

The Historical Development of the Person-Centred Approach in Counselling

Carl Rogers and the Person-Centred approach to Counselling.

(From Sanders "First Steps in Counselling" and Dryden "Individual Therapy")

Person Centred therapy was developed by an American psychologist, Carl Rogers who was born in Illinois in 1902. His early background was a lonely and repressive one, as his parents, who held rigid fundamentalist beliefs, did not encourage the kind of emotional atmosphere, which is conducive to childhood spontaneity and freedom of expression. He was brought up in the countryside where he spent most of his time in solitary pursuits, and since his parents did not want much contact with outsiders, he had very little chance to mix with the other young people or to become involved in social events. This lack of contact with other people had a profound effect on Rogers who, in later life, identified his poor self-confidence and social skills as having their origin in his childhood and teenage years.

Rogers went on to study agriculture at the University of Wisconsin. Rather than pursue agriculture he decided to join the Christian Ministry and went to Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He soon took up the study of psychology at Teachers' College Columbia University having become disillusioned with the more rigid doctrines of the church. He worked with children and their families for twelve years in Rochester, New York, in which time he began to develop his ideas about people's capacity for self-help and the role of the counsellor acting as a co-worker rather than being an expert in the helping process. Rogers progressive disillusionment with psychological diagnosis and interpretation during his time at Rochester marked the beginning of his own unique approach to therapy.

By 1940 Rogers was a professor of psychology at Ohio State University and his first book Counselling and Psychotherapy was published in 1942. With the publication of Client Centred Therapy in 1951, Rogers became a major force in the world of psychotherapy and established his position as a practitioner, theorist and researcher who warranted respect.

Rogers's particular contribution to contemporary culture was to put the individual, their experience and potential for self-healing at the heart of the effective change process. At the time his ideas and approach were a serious challenger to mainstream psychology, which was busy trying to convince the world that psychologists were "experts" on human behaviour.

Carl Rogers's work concerning the process of change in therapy and education is based on the following fundamental propositions;

- That the fundamental underpinning or "**core**" of human personality is constructive and good
- That humans have an instinctive movement toward achieving their full potential in a constructive way, which Rogers called being "**fully functioning**"
- That the movement towards fulfilling one's potential includes an element of psychological self-healing
- That the counsellor must provide the right conditions in which this self-fulfilling, self-healing process can flourish
- That the right conditions are primarily when there is a complete absence of threat to the individual
- That there is no single objective reality, just a collection of subjective ones

- That the best vantage point from which to understand another person's behaviour is from their subjective viewpoint.

The client is the centre of the helping process in the sense that helping is seen as activating the self-healing process located in the client themselves by providing basic or "core" helping conditions (empathy, unconditional positive regard, congruence) It is a respectful, non-threatening method, letting the client direct the process themselves through the wisdom of their self-healing tendencies.

Key Points

The founding Father of Person- Centred Counselling is Carl Rogers (1902- 1987)

Person-centred Counselling is often referred to as "Rogerian" Counselling after Carl Rogers

Originally called "Client-centred Therapy" the term "Client" was replaced with "Person" Rogers preferred the term "client" to the term "patient" because the word has medical connotations.

Rogers called his approach to Counselling "Non- Directive" as opposed to "Directive". In other words, he did not attempt to direct the client in counselling but encouraged the client to direct him or herself. This approach was radically different to the approaches of his day which tended to direct clients towards counsellor agendas.

Rogers was strongly influenced in his thinking by such figures as the Humanist Psychologist Abraham Maslow. Equally, "Phenomenology" a school of Philosophy was strongly influential to his approach. (Reality of what people experience/approach that concentrates on the study of consciousness and the objects of direct experience)

Person centred Counselling is founded on the notion that each person has a very individual and unique view of the world. In a sense "reality" is different for each person, although there may be strong similarities between people's perceptions too.

This key notion, that each of us creates our own view of the world, largely governs the counsellors' approach to helping a client. Rogers asserted that one of the primary aims of counselling was to gain a thorough understanding of how the clients sees the world and what it means to him or her.

Another key belief of Person-centred counselling is the idea that each person possesses an in-born tendency to grow and develop to their fullest potential. Rogers was largely influenced in this thinking by Abraham Maslow who used the term the "Self-actualising tendency" describe this drive for personal fulfilment Maslow said, "what a person can be, they must be"

Central to the Person-centred approach to Counselling is the idea that the client is able to heal himself given the right conditions and the correct relationship. Rogers believed that the client

knows what is best for him or her, and how to discover it. The counsellors' task them is to establish a relationship with the client which is conducive to this self-healing and to the discovery of the client's own directions.

Rogers asserted that the client is the "Expert" on him or herself, and not the counsellor.

The Person-Centred counsellor attempts to form a relationship which is empowering to the client. The client is encouraged to be "Self-Determining", that is, to choose for himself, explore his own direction, and determine what is right and appropriate for him. The

relationship between the counsellor and the client is seen as a co-operative, and equal partnership with an equal distribution of power.

The Person-centred counsellors view of human nature is outstandingly positive. People are seen as basically good, trustworthy and constructive.

The approach views the client as a “Whole” person and not simply a collection of problems or symptoms.

Assumptions of the approach

The actualising tendency is the single most basic motivating drive. This is an in-born tendency to maintain, enhance and reproduce itself.

People, he asserts, have the capacity to guide, regulate and control themselves provided certain conditions exist.

All difficulties are caused by obstructions to the expression of this self-actualising tendency.

View of the Person

The Organismic Self- Also referred to as the “real self” or “authentic self”

This real self is present from birth. It represents the true core of our nature, a fundamental identity which is trustworthy, positive, reliable and constructive. The organismic self constantly seeks to convey accurate messages to us about who we are as individuals, our real needs and desires, as well as prompting us to act upon these.

The Self Concept- The self-concept evolves from about the age of five years old although it has been suggested that its development occurs earlier. This is a view of ourselves conveyed by significant individuals such as parents.

Depending on the messages we have received from others, the Self-concept may grow to become either positive or negative in type. A positive self-concept may match in many ways the messages emerging from the organismic self. A negative self-concept is likely to clash with the organismic experience of self.

When we say “I” or “Me” we are referring to the self-concept.

Conditions of Worth

Rogers asserted that Human Beings possess a powerful need to be viewed by others as positive and valuable. He called this force the need for “Positive self-regard” The need to receive the positive regard of others and to perceive oneself in a positive light. Such a need, he suggests, is learned from an early age and drives much of our behaviour.

Initially our quest to attain positive self-regard is driven by the promptings of the organismic self. Therefore, the individual is simply expressing genuine needs of the self within his or her environments. However, significant others may not accept such authentic behaviour. In fact, this behaviour and the feelings that accompany them may be rejected by such figures as parents. A child's actions may be deemed unacceptable, despite the fact that they represent the child's true self.

Consequently, the child is given the message that genuine parts of him are not valuable or worthy. The child learns that by expressing himself in certain ways he is not given positive regard by others. In this way the actions and responses of other people begin to create another view of oneself – the self-concept.