

Person-Centered Therapy

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Person centered therapy, often referred to as client-centered therapy is a unique approach to counseling developed by Carl Rogers in response to many of the negative results he saw through the cold, authoritative psychoanalytic approach. Over decades of experience working with patients had led him to fundamental principles that designate the therapeutic processes used throughout person-centered therapy. This therapeutic approach relies on warm, authentic client-counselor relationship that is conducive to change. If a therapist creates an accepting, empathetic relationship in which the client experiences unconditional positive regard, then that client will naturally move towards growth.

Person-Centered Counseling as an Effective Approach

Before analyzing the efficacy of Person-Centered Counseling, one must first acknowledge that this theoretical approach is more of an attitude and core belief system than it is a systematic therapeutic curriculum. As such, it is difficult to accurately study and determine the specific outcomes of person-centered counseling. As Carl Rogers says, "Experience is, for me, the highest authority. The touchstone of validity is my own experience" (1961). The theoretical principles should be examined less by research-based methodologies and, instead, be proven through a true examination of the world around us. A better way to study the effectiveness of person-centered therapy is to study the various components and principles of which the practice is based upon. Principles which include the concept of congruence, unconditional positive regard, empathy, and the fundamental belief that "If [the counselor] can provide a certain type of

relationship, the other will discover within himself the capacity to use that relationship for growth and change and personal development will occur” (Rogers 1961).

Creating a positive, genuine, accepting, and empathetic relationship allows for growth for a broad range of individuals. If one fundamentally believes that humans are generally and naturally good, then it is only logical to assume that rebuilding their self-image will allow them the freedom and space to develop. In group therapy, for example, empathy is a necessary factor in the effects of therapy; without it, members are unable to confidently open up to each other (Abernethy, Tadie, & Tilahun 2015). Grieving mothers who suffer from pregnancy loss found that the therapeutic relationship, above all else, was the key determinant in their willing to reflect and change (Markin & McCarthy 2020). Suicidal clients were had better outcomes from therapy if they perceived a strong, positive therapeutic relationship (Ring & Gysin-Maillart 2020). From a client-centered approach, it is not the specific diagnosis that limits a client’s progress. Regardless of their specific ailment, the client benefits from a therapeutic relationship where the client is valued, accepted, and understood.

Importance of Genuineness

Genuineness, sometimes called “congruence” is not simply an attitude or personality trait. It is an active process which refers to “the counselor’s freely flowering awareness of his experience in the therapeutic moment” (Murdock 2017). To be genuine, a counselor must remain painfully aware of their internal feelings and external behaviors. What they say and do must accurately reflect their opinions and feelings. While it may seem counterproductive to display feelings that may not always be positive, such as disapproval, person-centered therapy relies on a counselor's ability to remain genuine. “The more genuine and congruent the therapist in the

relationship, the more probability there is that change in the personality in the client will occur” (Rogers 1961).

To consistently relate to a client on a genuine level, a therapist will need to ensure that they are cognizant of their own emotions and feelings. Meditation, continued self-reflection, and counsel will continue to develop a counselor’s personal awareness. Additionally, a counselor will need to understand and empathize with their client to ensure that their authentic feelings are not harmful to that client. For example, a counselor may feel resistant to work with someone who has committed atrocious acts. They may fear that they cannot genuinely express compassion to their client. However, if the therapist truly works to understand the client’s perspective and understand how their experiences have led them to their current state, then the counselor can authentically relate to the client. Congruence would be easily achievable.

Role of Empathy

Carl Rogers beautifully defined empathy as “entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it” (1975). In person-centered therapy, the process is simple. Clients enter therapy in a state of incongruence and through an authentic, empathetic relationship, they leave in a state of congruence or “genuineness”. In the seven stages of therapy, the client begins in a state in which he only observes his external experience, where he is trapped in his ingenuine façade (Murdock 2017). Throughout the treatment, he transforms into his true organism (or self). The therapist’s willingness to empathize completely with the client provides a client with a profound perspective. He is able to see himself as he is and as he can be who chooses.

Rogerian empathy does not require one to approve a person’s behaviors. In fact, this would contradict the necessity for genuineness. When explaining the importance of genuineness,

Carl Rogers addresses this challenge, "I have found this to be true even when the attitudes I feel are not attitudes with which I am pleased or attitudes which seem conducive to a good relationship. It seems extremely important to be real" (Rogers 1961). Thus, faking approval should not occur in the counseling relationship. If the counselor believes that a client must be accountable for their actions, then it is important for the counselor to follow through with this belief. Empathy and genuineness are not mutually exclusive.

Unconditional Positive Regard

Carl Rogers passionately believed that unconditional positive regard communicates genuine acceptance for the client, allowing them the freedom and willingness to grow. "When the therapist is experiencing a warm positive and acceptant attitude towards what *is* in the client this facilitates change" (Rogers 1961). When the counselor completely accepts the client as they are, be that in a state of anger, happiness, fear, excitement, anguish, etc., the client is more likely to accept themselves as they are. This acceptance is a crucial part of their development. Only once they are able to fully explore their deepest darkest attributes without fear of losing their counselor's care, they are able to recognize them and move forward. "It is my purpose to understand the way he feels in his own inner world, to accept him as he is, to create an atmosphere of freedom in which he can move in his thinking and feeling and being, in any direction he desires" (Rogers 1961).

To be completely and truly accepted when your flaws are on display is an empowering feeling. Clients suffering from depression, anxiety, fear, or mental distress can move forward with a fearless self-acceptance. Frankel, Rachlin, and Yip-Bannicq study the affects of unconditional positive regard on change. They argue, "Because the nondirective client-centered therapist's unconditional positive regard may conflict with the client's conditional self-regard, the

therapy cultivates a novel restructuring of the client's narrative” (2012). The client is able to use the therapist’s perspective to rebuild their own self-image and continue to grow into their natural, whole self.

Person-Centered Therapy Qualities

The ACA code of ethics follows many Rogerian principles and incorporates beliefs that are fundamental to the theory. For example, autonomy is one of six professional values in the ACA code of ethics (2014). A counselor must aim for client independence. Person-centered therapy implicitly assumes an identical goal. “The goal of PC therapy is to facilitate the client’s journey toward full potential” (Murdock 2017).

Respect for the client is essential to both the ACA code of ethics as well as person-centered therapy. This is apparent in subtleties such as referring to the person seeking treatment as the “client” rather than the “patient.” It is also apparent in the handling of client consent. The ACA requires counselors to provide the client with transparent information so the “clients have the freedom to choose whether to enter into or remain in a counseling relationship” (ACA 2014). Additionally, “Counselors work to minimize any potential risks or harm” (ACA 2014). Protective codes such as these demonstrate a deep respect for the client.

Person-centered therapy’s emphasis on a counselor’s need to empathize was incorporated into the ACA code of ethics. In sections A.4.b, it states “Counselors are aware of—and avoid imposing—their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors” (ACA 2014). Additionally, “counselors respect the diversity of clients” (2014). As explained in an earlier section, empathy is the willingness and ability to understand a client’s experience as they see it. Recognizing the significance of the client’s own values and culture is a essential part of empathy.

Person-centered therapy is an approach to therapy that has taken over the counseling profession. The humanistic view of clients has shaped modern counseling techniques. From the ACA code of ethics to the therapeutic relationship clients are met with acceptance, understanding, unconditional positive regard, and a genuine respect.

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