

Humanistic approaches: Person-Centred Therapy

Humanistic approaches to common human problems are built around the idea that human beings are motivated by the need to realise as much of their potential as possible. This *actualising tendency* is the fundamental energy that drives human behaviour and it applies to all domains of human life. This energy at the core of each person is good, social, forward-looking and constructively creative. It has the potential to enable a person to find fulfilment in their life if certain physiological and physical safety needs are met. We have touched on this idea already in Chapter 2 when we looked at whether problems originated inside a person or outside a person. So, for example, can a person find true fulfilment if their needs for food and shelter are unmet?

Another distinguishing feature of humanistic approaches, and the Person-Centred approach in particular is that they are *phenomenological* approaches. Phenomenology is the belief that our knowledge is based on our own experience, on attending to phenomena as they are subjectively experienced.

A distinguished contribution to our understanding of human distress and disturbance was made by Carl Rogers and it is the Person-Centred Approach which he developed until his death in 1987 that we will focus on in this section. Indeed we hope that it is clear that the present book reflects the authors' commitment to humanistic and largely Rogerian Person-Centred ideas, skills and frameworks for helping relationships.

It may seem to some readers that all there is to the Person-Centred Approach is the so-called 'core conditions'. In fact the Person-Centred Approach is one of the most complete approaches, since Rogers laid a clear philosophical basis for his ideas, proposed a comprehensive personality theory and, in addition, outlined a detailed skills and attitudes-based framework for helping activities (known as the 'core conditions'). The latter receives more coverage in Chapter 5.

Human personality

Rogers proposed that human personality had two components; the *core self* and the *self-concept*. The core self is the seat of the *actualising tendency* described above and is present at birth. The self concept is acquired or learned and the process of its modification as a consequence of experience, continues throughout life.

Core self

inborn
innate
consistent
unchanging
irreducible

Self Concept

acquired
learned
modifiable

- *Core self*: This is the basic human self or *organismic self* as Seeman (1983) called it. It is the life energy of the human organism and gives each of us our unique sense of being. It is irreducible, there is no more fundamental human element to our personality. In the core self are located the essentially 'good' creative energies that make up the self actualising tendency and which have the potential for self-fulfilling, self-healing growth. It is here that the organism values experiences

and makes primary, vital decisions that determine who we are and how we express our singular and distinctive selves. We might recognise the influence of our organismic self in 'peak experiences', choice of life partner, choice of job or the ways we express our sexuality.

- *Self-concept*: This is the part of human personality that is acquired through experiences, particularly experiences where other people judge us and give us approval on certain conditions. Rogers suggested that the self-concept consists of a network of linked units, each unit comprising an experience or self-observation and *the value attached to it*, i.e. whether we feel good or bad as a result of the experience.

The acquisition of these 'units' can take two pathways:

- a *'healthy' one* in which the individual has an experience and values it according to the organismic valuing process located in their core self.

For example, as a young boy I might experience attraction towards men and sexual arousal. If I enjoyed the feeling attraction and sexual arousal then I would attach a positive value to it in my self-concept. 'I am attracted to men and like it'.

- an *'unhealthy' one* in which the individual has an experience but someone else evaluates the experience and the individual takes on board the other person's valuing of the experience *as if it were their own*.
For example, if as a young boy I experience

attraction and arousal in the presence of men, my parents might disapprove and say that such attraction and arousal is unnatural, evil and bad. I would then take the experience of attraction and arousal into my self concept with my parents' values attached, but I would remember the values as though they were my own. 'I am attracted to men, it is unnatural and I am bad.'

The process of taking these 'units' in in this unhealthy way is called *introjection*, and leads to a self-concept that is not in harmony with or *congruent* with the core self. Such a self concept is vulnerable because it is built upon *introjected values* which have been acquired not through an organismic valuing process, but by a process of introjection. The incongruence between the self concept and core self will be revealed by life experiences which continue to challenge the introjected values. I will continue to be attracted to, and aroused in the presence, of men and will therefore continue to feel bad, anxious and disturbed by my feelings.

Mental life

In common with other major theorists, Rogers believed that the 'human condition' was that we cannot escape being brought up without acquiring a fundamentally flawed personality. We may be functional on the surface, but have what he called 'potential psychological tension', caused by introjected values, just waiting to be revealed.

Everyday life becomes an effort to keep experiences within the limited range that the flawed self-concept can handle without feeling too threatened by incongruence. So, I avoid the sort of contact with

men that may lead to disturbing attraction and arousal. I marry and have children to create life experiences that will be comforting to my self concept rather than challenging to it.

Identifying introjected values is a tricky business since if we have taken them in *as though they were our own* we will have difficulty distinguishing them from values that we have acquired authentically from our own organismic valuing process. Also, Rogers proposed two ways of dealing with experiences that are incongruent with our introjected values, which we develop to protect our vulnerable self-concept from these disturbing incongruent experiences:

- *Denial*: experiences that are not in accord with our self concept they are simply denied; it's as if they didn't happen. This is a wide-ranging process from forgetting to disbelief. *For example, if asked if I've ever been attracted to or aroused by men, I would not be able to remember any instances. Also, if my wife told me that I had been behaving in a flirtatious way towards a man at a party, I would not believe her.*

- *Distortion*: experiences are changed or distorted so that they do fit in with the introjected elements of the self-concept. Distortion can take almost any form and is as varied as our creative abilities allow.

For example, I could distort the occasions on which I felt attracted to and aroused by men by saying to myself that the men were very effeminate and looked like women, so what would any red-blooded man feel? My so-called flirtatious behaviour at the party could

be put down to my wife not understanding the way I am ordinarily friendly to men. So these experiences are now rendered acceptable to my self-concept.

A way of looking at common human problems?

The self-concept is built around some fundamental pieces of value-laden information rather like key stones in an arch. Take away the key stone and the arch falls down; take away some key values and the self concept is likely to begin to disintegrate. An introjected value is vulnerable to being dislodged because it is only cemented flimsily in place - after all it is *someone else's value!* An authentic value is securely in place since it is tied into the self-structure by being the product of the *organismic valuing process*.

The key values around which my self concept is likely to be built are my heterosexuality, being employed, being able-bodied, having a loyal female life-partner and children. If some or all of these turn out to be introjected, my self concept will be intact as long as none of these is challenged. Experiences such as being increasingly attracted to men, losing my job, disablement due to an accident, divorce, or discovering I am infertile, are likely to stress my self-concept to the point of collapse.

When faced with change in this way, a healthy self-concept has a flexible organismic valuing process to help repair the damage. An unhealthy self-concept has only the cockeyed process of introjection, and the consequence is that the person concerned may feel that their life and its meaning is falling apart, with no way in sight of putting it back together again.

Unfortunately, space allows only this rather oversimplified and brutal charting of the course of human distress. Readers must continue to bear in mind some other central tenets of person-centred theory, namely:

- there is no objective reality,
- everyone's experience is different,
- the client and their unique experience is paramount,
- the client's self healing process will be at the centre of the helping relationship.

Rogers' assertion that the majority of adults (that includes us!) have a flawed self-structure, in no way minimises the pain, distress, disorientation and fear caused by the demise of a self concept packed with introjected values being pushed uncomfortably up against incongruent life experiences. Such distress is all too common in our own lives and the lives of people we know and love. A largely introjected self concept is very vulnerable to abrupt, rapid or violent change in the world around us. Redundancy, divorce, bereavement, feeling unfulfilled in your job, overnight success, illness, achieving a life's ambition or watching your last chance slip away are the stuff of ordinary lives.

A view of the helper and helping process

The work of Carl Rogers did more to re-construct our notions of what helping is than any other major thinker since Freud. The person-centred approach was a radical new way of understanding the helping process when it appeared as *Client-Centred Therapy* in the early 1950s and remains a challenge to our notions of helping in the 1990s.

Rogers was not simply the first to put the word 'relationship' into our appreciation of helping, he put

it at the forefront of the helping process. At the centre of this helping process was the person being helped; another radical proposal for the time, since up to that point helping had been constructed around the helper, their knowledge, expertise, needs and professional status.

These were not mere statements of liberal political dogma, but firmly rooted in the emerging humanistic psychology of the 1950s and 60s, which put the emphasis on the person's capacity for self-understanding and self-healing. Such radical positions have fundamental effects upon the construction of the helping process. These set the Person-Centred approach apart from other approaches to helping. This is clear from the core tenets of the theory and should become even more distinct in the following section.

The helper is:

- a co-operative companion rather than expert,
- skilled in the provision of a safe environment in which the person being helped can contact and activate their own self-healing energy,

The relationship is:

- either seen as unstructured or structured upon the needs of the person being helped,
- focused around the experience of the person being helped,
- is non-hierarchical; the helper is not in the role of expert.

The main active skills are:

- providing certain 'core conditions' for effective helping, namely:
 - good psychological contact,
 - empathy,
 - congruence or authenticity,

- non-judgemental warmth, which of course means no interpretation of the other person's experience.

The helping process is:

- directed and driven by the person being helped:
 - however mysterious this may seem to the helper,
 - however long it may take (healing wisdom is located in the person being helped),
- is out of the hands and beyond the reach of the helper, they simply facilitate the emergence of the process,
- an attempt to empower the individual's capacity for self-help,
- aiming to restore executive control of our lives to the organismic core of our personality.

The model assumes:

- that only people can help themselves,
- there is no need for their experiences to be interpreted by others, indeed interpretation is philosophically invalid and practically damaging to the helping process,
- core self is intrinsically positive, social and healing so people can be encouraged to connect with their core self without fear,
- the person-centred helping process, based on the core conditions, is affirmative and empowering, not dangerous,
- helping can be done by anyone who provides the core conditions, regardless of age, status, or professional qualification.

The real ramifications of this approach can be felt in the way it gives the helping process back to ordinary

people. Indeed, what could be more ordinary than the human qualities of empathy, genuineness and non-judgemental warmth? If the change process really is located in each one of us, just waiting to be activated by the core conditions within a relationship, then the challenge is a serious one to all who seek to keep helping for the 'experts'.

Activity

- *Take a few moments to consider these propositions regarding the nature of the helping process. It might help to think of times you have needed help yourself or times you have helped someone.*
- *Can you apply these ideas to those situations?*

The process of helping following a Person-Centred model can be summarised in the following diagram. It seems to be well suited to helping in a wide range of situations with its emphasis upon developing generic helping skills rather than particular expert knowledge.

