

## Underlying Theory of Person-Centred Counselling

The person-centred approach views the client as their own best authority on their own experience, and it views the client as being fully capable of fulfilling their own potential for growth. It recognizes, however, that achieving potential requires favourable conditions and that under adverse conditions, individuals may well not grow and develop in the ways that they otherwise could. In particular, when individuals are denied acceptance and positive regard from others -- or when that positive regard is made conditional upon the individual behaving in particular ways -- they may begin to lose touch with what their own experience means for them, and their innate tendency to grow in a direction consistent with that meaning may be stifled.

One reason this may occur is that individuals often cope with the conditional acceptance offered to them by others by gradually coming to incorporate these conditions into their own views about themselves. They may form a self-concept which includes views of themselves like, "I am the sort of person who must never be late", or "I am the sort of person who always respects others", or "I am the sort of person who always keeps the house clean". Because of a fundamental need for positive regard from others, it is easier to 'be' this sort of person -- and to receive positive regard from others as a result -- than it is to 'be' anything else and risk losing that positive regard. Over time, their intrinsic sense of their own identity and their own evaluations of experience and attributions of value may be replaced by creations partly or even entirely due to the pressures felt from other people. That is, the individual displaces personal judgements and meanings with those of others.

Psychological disturbance occurs when the individual's 'self-concept' begins to clash with immediate personal experience -- i.e., when the evidence of the individual's own senses or the individual's own judgement clashes with what the self-concept says 'ought' to be the case. Unfortunately, disturbance is apt to continue as long as the individual depends on the conditionally positive judgements of others for their sense of self-worth and as long as the individual relies on a self-concept designed in part to earn those positive judgements. Experiences which challenge the self-concept are apt to be distorted or even denied altogether in order to preserve it.

## Therapeutic Approach of Person-Centred Counselling

The person-centred approach maintains that three core conditions provide a climate conducive to growth and therapeutic change. They contrast starkly with those conditions believed to be responsible for psychological disturbance. The core conditions are:

- ✖ The first -- unconditional positive regard -- means that the counsellor accepts the client unconditionally and non-judgementally. The client is free to explore all thoughts and feelings, positive or negative, without danger of rejection or condemnation. Crucially, the client is free to explore and to express without having to do anything in particular or meet any particular standards of behaviour to 'earn' positive regard from the counsellor.
- ✖ The second - empathic understanding -- means that the counsellor accurately understands the client's thoughts, feelings, and meanings from the client's own perspective. When the counsellor perceives what the world is like from the client's point of view, it demonstrates not only that that view has value, but also that the client is being accepted.
- ✖ The third -- congruence -- means that the counsellor is authentic and genuine. The counsellor does not present an aloof professional facade, but is present

and transparent to the client. There is no air of authority or hidden knowledge, and the client does not have to speculate about what the counsellor is 'really like'.

Together, these three core conditions are believed to enable the client to develop and grow in their own way -- to strengthen and expand their own identity and to become the person that they 'really' are independently of the pressures of others to act or think in particular ways.

As a result, person-centred theory takes these core conditions as both necessary and sufficient for therapeutic movement to occur -- i.e., that if these core conditions are provided, then the client will experience therapeutic change. (Indeed, the achievement of identifying and articulating these core conditions and launching a significant programme of scientific research to test hypotheses about them was one of the greatest contributions of Carl Rogers, the American psychologist who first began formulating the person-centred approach in the 1930s and 1940s.) Notably, person-centred theory suggests that there is nothing essentially unique about the counselling relationship and that in fact healthy relationships with significant others may well manifest the core conditions and thus be therapeutic, although normally in a transitory sort of way, rather than consistently and continually.

Finally, as noted at the outset, the person-centred approach takes clients as their own best authorities. The focus of person-centred therapy is always on the client's own feelings and thoughts, not on those of the therapist -- and certainly not on diagnosis or categorization. The person-centred therapist makes every attempt to foster an environment in which clients can encounter themselves and become more intimate with their own thoughts, feelings and meanings.

### Criticisms of Person-Centred Counselling

A frequent criticism of the person-centred approach is that delivering the core conditions is what all good therapists do anyway, before they move on to applying their expertise and doing the real work of 'making clients better'. On the face of it, this criticism reflects a misunderstanding of the real challenges of consistently manifesting unconditional positive regard, empathic understanding and congruence. This is especially true of congruence: to the extent that some therapeutic techniques deployed in some other traditions depend on the counsellor's willingness to 'hold back', mentally formulate hypotheses about the client, or conceal their own personal reactions behind a consistent professional face, there is a real challenge in applying these techniques with the openness and honesty which defines congruence. It may also demonstrate something of a reluctance to take seriously the empirical research on counselling effectiveness and the conclusion that the quality of the client-counsellor relationship is a leading predictor of therapeutic effectiveness -- although this is somewhat more controversial, since one might argue that providing the core conditions is not the only way to achieve a quality relationship.

At a deeper level, however, there is a more sophisticated point lurking, which many expositions of person-centred theory seem to avoid addressing head-on. Namely, given that the self is the single most important resource the person-centred counsellor brings to the therapeutic relationship, it makes sense to ask: what (if anything) is it important that this self has, apart from the three core conditions? I.e., manifesting of the core conditions does not by itself tell us what experiences or philosophies the counsellor is bringing to the relationship. It tells us that the client will have transparent access to that self -- because

the counsellor is congruent -- but it doesn't tell us anything else about that self. Whether or not that self should be developed in any particular way, or whether that self should acquire any particular background knowledge, seems to me a question which is more often side-stepped than answered within the person-centred tradition.

(Another way to understand this point is this: given two counsellors, each of whom manifests the core conditions to some specified degree, what else, if anything, matters? Would it be better for a given client to have the one who is an expert at astrophysics or the one who is an economist? Would it be better for a given client to have the one who struggled through a decade of ethnic cleansing in a war-torn country or the one who went to private school in an affluent suburb and subsequently worked as a stockbroker? Aside from academic expertise and personal history, what about personal philosophy, parenthood, and other factors?)

Clients who have a strong urge in the direction of exploring themselves and their feelings and who value personal responsibility may be particularly attracted to the person-centred approach. Those who would like a counsellor to offer them extensive advice, to diagnose their problems, or to analyse their psyches will probably find the person-centred approach less helpful. Clients who would like to address specific psychological habits or patterns of thinking may find some variation in the helpfulness of the person-centred approach, as the individual therapeutic styles of person-centred counsellors vary widely, and some will feel more able than others to engage directly with these types of concerns.