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## Basic Theory of the Person-Centred Approach

- The Self-Concept
- Conditions of Worth
- The Organismic Valuing Process
- The Locus of Evaluation
- Creating the Conditions for Growth

### The Self-Concept

Distrust of experts runs deep among person-centred practitioners. The person-centred counsellor must learn to wear her expertise as an invisible garment in order to be an effective counsellor. Experts are expected to dispense their expertise, to recommend what should be done, to offer authoritative guidance or even to issue orders. Clearly there are some areas of human experience where such expertise is essential and appropriate. Unfortunately, all too many of those who seek the help of counsellors have spent much of their lives surrounded by people who, with devastating inappropriateness, have appointed themselves experts in the conduct of other people's lives. As a result such clients are in despair at their inability to fulfil the expectations of others, whether parents, teachers, colleagues or so-called friends, and have no sense of self-respect or personal worth. And yet, despite the damage they have already suffered at the hands of those who have tried to direct their lives for them, such people will often come to a counsellor searching for yet another expert to tell them what to do. Person-centred counsellors, while accepting and understanding this desperate need for external authority, will do all they can to avoid falling into the trap of fulfilling such a role. To do so would be to deny a central assumption of the approach, namely that the client can be trusted to find his own way forward if only the counsellor can be the kind of companion who is capable of encouraging a relationship where the client can begin, however tentatively, to feel safe and to experience the first intimations of self-acceptance. The odds against this happening are sometimes formidable because the

view the client has of himself is low and the judgemental ‘experts’ in his life, both past and present, have been so powerfully destructive. The gradual revelation of a client’s *self-concept*, that is, the person’s conceptual construction of himself (however poorly expressed), can be harrowing in the extreme for the listener. It is with this revelation that the full extent of an individual’s self-rejection becomes apparent and this may prove a stern challenge to the counsellor’s faith, both in the client and in her own capacity to become a reliable companion in the therapeutic process.

The brief extract in Box 1.1 captures the sad and almost inexorable development of a self-concept which then undermines everything that a person does or tries to be. There is a sense of worthlessness and of being doomed to rejection and disapproval. Once such a self-concept has been internalised the person tends to reinforce it, for it is a fundamental tenet of the person-centred viewpoint that our behaviour is to a large extent an acting-out of how we actually feel about ourselves and the world we inhabit. In essence what we do is often a reflection of how we evaluate ourselves; if we have come to the conclusion that we are inept, worthless and unacceptable it is more than likely that we shall behave in a way that demonstrates the validity of such an assessment. The chances, therefore, of winning esteem or approval become more remote as time goes on.

### Box 1.1 The Evolution of the Poor Self-Concept

- Client:* I don’t remember my parents ever praising me for anything. They always had something critical to say. My mother was always on about my untidiness, my lack of thought about everything. My father was always calling me stupid. When I got six ‘A’ passes in my GCSEs he said it was typical that I had done well in the wrong subjects.
- Counsellor:* It seems you could never do anything right in their eyes no matter how hard you tried or how successful you were.
- Client:* My friends were just as bad. They kept on at me about my appearance and told me that I was a pimply swot. I just wanted to creep around without being seen by anyone.
- Counsellor:* You felt so awful about yourself that you would like to have been invisible.
- Client:* It’s not all in the past. It’s just the same now. My husband never approves of anything I do and now my daughter says she’s ashamed to bring her friends home in case I upset them. It seems I’m no use to anyone. It would be better if I just disappeared.

## Conditions of Worth

Fortunately the disapproval and rejection that many people experience is not such as to be totally annihilating. They retain some shreds of self-esteem although these may feel so fragile that the fear of final condemnation is never far away. It is as though they

are living according to a kind of legal contract, and that they only have to put one foot wrong for the whole weight of the law to descend upon them. They struggle, therefore, to keep their heads above water by trying to do and to be those things which they know will elicit approval while scrupulously avoiding or suppressing those thoughts, feelings and activities that they sense will bring adverse judgement. Their sense of worth, both in their own eyes and in those of others who have been important to them, is conditional upon winning approval and avoiding disapproval, and this means that their range of behaviour is severely restricted for they can only behave in ways which are sure to be acceptable to others. They are the victims of the *conditions of worth* which others have imposed upon them, but so great is their need for positive approval that they accept this straitjacket rather than risk rejection by trespassing against the conditions set for their acceptability.

Sometimes, though, the situation is such that they can no longer play this contractual game and then their worst fears may be realised as they experience the disapproval and growing rejection by the other person (see Box 1.2).

### Box 1.2 Conditions of Worth

- Client:* Everything was all right at first. I knew that he admired my bright conversation and the way I dressed. He liked the way I made love to him, too. I used to make a point of chatting when he came in and of making sure that I was well turned out even after a busy day at the office.
- Counsellor:* You knew how to win his approval and you were happy to fulfil the necessary conditions.
- Client:* Yes, but that all changed when I got pregnant. I wanted to talk about the baby but he wasn't interested it seemed. He obviously didn't like what was happening to my figure and I used to feel so tired that I hadn't the energy for the sort of love-making he wanted. He got more and more moody and I felt more and more depressed.
- Counsellor:* You were no longer acceptable to him or to yourself.

## The Organismic Valuing Process

Carl Rogers believed that there was one motivational force that determined the development of the human being. He called this the *actualising tendency*. It was the actualising tendency which, despite every kind of opposition or hindrance, would ensure that an individual continued to strive to grow towards the best possible fulfilment of their potential. Those who were fortunate enough to have a loving and supportive environment during their early years would receive the necessary reinforcement to guarantee the nourishment of the actualising tendency. They would also be affirmed in their ability to trust their own thoughts and feelings and to make decisions in accordance with their own perceptions and desires. Their *organismic valuing process*, to use Rogers' terminology,

would be in good order and would enable them to move through life with a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment.

Those not fortunate enough to have such supportive relationships but who, on the contrary, suffered from the imposition of many punitive *conditions of worth*, would soon discover that they had an overwhelming *need for positive regard*. So great is this need in all of us that its satisfaction can take precedence over the promptings of the actualising tendency and as a consequence create gross confusion for the organismic valuing process (see Box 1.3). This conflict between the desperate need for approval and the wisdom of the individual's organismic valuing process lies at the root of much disturbance and often leads to an inner bewilderment that undermines confidence and makes effective decision-making impossible.

### Box 1.3 Early Confusion of the Organismic Valuing Process

- Child:* [Falls over and cuts his knee: runs crying to his father for comfort or assurance.]
- Father:* What a silly thing to do. Stop crying and do not be such a baby. It's hardly bleeding.
- Child:* [Thinks: it's stupid to fall over; it's wrong to cry; I shouldn't want daddy's support but I need it. But I wanted to cry; I wanted daddy's cuddle: I wasn't stupid. I don't know what to do. Who can I trust? I need daddy's love but I want to cry.]

The loss of trust in the organismic valuing process and the loss of contact with the actualising tendency which informs it can result in the creation of a self-concept that is forced to suppress or deny altogether the promptings that emanate from the deepest parts of the person's response to experience. A person who is told repeatedly, for example, that it is wrong and destructive to be depressed may arrive at a point where he says of himself, 'I am a person who never feels depressed', or, just as disastrously, 'I am a person who deserves to be punished because I am always feeling miserable.' In the first case the intimations of depression have been repressed from consciousness whereas in the second they are a cause for self-condemnation and guilt. In both cases the resulting self-concept is far removed from any sense of trust in the reliability of the organismic valuing process as a guide to assessing direct and untrammelled experience. One of the most rewarding moments in a counselling process comes when the client discovers or re-discovers the dependability of his organismic valuing process however temporary or partial this may be (see Box 1.4). Such a moment can do much to strengthen the counsellor's faith in the client's ability to find his own way forward. It also points to the resilience of the actualising tendency, sometimes against all odds, to survive despite all the obstacles to its healthy functioning. At the deepest level, it would seem, the yearning to become more than we currently are is never completely extinguished.

### Box 1.4 The Organismic Valuing Process is Restored

- Client:* I feel very sad: it's an overwhelming feeling.
- Counsellor:* As if you have no option but to give yourself to the sadness.
- Client:* That sounds very frightening – as if I shall lose control. But I never lose control. [*Suddenly bursts into tears.*]
- Counsellor:* Your tears speak for you.
- Client:* But big boys don't cry.
- Counsellor:* Are you saying that you are ashamed of your tears?
- Client:* [*Long pause.*] No ... for the first time for years I feel in touch with myself ... It feels OK to be crying.

It would be incomplete to leave the discussion of the organismic valuing process at this point. Human beings, because they are essentially relational creatures, are deeply affected not only by the responses of significant others to them during the course of their lives but also by the societal and cultural norms of the milieu in which they find themselves. The organismic valuing process is inevitably affected by these norms and is indeed permeated by them in such a way that the individual is sometimes prevented from behaving in ways that could be foolhardy or even self-destructive. What we have come to term *social mediation* is an important factor for the counsellor as she encounters a client who is struggling to determine a course of action in light of the promptings of the organismic valuing process. A response to those promptings – which seem to be demanding growth at all costs – may need the moderating influence of social mediation to forestall disaster. The actualising tendency and organismic valuing process sometimes require the compassionate brake of social mediation to ensure that the client listens to a voice which whispers that, in this instance and at this time, no-growth is the more prudent option. This is not to deny, of course, that very often the norms of society or of the prevailing culture impede the functioning of the organismic valuing process rather than informing or enhancing it. It is not always easy by any means to distinguish between social mediation as the compassionate brake and social conditioning as the vehicle of pervasive conditions of worth which stifle creativity, undermine confidence and condemn persons to half a life. A more detailed exploration of this and some of the other complex issues arising from recent developments in person-centred theory as they affect the actualising process is to be found in the next chapter.

### The Locus of Evaluation

The person who has been unlucky enough to be surrounded by those who are sharply critical and judgemental will have been forced to resort to all manner of strategies in order to achieve a modicum of approval and positive regard. In most cases this will have

entailed a progressive alienation from the organismic valuing process and the creation of a self-concept divorced from the person's innate resources and developed wisdom. The self-concept is likely to be poor but in some cases the person establishes a picture of himself that enables him to retain a degree of self-respect through a total blocking off from all significant sensory or 'visceral' experience. In all such cases, however, the organismic valuing process has ceased in any significant way to be a source of knowledge or guidance for the individual. He is likely to have great difficulty in making decisions or in knowing what he thinks or feels. There will probably be a reliance on external authorities for guidance or a desperate attempt to please everyone that may result in unpredictable, inconsistent and incongruent behaviour.

Psychologically healthy persons are men and women who have been fortunate enough to be surrounded by others whose acceptance and approval have enabled them to develop self-concepts that allow them for at least some of the time to be in touch with their deepest feelings and experiences. They are not cut off from the ground of their being and they are well placed to move towards becoming what Rogers has described as 'fully functioning' persons (Rogers, 1963a). Such people are open to experience without feeling threatened and are consequently able to listen to themselves and to others. They are highly aware of their feelings and the feelings of others and they have the capacity to live in the present moment. Most importantly, they display a trust and confidence in their organismic valuing process that is manifestly lacking in those who have continually had to battle with the adverse judgement of others. Such trusting is most evident in the process of decision-making and in the awareness and articulation of present thoughts and feelings. Instead of searching for guidance from outside or experiencing an internal confusion or blankness, the fully functioning person holds their source of wisdom deep within and accessible. Rogers has described this self-referent as the internal *locus of evaluation* and, for the counsellor, one of the most significant moments in therapy is the point at which a client recognises this reference point within himself perhaps for the first time (see Box 1.5).

### Box 1.5 The Internal Locus of Evaluation

- Client:** I suppose I went into the job to please my father. It seemed to make sense, too, in terms of having some sort of career structure.
- Counsellor:** It was important to please your father and to feel OK in conventional career terms.
- Client:** Yes – and I have a feeling I married Jean because I knew my parents liked her. I certainly wasn't in love with her.
- Counsellor:** You married her to please them, really.
- Client:** And last night I knew that I can't go on. I hate the job and my marriage is a farce. I've got to find out what I want, what makes sense to me, before I waste the whole of my life trying to please other people. And I think I'm beginning to get some glimmering of what I must do. It's very frightening to hear your own voice for the first time.

## Creating the Conditions for Growth

The person-centred counsellor believes that all clients have within themselves vast resources for development. They have the capacity to grow towards the fulfilment of their unique identities, which means that self-concepts are not unalterable and attitudes or behaviours can be modified or transformed. Where development is blocked or distorted this is the outcome of relationships that have trampled upon the individual's basic need for positive regard, and which have led to the creation of a self-concept and accompanying behaviour that serves as a protection against attack and disapproval. The counsellor's task is to create new conditions of relationship where the growth process can be encouraged and the stunting or warping remedied. In a sense the counsellor attempts to provide different soil and a climate in which the client can recover from past deprivation or maltreatment and begin to flourish as the unique individual he or she actually is. It is the nature of this new relationship environment and the counsellor's ability to create it that is central to the whole therapeutic enterprise.

It is possible to describe the nature of the growth-producing climate briefly and clearly. Rogers believed that it is characterised by three core conditions. The first element focuses on the realness, or genuineness, or *congruence* of the counsellor. The more the counsellor is able to be herself in the relationship without putting up a professional front or a personal façade the greater will be the chance of the client changing and developing in a positive and constructive manner. The counsellor who is congruent conveys the message that it is not only permissible but desirable to be oneself. She also presents herself as transparent to the client and thus refuses to encourage an image of herself as superior, expert, omniscient. In such a relationship the client is more likely to find resources within himself and will not cling to any expectation that the counsellor will provide the answers for him. The second requirement in creating a climate for change and growth is the counsellor's ability to offer the client a total acceptance, a cherishing, an *unconditional positive regard*. When the counsellor is able to embrace this attitude of acceptance and nonjudgementalism then therapeutic movement is much more likely. The client is more able to feel safe to explore negative feelings and to move into the core of his anxiety or depression. He is also more likely to face himself honestly without the ever-present fear of rejection or condemnation. What is more, the intensive experience of the counsellor's acceptance is the context in which he is most likely to sense the first momentary feelings of self-acceptance. The third element necessary in the therapeutic relationship is *empathic understanding*. When this is present the counsellor demonstrates a capacity to track and sense accurately the feelings and personal meanings of the client; she is able to learn what it feels like to be in the client's skin and to perceive the world as the client perceives it. What is more, she develops the ability to communicate to the client this sensitive and acceptant understanding. To be understood in this way is for many clients a rare or even a unique experience. It indicates to them a preparedness on the part of the counsellor to offer attention and a level of caring which undeniably endows them with value. Furthermore, when a person is deeply understood in this way it is difficult to maintain for long a stance of alienation and separation. Empathic understanding restores to the lonely and alienated individual a sense of belonging to the

human race. These three elements in the therapeutic relationship are summarised in Box 1.6. They are often referred to in the person-centred literature as the *core conditions* and were constantly reiterated by Rogers (1951, 1957, 1961, 1974, 1979, 1980a).

### Box 1.6 The Core Conditions

The creation of a growth-producing climate in a therapeutic relationship requires that the counsellor can:

- 1 be genuine or congruent
- 2 offer unconditional positive regard and total acceptance
- 3 feel and communicate a deep empathic understanding.

The core conditions are simple enough to state, but for a counsellor to develop and maintain such attitudes across all clients involves a lifetime's work and demands a commitment that has profound implications not only for the counsellor's professional activity but for her life as a whole. Much of this book, indeed, is devoted to an exploration of the complex issues involved when a counsellor attempts to be congruent, accepting and empathic. The words can trip off the tongue but their significance is little short of awe-inspiring.