An Overview of the Person-Centred Approach to Counselling and to Life

An introduction to the approach

Understanding the person-centred approach to counselling can only really come about through connecting the theory to counselling practice, in order to bring it to life. Throughout this book I will be using a number of examples from my client work to try to show how I work as person-centred counsellor. These casework examples will be composites from my work with a variety of clients, with the individuals’ details changed in order to protect confidentiality. None of the examples used will portray any particular individual.

When I begin my work with a new client, I usually start by giving them a simple outline of how I work as a person-centred counsellor. In order to try to begin to make my understanding of the person-centred approach more accessible to the reader, I will begin by describing some aspects of how I tell a new client about the way that I work.

The first meeting with a client

A young woman, Margaret, had been referred to me for counselling by her employer, as she was suffering from
stress through being harassed by a colleague and was showing some symptoms of depression. When she arrived for her first meeting, I asked her to take a seat and make herself comfortable. I noticed that she sat right on the edge of her chair and was gripping her hands tightly, in a way that seemed rather tense and ill at ease. I introduced myself and told her that I was feeling a little nervous, which I usually do when meeting new people. I then said in a very accepting way, that she also seemed a little tense and that I suspected she might be feeling a bit nervous or anxious too, at which she nodded quietly in agreement. I asked if she knew anything about counselling, to which she cautiously replied ‘No, not a thing’. So I told her that I usually begin by talking a little about the way that I work as a person-centred counsellor, saying something about me and my background and clarifying what we could expect from each other if we agreed to work together. I explained that I believed it was important to do this, so that I could make it feel safe enough for her to talk to me about anything she wanted to. She agreed that this might be helpful and so I began:

Well, Margaret, there are several different approaches to counselling in this country and I have been trained to work as person-centred counsellor. There are some important differences between this approach and the other major approaches to counselling.

First of all, I have a very strong belief in the positive nature of all human beings. We will always strive to do the best for ourselves, no matter what conditions we find ourselves in or what problems we face.

Secondly, I believe in the uniqueness and worth of every individual human being and that we all deserve respect for our capacity to choose our own directions in life and to select and choose our own values to live by.
Thirdly, I believe that you are the only expert in your own internal world and the only person who really knows how you feel. You are the only person who can decide who and how you should be, the only person who can decide what the meaning of your life is and what you should do with it.

Fourthly, I believe that the most important thing in counselling is the therapeutic relationship that will develop between us, in which I hope that you will really feel heard and understood, in a non-judgemental way and that you will experience me as a real and genuine person in this relationship. I will often be very open with my feelings as I experience them here, rather than playing the role of counsellor or expert whom you have come to ask for solutions to your problems.

I am not an expert: I do not have any answers to your problems and difficulties. I believe that the answers, if there are any, lie within you. I will not probe or pry into anything you tell me, I will only work with what you choose to talk about. The only questions I will ask will be to check that I have heard and understood your feelings or to clarify the meaning of what you are telling me. I am quite used to a lot of silence, tears and other strong feelings being expressed.

I will be very accepting of what you tell me and, at the same time, I will notice when the words you say seem to be at odds with how I am experiencing you. I might even notice these things out loud, as I did at the start of this session, when I saw that you seemed to be trying to look very calm and in control and yet there were lots of little signals that you were quite tense. I will do my best not to interpret anything you do or say with my meanings, but I will try to clarify what these things mean for you and how you are really feeling.
I will try to be sensitive in what I say to you and at the same time I would want you to experience me as being really authentic with you and not putting on any pretence. I will be very direct and honest in sharing how I experience you and the things you talk about and you may find this way of working quite challenging at times.

What I will try to do here, is create a trusting relationship between us that will provide a safe space in which I hope you will feel very accepted and understood so that you can be in touch with your feelings and talk, without fear, about anything which concerns you. I have a strong belief that we need to own and value all our feelings, even the most uncomfortable ones and to be able to say how we feel and to insist on being heard and understood. I hope that you will experience that here with me so that you will feel able to deal more effectively with the feelings that are troubling you.

That, in a nutshell, is the person-centred approach to counselling. These words, or something very similar, are the way that I usually start to develop a working relationship with any new client, helping both them and me to settle down and relax and begin to relate to each other. It sounds fairly simple and even rather like common sense, yet I know that to do it well requires considerable knowledge and the expertise that comes from a lot of practice. These words also outline what I believe are the basic principles of the person-centred approach to counselling.

A brief history of the development of the person-centred approach

One of the criticisms of the person-centred approach to counselling is that it is based on very little theory and at times has
even been described as ‘theory thin’. However, in this book I aim to show that the approach is underpinned by a richness and depth of philosophy and theory, which it is important to understand in order to effectively practise in this way.

Carl Rogers who was the originator of the person-centred approach to counselling, was born in 1902 in Chicago and died in California in 1987, leaving behind the legacy of what has been called the ‘Third Force’ in American psychology, namely, humanistic psychology. Rogers was the founder of what he originally called ‘non-directive therapy’ (Rogers, 1942), which later he changed to calling ‘client-centred therapy’. Today it is more popularly known as the person-centred approach. In the late 1940s, at the time that he began to develop his theories, the other two forces prevalent in American psychology were Psychoanalysis and Behaviourism, whose views on human nature were strongly challenged by Rogers.

The development of the person-centred approach stemmed from Rogers’ experience of being a client and his experience of working as a counsellor, which gave rise to the views he developed about the Behaviourist and Psychoanalytic approaches to counselling. Rogers felt that in general terms, the Behaviourists seemed to take the view that human beings are organisms that only react to stimuli, developing habits learned from experience; that individuals are helpless and are not responsible for their own behaviour. The Behaviourists seemed to be saying that individuals have been taught to think and behave in ways that are unhelpful or maladaptive and that it was their job to teach them to be different. Rogers also felt that the Psychoanalysts, particularly Freud, appeared to take the view that human beings are never free from the primitive passions originating in their childhood fixations and are solely the product of powerful biological drives. The Psychoanalysts emphasised the dark side of human nature with its destructive impulses, over which human beings seemed to have no control.
Rogers suggested that in both of these approaches, human beings were seen to have no choice and no control over themselves, that individuals are inherently bad or weak, and are likely to get ‘broken’ and will need the help of the counsellor as an expert who could ‘mend’ the broken individual. In the process of therapy the counsellor would assess and diagnose what was wrong with the client and identify the goals for change which the client needed to achieve. The counsellor would then direct how the client would achieve these goals by identifying the required strategies the client needed to use in order resolve their problems.

In his work as a counsellor, Rogers became increasingly uncomfortable with being in the role of ‘the expert’ and being expected to take a very directive approach to how his clients should change. As a consequence of his experiences as a client in his own therapy and through his contact with other influential psychologists at the time, he began to develop a very different view of human nature and what clients needed to experience in counselling.

I do want to state here, that I strongly respect the beliefs and value the good practice of counsellors from the psychodynamic and cognitive-behavioural approaches. I have had good personal experience of therapy from counsellors trained in those approaches. However, I do not feel able to practise those approaches myself, because they do not sit well with my personal belief system about the nature of humanity, or with my nature and personality. In simple terms, the person-centred approach seems to fit me and to work well for me and the clients that I work with.

The basic philosophical assumptions

In 1942, Rogers published *Counselling and Psychotherapy*, in which he identified what he saw as the two basic assumptions
underpinning the behaviourist and psychoanalytic approaches. Namely that ‘the counsellor knows best’ and that the job of the counsellor is to lead the client to the goal that the counsellor has chosen.

Rogers then described what he saw as a newer approach to counselling, which had a totally different character to the other approaches and was based on very different beliefs about the nature of human beings. The aim of this new approach was not to solve a particular problem or problems, but to develop a trusting relationship. This relationship would enable the individual to grow, so that they could cope with their current difficulties and with later problems in a more effective manner and thereby become more independent and able to function more effectively.

Rogers argued that human beings are essentially, positively motivated with a natural internal drive towards growth, health and adjustment. They can be trusted to make choices that enable them to shape, direct and take responsibility for their own existence and the way they live their lives. He believed that human beings need to be enabled to free themselves from internal and external controls imposed by others, in order to become fully functioning and to 'heal' themselves. He felt that the natural tendency in any human being was to develop towards becoming a fully functioning individual, with a natural drive to become who we truly are. He developed a strong humanistic belief that the counsellor who enables their client to experience the right growth-promoting conditions in the counselling relationship, will enable clients to become more fully functioning; to become their true selves.

The six necessary and sufficient conditions

In 1957, Rogers published an article that identified the following six fundamental conditions, which he regarded as both
necessary and sufficient to establish a counselling relationship, in which therapeutic growth and personality change could occur (Rogers, 1957). These six conditions are:

1. Two persons are in *psychological contact*.
2. The first, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of *incongruence*, being vulnerable or anxious.
3. The second person, whom we shall term the therapist, is *congruent* or *integrated* in the relationship.
4. The therapist experiences *unconditional positive regard* for the client.
5. The therapist experiences an *empathic understanding* of the client’s internal frame of reference and endeavours to communicate this experience to the client.
6. The communication to the client of the therapist’s empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved.

Rogers had an unshakeable belief that if the client can experience these six essential conditions for therapeutic growth, then nothing else is required to enable change to take place in the client. These conditions are both necessary and sufficient in themselves.

**All six are the core conditions**

From the very beginning, Rogers referred to all six conditions as ‘the core conditions’ for therapeutic growth. However, as the use of the approach developed, three of the conditions (numbers three, four and five), which are perhaps seen to be attributes or attitudes to be integrated in the counsellor, began to receive more prominence and attention than the others. To some extent this still continues today, with these three often being referred to as the ‘core
conditions’. The other three conditions (numbers one, two and six), seem to be given less attention, perhaps because they are rather more like aspects of the relationship between counsellor and client. Rogers himself, believed that condition one, psychological contact, was an absolute pre-requisite for therapy to take place.

For the counsellors who want to commit themselves to the person-centred approach, it is important to remember that all six conditions are of equal importance. They are rather like the pieces in a jigsaw, they all need to be present in some way in the counselling relationship, in order to see the full picture. This does not mean that they all have to be present to the same degree all the time. That would probably be impossible to achieve, even for Carl Rogers. It does mean that all six need to be present in some way and to be experienced by the client to at least a minimal degree during counselling.

The inter-relationship between the six conditions

Retaining Rogers’ concept that all six conditions are the core conditions, in order to help explore and explain them, I will refer to conditions three, four and five as the ‘central conditions’, and conditions one, two and six as the ‘further conditions’.

Because of the prominence that has been given to the three central conditions, anyone setting out to practise as a person-centred counsellor may find it difficult to understand the equal importance of all six core conditions, the inter-relationship between them and, in particular, the centrality of the first condition, around which the other five conditions seem to revolve. It can be said that in the counselling relationship the other five conditions are meaningless, without the presence of the first condition. This is because the first condition, psychological contact, is about
counsellor and client having a real relationship, rather than
two people just being in a room together. It is also very clear
that relationships do not just happen without any effort. Even in everyday life, we usually have to want a relation-
ship to happen and to do something about making it hap-
pen and work at maintaining it. This is no less true of the
counselling relationship and of establishing psychological
contact between counsellor and client.

It is also very clear that the sixth condition (the com-
communication to the client of the therapist’s empathic under-
standing and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal
degree achieved) is essential. Counselling can hardly be
effective if the client doesn’t actually experience the coun-
sellor as being empathic or having unconditional positive
regard for them.

Necessary and sufficient

Today, there is a growing and more general acceptance that
the central conditions are important for any therapist, what-
ever approach they use, although other approaches do not
accept that these conditions are sufficient in themselves to
enable change to take place.

For Rogers, however, these conditions were more than
just essential. He believed that they were entirely sufficient
on their own, to enable therapeutic growth to be possible.
He argued strongly that the experiencing of those three
central conditions by the client, in the therapist, creates a
strongly therapeutic relationship and therefore there was
no need for techniques of any sort. He also firmly believed
that these conditions could not be ‘turned on’ in coun-
selling as a kind of technique. Instead, they needed to be
developed as an integrated part of the counsellor’s person-
ality, and to be rooted in the counsellor having those
fundamental beliefs about human nature which are described
above, along with the counsellor’s belief in the client’s capacity to achieve their own potential to become fully functioning.

The stages of becoming fully functioning in counselling

Rogers held the belief that the ideal state for any human being is to be in a state of becoming, to be always striving to become a fully functioning person. Through his interest in research into the outcomes of counselling, he developed a belief that it was important to develop some understanding of the way in which change takes place in individuals through counselling. In particular, he wanted to find a way to describe the process which takes place in the counselling relationship. Through further research into his own practice, he developed his theory of the seven stages of process (Rogers, 1967). He saw these stages as a flowing continuum rather than seven fixed and discrete stages. A brief outline of these stages is as follows:

Stage One: The client is very defensive, and extremely resistant to change.

Stage Two: The client becomes slightly less rigid, and will talk about external events or other people.

Stage Three: The client talks about him/herself, but as an object and avoids discussion of present events.

Stage Four: The client begins to talk about deep feelings and develops a relationship with the counsellor.

Stage Five: The client can express present emotions, and is beginning to rely more on his/her own decision making abilities and increasingly accepts more responsibility for his/her actions.
Stage Six: The client shows rapid growth towards congruence, and begins to develop unconditional positive regard for others. This stage signals the end of the need for formal therapy.

Stage Seven: The client is a fully functioning, self-actualising individual who is empathic and shows unconditional positive regard for others. This individual can relate their previous therapy to present day real-life situations.

Rogers wrote eloquently about what he perceived as these seven stages that an individual passes through in therapy in the journey towards becoming, which I will explore in more depth in Chapter 5.

Self-actualisation

In developing his theories, Rogers was profoundly influenced by the writings of a number of other psychologists and philosophers. In particular, he was strongly influenced by the thinking of Kurt Goldstein, a Jewish-German psychiatrist who first developed the term ‘self-actualisation’ (Goldstein, 1939). This was a term that Rogers also used, although rather more broadly than Goldstein had defined it. Rogers referred instead to the ‘actualising tendency’, which he believed was the principle basic tendency in all human beings. The tendency to want to become the self that one truly is, rather than the self that others want us to be.

Goldstein also influenced Abraham Maslow, another psychologist whose thinking Rogers also drew upon, who was developing his own theories of personality development. Maslow’s most famous concept was that of a hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) The inner core of human nature, argued Maslow, consists of urges and instinctive tendencies that create basic needs within the person. These needs have
to be satisfied, otherwise frustration and sickness will result. The first and most basic needs are physiological and are related to survival, these include the need for food and shelter. If these physiological needs are not satisfied, all other needs are temporarily pushed aside. Once basic physiological needs are fulfilled, relatively higher needs emerge, such as those for safety, love and esteem. When safety needs are satisfied, love and esteem needs arise and the individual will focus on meeting these needs.

The self-actualising tendency and the fully functioning person

At the top of the hierarchy of needs, Maslow placed the need for self-actualisation, which arose from the emergence of a need to know, a need to satisfy our curiosity about nature, a need to understand the perplexities of life and ourselves. Maslow and Rogers both drew close parallels between Maslow’s self-actualising person – whose most basic drive was the desire to become all that one is capable of becoming, and Rogers’ fully functioning person – whose basic drive was to become the person that one truly is. Rogers believed that the actualising tendency could be inhibited but could never be destroyed, except by death and that it was directed only towards positive objectives, to enable the individual to function to the best of their ability in whatever conditions they might find themselves.

Rogers’ theory of personality and behaviour

At this point it is also important to acknowledge Rogers’ theory of personality and behaviour (Rogers, 1951). In this
he describes, in nineteen propositions, his theoretical view of the nature of human personality and how it works. Perhaps one of the most important of these propositions is the one which states that the ‘organism reacts as an organised whole to its experiencing of its phenomenological field’ (Rogers, 1951: 484). This is broadly taken to mean that no one part of the personality acts entirely on its own behalf, but that parts of the self which are fragile or vulnerable and may perhaps have been damaged, will be helped, supported and even protected by other parts of the personality as they respond to their experience of life. This has led to an important aspect of the person-centred approach which is that of attending to the ‘whole’ person. This means that as counsellors we want to be accepting, empathic and genuinely present both with and for all aspects of the client’s personality and not just those parts that we like or are drawn to. To illustrate, I will briefly describe some of my work with a client for whom it was really important that I was completely accepting of her whole person, including the part of her that wanted to deny the pain that she was experiencing.

The communication and experiencing of unconditional acceptance

I recall Patricia, a middle-aged, female client who presented with a very bubbly, cheerful personality, always smiling and talking in a positive way. She had been referred to me because she was having difficulties in all of the important relationships in her life. She seemed to have no capacity at all to express feelings of anger, frustration, disappointment, sadness, loss or fear. She seemed to continually try to convince herself that everything would be all right providing she put on a brave face and remained cheerful.
I noticed how when she talked about some of her disappointments and difficulties, she would slump down in her chair with quite a sad expression on her face and that tears would come to her eyes, which she would rapidly wipe away. She would then literally, give herself a shake, sit upright, grit her teeth and smile before making one of her ‘Well – it will all be alright if I stay positive, won’t it?’ statements.

I said that I had noticed this happening several times and how puzzled I was by this behaviour. I wondered what it would be like for her to stay with her feelings of sadness or disappointment. ‘I can’t do that’ she said strongly. ‘Ever since I was a little girl I’ve been taught to put a brave face on things and that if I do, they will get better.’ She paused for a moment or two and then added in a very quiet and reflective voice, ‘But I guess they don’t always do that, do they?’

I responded with ‘Well, Patricia, I’m not saying you shouldn’t do what you have been taught to do, even if you know it doesn’t always work. I guess there are times when it has been really useful. What I am saying is that here, in this room, it is OK for you to choose to be with these uncomfortable feelings, because it is safe enough to do that. I feel that it would be OK for you to experience and talk here with me, about all that disappointment and sadness that you have. I won’t think any worse of you if you do. In fact I’ll be really pleased if you can share those feelings with me. I’d feel privileged by that rather than feeling you are shutting me out.’

After some quiet thought, she replied, ‘Do you mean it is all right for me to have these feelings, you’re saying that I am allowed to have them?’

‘Dead right’, I said. ‘If I was experiencing some of the difficulties you are describing, I think I would feel pretty sad
and disappointed too. Those feelings may not be comfortable or nice, but they are your feelings and I think it is pretty important to value and take care of them, rather than pretending that they don’t exist. It’s a bit like saying to yourself that your pain doesn’t matter – and I think that it does matter to you a great deal.’

‘I’ll have to think about that,’ she said. ‘Don’t know if I can do it, though.’

‘That’s OK.’ I said. ‘No Hurry. I’d just like to be able to get a real sense of how it feels to be Patricia, living with all that pain and never able to share it with anyone.’

In experiencing my acceptance of all the parts of her personality, she eventually began to be able to be more accepting of that part of her which was in so much pain and much more able to choose not to defend it by pretending it did not exist.

**Phenomenological observation**

This extract also demonstrates another important principle in the person-centred approach which we perhaps use in a different way to the other approaches. The technical term for this is phenomenology, the observation of phenomena – things that happen. That is, the importance of careful observation of everything the client does and says in the relationship and the communication of how the counsellor experiences all these aspects of the client, in a non-judgemental way. Above, I show how I noticed the apparent conflict between the feelings Patricia was describing and how she was behaving. I fed this back in an accepting, non-judgemental manner, without interpreting it in any way. I sought to find
out what this behaviour meant to her, so that both she and I could begin to understand. This, I think, gave her an opportunity to think about what she was doing and the consequences of behaving in that way. Through that Patricia began to recognise that she could choose to behave differently, rather than continue to do as her parents had taught her and that there would be quite different and more positive consequences arising from her changed behaviour.

**The avoidance of technique and developing a way of being**

I referred earlier to Rogers’ view that the six conditions could not and should not be used as a kind of technique but that they need to be developed from within a deeply held belief in the positive nature of human beings and their actualising tendency, as an integrated part of the counsellor’s personality. If this happens in counselling, the client will experience those conditions in abundance in the relationship. In this process Rogers believed that the client, in experiencing these conditions in the counsellor, will experience themselves as being fully, psychologically ‘received’ by the counsellor (Rogers, 1969). Any attempt to use those conditions as a technique, without those strongly held beliefs, will be experienced by the client as false and lacking in genuineness and is unlikely to provide the relationship or the therapeutic climate in which change can occur.

Rogers took this further to develop the most significant difference between the person-centred approach to counselling and other approaches. This lies in the belief that the experiencing of the three central conditions is important in every relationship and in every aspect of life. The
person-centred approach has become more than a way of developing a therapeutic relationship with clients. Rogers described it as ‘a life-affirming way of being’ (Rogers, 1980). This has led to the person-centred approach being described as a quiet revolution.

A link to the next chapter

In the next chapter I will look at beginning the counselling relationship and how the six conditions can be established. I will look more deeply at the first of the six conditions and its relationship to the other five conditions and how they are rooted in some of the fundamental beliefs about human nature.

Recommended reading
