

Person Centered Therapy

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Saul McLeod, published 2008, updated 2015

Humanistic therapies evolved in the USA during the 1950s. Carl Rogers proposed that therapy could be simpler, warmer and more optimistic than that carried out by behavioral or psychodynamic psychologists.

His view differs sharply from the psychodynamic and behavioral approaches in that he suggested that clients would be better helped if they were encouraged to focus on their current subjective understanding rather than on some unconscious motive or someone else's interpretation of the situation.

Rogers strongly believed that in order for a client's condition to improve therapists should be warm, genuine and understanding. The starting point of the Rogerian approach to counseling and psychotherapy is best stated by Rogers (1986) himself:

'It is that the individual has within himself or herself vast resources for self-understanding, for altering his or her self-concept, attitudes and self-directed behavior - and that these resources can be tapped if only a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided'.

Rogers rejected the deterministic nature of both psychoanalysis and behaviorism and maintained that we behave as we do because of the way we perceive our situation. "As no one else can know how we perceive, we are the best experts on ourselves." (Gross, 1992)

Believing strongly that theory should come out of practice rather than the other way round, Rogers developed his theory based on his work with emotionally troubled people and claimed that we have a remarkable capacity for self-healing and personal growth leading towards self-actualization. He placed emphasis on the person's current perception and how we live in the here-and-now.

Rogers noticed that people tend to describe their current experiences by referring to themselves in some way, for example, "I don't understand what's happening" or "I feel different to how I used to feel".

Central to Rogers' (1959) theory is the notion of self or self-concept. This is defined as "the organized, consistent set of perceptions and beliefs about oneself". It consists of all the ideas and values that characterize 'I' and 'me' and includes perception and valuing of 'what I am' and 'what I can do'.

Consequently, the self concept is a central component of our total experience and influences both our perception of the world and perception of oneself. For instance, a woman who perceives herself as strong may well behave with confidence and come to see her actions as actions performed by someone who is confident.

The self-concept does not necessarily always fit with reality, though, and the way we see ourselves may differ greatly from how others see us. For example, a person might be very interesting to others and yet consider himself to be boring. He judges and evaluates this image he has of himself as a bore and this valuing will be reflected in his self-esteem. The confident woman may have a high self-esteem and the man who sees himself as a bore may have a low self-esteem, presuming that strength/confidence are highly valued and that being boring is not.

Person Centered Approach

Note: Person centered therapy is also called **client centered therapy**.

One major difference between humanistic counselors and other therapists is that they refer to those in therapy as 'clients', not 'patients'. This is because they see the therapist and client as equal partners rather than as an expert treating a patient.

Unlike other therapies the client is responsible for improving his or her life, not the therapist. This is a deliberate change from both psychoanalysis and behavioral therapies where the patient is diagnosed and treated by a doctor. Instead, the client consciously and rationally decides for themselves what is wrong and what should be done about it. The therapist is more of a friend or counselor who listens and encourages on an equal level.

One reason why Rogers (1951) rejected interpretation was that he believed that, although symptoms did arise from past experience, it was more useful for the client to focus on the present and future than on the past. Rather than just liberating clients from their past, as psychodynamic therapists aim to do, Rogerians hope to help their clients to achieve personal growth and eventually to self-actualize.

There is an almost total absence of techniques in Rogerian psychotherapy due to the unique character of each counseling relationship. Of utmost importance, however, is the quality of the relationship between client and therapist.

┆ The therapeutic relationship...is the critical variable, not what the therapist says or does

If there are any techniques they are listening, accepting, understanding and sharing, which seem more attitude-orientated than skills-orientated. In Corey's (1991) view 'a preoccupation with using techniques is seen [from the Rogerian standpoint] as depersonalizing the relationship'. The Rogerian client-centered approach puts emphasis on the person coming to form an appropriate understanding of their world and themselves.

A person enters person centered therapy in a state of incongruence. It is the role of the therapists to reverse this situation. Rogers (1959) called his therapeutic approach client-centered or person-centered therapy because of the focus on the person's subjective view of the world.

Rogers regarded everyone as a "potentially competent individual" who could benefit greatly from his form of therapy. The purpose of Roger's humanistic therapy is to increase a person's feelings of self-worth, reduce the level of incongruence between the ideal and actual self, and help a person become more of a fully functioning person.

Core Conditions

Client-centered therapy operates according to three basic principles that reflect the attitude of the therapist to the client:

1. The therapist is **congruent** with the client.
2. The therapist provides the client with **unconditional positive regard**.
3. The therapist shows **empathetic** understanding to the client.

Congruence in Counseling

Congruence is also called genuineness. Congruence is the most important attribute in counseling, according to Rogers. This means that, unlike the psychodynamic therapist who generally maintains a 'blank screen' and reveals little of their own personality in therapy, the Rogerian is keen to allow the client to experience them as they really are.

The therapist does not have a façade (like psychoanalysis), that is, the therapist's internal and external experiences are one in the same. In short, the therapist is authentic.

Unconditional Positive Regard

The next Rogerian core condition is **unconditional positive regard**. Rogers believed that for people to grow and fulfill their potential it is important that they are valued as themselves.

This refers to the therapist's deep and genuine caring for the client. The therapist may not approve of some of the client's actions, but the therapist does approve of the client. In short, the therapist needs an attitude of "I'll accept you as you are." The person-centered counselor is thus careful to always maintain a positive attitude to the client, even when disgusted by the client's actions.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand what the client is feeling. This refers to the therapist's ability to understand sensitively and accurately [but not sympathetically] the client's experience and feelings in the here-and-now.

An important part of the task of the person-centered counselor is to follow precisely what the client is feeling and to communicate to them that the therapist understands what they are feeling.

In the words of Rogers (1975), accurate empathic understanding is as follows:

'If I am truly open to the way life is experienced by another person...if I can take his or her world into mine, then I risk seeing life in his or her way...and of being changed myself, and we all resist change. Since we all resist change, we tend to view the other person's world only in our terms, not in his or hers. Then we analyze and evaluate it. We do not understand their world. But, when the therapist does understand how it truly feels to be in another person's world, without wanting or trying to analyze or judge it, then the therapist and the client can truly blossom and grow in that climate'.

Conclusion

Because the person-centered counselor places so much emphasis on genuineness and on being led by the client, they do not place the same emphasis on boundaries of time and technique as would a psychodynamic therapist. If they judged it appropriate, a person-centered counselor might diverge considerably from orthodox counseling techniques.

As Mearns and Thorne (1988) point out, we cannot understand person-centered counseling by its techniques alone. The person-centered counselor has a very positive and optimistic view of human nature.

The philosophy that people are essentially good, and that ultimately the individual knows what is right for them, is the essential ingredient of a successful person centered therapy as "all about loving".

Ten Tips for Client-Centred Counsellors

1. Set clear boundaries

For example, when and how long you want the session to last. You may also want to rule out certain topics of conversation.

2. The client knows best

The client is the expert on his/her own difficulties. It's better to let the client explain what is wrong. Don't fall into the trap of telling them what their problem is or how they should solve it.

3. Act as a sounding board

One useful technique is to listen carefully to what the client is saying and then try to explain to him/her what you think he/she is telling you in your own words. This can not only help you clarify the client's point of view, it can also help the client understand his/her feelings better and begin to look for a constructive way forward.

4. Don't be judgmental

Some clients may feel that their personal problems mean that they fall short of the 'ideal'. They may need to feel reassured that they will be accepted for the person that they are and not face rejection or disapproval.

5. Don't make decisions for them

Remember advice is a dangerous gift. Also, some clients will not want to take responsibility for making their own decisions. They may need to be reminded that nobody else can or should be allowed to choose for them. Of course you can still help them explore the consequences of the options open to them.

6. Concentrate on what they are really saying

Sometimes this will not be clear at the outset. Often a client will not tell you what is really bothering him/her until he/she feels sure of you. Listen carefully – the problem you are initially presented with may not be the real problem at all.

7. Be genuine

If you simply present yourself in your official role the client is unlikely to want to reveal personal details about themselves. This may mean disclosing things about yourself – not necessarily facts, but feelings as well. Don't be afraid to do this – bearing in mind that you are under no obligation to disclose anything you do not want to.

8. Accept negative emotions

Some clients may have negative feelings about themselves, their family or even you. Try to work through their aggression without taking offence, but do not put up with personal abuse.

9. How you speak can be more important than what you say

It is possible to convey a great deal through your tone of voice. Often it will be found helpful to slow down the pace of conversation. Short pauses where the client (and you) have time to reflect on the direction of the session can also be useful.

10. I may not be the best person to help

Knowing yourself and your own limitations can be just as important as understanding the client's point of view. No person centred counsellor succeeds all the time. Sometimes you will be able to help but you will never know. Remember the purpose of a counselling session is not to make you feel good about yourself.

Learning Check

Joyce is a successful teacher and is liked by her colleagues. However Joyce has always dreamed of becoming a ballroom dancer. She spends much of her free time with her partner practising elaborate lifts and can often be seen twirling around the classroom during break times. Joyce is considering leaving teaching and becoming a professional dancer.

Her colleagues described her plans as 'ridiculous' and her parents who are very proud that their daughter is a teacher have told Joyce that they will not speak to her again if she does leave teaching to become a dancer. Joyce is beginning to feel sad and miserable.

Referring to features of humanistic psychology explain how Joyce's situation may affect her personal growth. [8 marks]

References

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