from the field's accumulated wisdom rather than starting afresh from scratch, convinced of one's own unique insight.

The psychotherapy field as a whole is prone to this dynamic — to the proliferation of apparently new approaches which are, at a deeper level, variations on familiar themes. Critical dialogue which names this dynamic, respectfully but clearly, is a contribution to the field's maturation.

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