

Understanding Person-Centred Counselling

One

The Evolution of Rogers' Philosophy: Rogers' Life and the Development of His Attitudes and Ideas

Carl Ransom Rogers was born on 8 January 1902 in Oak Park, an upper-middle-class suburb of Chicago, Illinois. Ethnically and politically diverse, the city is situated on the edge of America's 'Bible Belt' – an area of the United States in which conservative evangelical Protestantism is a significant social force and Christian church attendance is high. His mother a devout Christian and his father a successful civil engineer, Rogers' parents were religious, wealthy and disciplinarian.

When Rogers was twelve years old his parents moved the family to a farm some thirty miles west of Chicago in order to remove their children from 'urban temptation'. Subsequently, with early-twentieth-century America in the grip of Prohibition and with the city in the grip of mobsters, downtown Chicago became brutal, criminally driven, politically fraudulent, fraught with danger and indeed full of 'temptation'. The city developed worldwide notoriety for its gangland murders and domestic homicides (Kobler, 1971). However, 'kept down on the farm' and away from alcohol, dancing, cards, the theatre and with very little social life, Carl became a rather 'solitary boy' (Rogers, 1961), yet encouraged by his father and with many chores to perform, Carl developed self-discipline and the ambition to self-educate.

Rogers learned to read before he started school and during his formative years developed a great respect for scientific and practical endeavour. This 'fundamental feeling for science' (Rogers, 1961) persisted throughout his life and he became the first therapist to publish research evidence on how and why psychotherapy appears to work effectively (Rogers, 1951).

After high school, during which Carl tells us he had only two dates (Rogers, 1961), he attended college at Wisconsin, studying agriculture. One of the things he remembered best about this time was the passionate plea of his professor:

'Don't be a damned ammunition wagon; be a rifle!'

This lecturer was stressing the ineffectiveness of citing encyclopaedic fact for its own sake and encouraging inventive thinking (Rogers, 1961), a concept that, it seems, resonated with Rogers, for all that he expounded and wrote holds the inherent invitation for us to discover more, learn more and enhance existing accumulated knowledge.

Carl's professional goals changed during his first two years at college and he switched to majoring in History, believing that this would better prepare him for a life's work in the Christian ministry, which he had emotionally decided to pursue. However, in 1922 he was chosen as one of twelve students to go to China to attend an international World Student Christian Federation Conference. This experience intensely affected his thinking. He witnessed how profoundly the French and Germans still hated each other, four years after the end of the bitter and bloody, disease-ridden, trench-fought conflict of World War I. Carl also came to realise that whilst people might hold divergent religious beliefs, they could still be honest, sincere and likeable individuals. He wrote:

In major ways I for the first time emancipated myself from the religious thinking of my parents, and realised that I could not go along with them. This independence of thought caused great pain and stress in our relationship, but looking back on it I believe that here, more than at any other time, I became an independent person. (Rogers, 1961: 7)

Marrying with his parents' reluctant consent before he went to university, Rogers entered the Union Theological Seminary – the most liberal in America at the time (1924). He came in contact with many scholars and teachers who earnestly believed in freedom of inquiry. Supported by this and in conjunction with others, Carl joined a student discussion group to explore his own ideas, questions and doubts. He found this experience acutely '*satisfying and clarifying*' (Rogers, 1961). He wrote:

I feel that it [the discussion group] moved me a long way toward a philosophy of life that was my own. The majority of members of that group, in thinking their way through the questions they had raised, thought themselves right out of religious work. I was one. (Rogers, 1961: 8)

Rogers discovered he could no longer be chained to an inflexible religious doctrine.

He began to attend lectures at Teachers' College, Columbia University on psychology and psychiatry, which had long attracted his interest, and he shifted into child guidance work. Gradually he started to think of himself as a child psychologist. During his internship at the then new Institute for Child Guidance, Carl immersed himself in the vibrant Freudian ideas of the staff, which he found greatly conflicted with the objective, cold, statistical point of view he was experiencing at Teachers' College. Freud (1856–1939) is seen as having had enormous influence on American psychology; in 1909 he had delivered a series of lectures on

psychoanalysis at Clark University. Freud had not been impressed with America, its thoughts or culture (Gay, 1998), however, Rogers' elementary clinical practice was rooted in Freudian philosophy.

At the end of his internship Rogers accepted a post in the Child Study Department of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in Rochester, New York. Employed as a psychologist, he worked in this institution for twelve years, gaining broad knowledge in the field. A series of experiences with clients gradually drew him away from being focused on interpreting or analysing a client's behaviour to the realisation:

that it is the client who knows what hurts, what direction to go, what problems are crucial, what experiences have been deeply buried. It began to occur to me that unless I had a need to demonstrate my own cleverness and learning, I would do better to rely upon the client for the direction of movement in the process. (Rogers, 1961: 11–12)

Working in progressively deeper psychotherapeutic relationship with a wide range of clients, Rogers found that this demanded a commitment to his continuing personal growth – which was sometimes highly challenging and painful but ultimately rewarding. He battled for years with the psychiatric profession, stubbornly following his own ideas, which caused consternation and unfavourable reaction (Rogers, 1961).

What draws me to the Person-Centred Approach

The particular commitment to on-going personal development that Rogers discovered was demanded in the application of his approach, is reflected in the similar personal discoveries made by others who practise the Person-Centred Approach today:

Ultimately, the Person-Centred Approach has become an irresistible force that simply leaves me no choice other than to make the process of self-awareness and personal growth a lifetime pursuit. **Helen Strutt – 2nd year Diploma student**

As I struggled as a trainee to extend person-centredness in my work with clients, I was called to challenge myself, which took my acceptance of self and others to a whole new and more profound level. **Robert Moonasar – substance misuse and offenders counsellor**

However, there were others who had discovered that the therapeutic relationship between client and counsellor was a significant element, vital to the clients' healing process. In 1933 Jessie Taft (1882–1960), Rogers' mentor, wrote:

The reason why these experiences in relationships which I call therapeutic, work healingly for the individual, is that there is present always in every human being underneath the fear, a more powerful, more or less denied, unsatisfied impulse to abandon the ego defences and let the too solid organization of the self break up and melt away in a sense of organic union, with a personality strong enough to bear it, and willing to play the part of the supporting whole. (Taft, 1933)

It is worth mentioning that current research has demonstrated that regardless of the model practised by a therapist, it is the quality of the relationship between client and therapist that is the most important factor in determining a successful psychotherapeutic outcome for the client (Norcross, 2002).

What draws me to the Person-Centred Approach

The central importance and healing value of the person-centred relationship that develops between client and counsellor is tenderly expressed here by one therapist as she recalls her psychotherapeutic experience as a teenager:

I am drawn to practise the Person-Centred Approach because of my amazing experience with a person-centred counsellor at the age of 17; as I revealed my painful story the kindness in his eyes was indescribable. Also in his eyes I saw myself and it enabled me to cry and then to heal. **Qualified person-centred counsellor**

In 1939 Otto Rank's (1884–1939) theoretical work on what he termed as *Will Therapy* (Rank, 1939) was published in America. Rank, once the most beloved student of Freud, broke away from orthodox psychoanalysis and coined the phrase '*here and now therapy*' (Rank, 1939), which fully encompasses the humanistic concept that all emotional experience is grounded in the present not in the past. Rather than working with the Freudian idea of the *repression* of prior experiences Rank used the idea of *denial*, which focuses on how an individual is emotionally negotiating the present. Rank theorised that the neurotic lives too much in the past to the detriment of experiencing the 'here and now'; clinging to the past in order to protect him/herself from emotionally surrendering to and experiencing the present (Rank, 1939).

In presenting his theory on the *Hierarchy of Needs* (Maslow, 1943), Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) introduced psychology to the idea of *actualisation*; once all our basic human physiological, psychological and emotional needs are met we can rise to be self-defining/directive and self-fulfilling:

What a man can be, he must be. (Maslow, 1954: 91).

Maslow also believed that 'the study of crippled, stunted, immature, and unhealthy specimens can yield only a cripple psychology and a cripple philosophy' (1954: 234).

Maslow's concept of *actualisation* differed from that of Rogers, who supposed an organism's movement to actualise-self is an ever-present tendency and not a hierarchical process.

However, the shift away from the therapist being the expert in the psychotherapeutic alliance to the client being the self-expert capable of being self-directive and self-transcending, was gathering momentum, albeit expressed in singular theoretical ways.

What draws me to the Person-Centred Approach

The person-centred/humanistic shift in psychotherapeutic theoretical perception, outlined above, has proven to be of central experiential importance to many clients and therapists, as is encapsulated in the views expressed below:

Having experienced as a teenager what was, for me, the questionable and sometimes abusive modality of both the psychodynamic approaches and the psychiatric services, I was deeply suspicious and antipathetic towards interpretive therapies. I was also extremely doubtful that many of the therapeutic models could offer any kind of equality within the therapeutic space. I felt drawn to the promise of alliance and mutuality that seemed to characterise the Person-Centred Approach and my notion of it that relationship is something built rather than implied or assumed. **Qualified person-centred counsellor and supervisor**

During my own healing process my experience of experts was one of feeling misunderstood, whilst what I needed most was empathic support to help myself. What initially grabbed me about the Person-Centred Approach was that the therapist does not claim expertise over the client. Believing in an individual's ability to self-heal with the help of the counselling relationship is of central importance to my own experience and philosophy. **2nd year Diploma student**

In 1940 Rogers was offered and accepted his first full professorship at Ohio State University. Whilst teaching his graduate students what he had learned from personal and practitioner experience about treatment and counselling, Rogers realised that he had developed a distinctive psychotherapeutic philosophy of his own (Rogers, 1961). By 1951 he had crystallised his ideas on non-directive counselling, and *Client-Centred Therapy* (Rogers, 1951) was published for the first time.

Rogers felt he always presented his ideas tentatively with the intention of allowing recipients the choice to reject or accept his views, but uproar raged around him; the furious, contemptuous and disapproving engaged in principled battle with a number of unquestioning Rogerian 'disciples'. In 1961 Rogers wrote of this furore: 'I have found it difficult to know, at times, whether I have been hurt more by my friends or my enemies' (Rogers, 1961).

The underlying tenets of his non-directive philosophy were based on Rogers' own significant learning experiences; a philosophy of life and being which he never anticipated as being fixed or complete, but rather fluid and changing (Rogers, 1961).

Central to Rogers' psychotherapeutic helping perspective and indeed his life view, are the concepts of:

- Transparency – acting and being without facade; acceptance of the self and personal experience (the psychotherapist's and/or the individual's **congruence**).
- Acceptance of others and their personal experiences (the psychotherapist's and/or the individual's **unconditional positive regard** – regarding the client without judgement).
- Seeking to understand others in their perceptual worlds and finding ways to effectively communicate this understanding (the psychotherapist's or the individual's ability to experience and demonstrate **empathy** with the client's experiences, thoughts and feelings).

When extended in unison within a counselling alliance, these attributes are known as the *three core conditions* in Rogerian clinical theory and are central to the healing relationship. Rogers further hypothesised that we are hindered in attaining these qualities by the *conditions of worth* placed on us by significant others and society. The threat of or the actual withdrawal of love and approval causes us to *introject* (integrate as personalised truths) the values and beliefs of those around us, which results in incongruence; psychological tension manifests between our unique self-experience and the introjected (integrated) idea of who we believe we 'should' be (Rogers, 1951).

What draws me to the Person-Centred Approach

Singularly described here from a person-centred practitioner's perspective is how the movement from incongruence to congruence occurs and subsequently leads to the dismissal of many of our introjected conditions of worth:

I am drawn to the Person-Centred Approach because it values me as a person with a natural tendency to actualise. It recognises that, in every moment I am co-creating my world with others and when I am

congruent, empathic and unconditionally loving of myself, I am able to break free from externally attributed conditions of worth to discover my pure source of unbounded potential and in so doing, enable others to discover theirs. **Dr Leslie Gadman – bereavement agency counsellor**

The honesty of intra- and interpersonal interaction, acceptance of the self and others and the demonstration of empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruent responses characterises the person-centred therapeutic alliance, and was for Rogers and is for the person-centred therapist '*a way of being*'. This is not a technique based on a goal-orientated belief system but a philosophy that embodies the conviction that *real relationships* affect change. Rogers wrote:

If I can accept the fact that I am annoyed at or bored by this client or this student, then I am also much more likely to accept his feelings in response. I can also accept the changed experience and the changed feelings which are then likely to occur in me and in him. Real relationships tend to change rather than to remain static. (Rogers, 1961)

It is in such psychotherapeutic relationships, which are by nature focused on the client's concerns, that clients can organically discover a more satisfying, self-defined life-view and direction.

What draws me to the Person-Centred Approach

Within the Person-Centred Approach it is the very imperfect humanity of the therapist, transparently and honestly present within the therapeutic alliance, that naturally assists the client in achieving self-directed psychological adjustment and emotional understanding:

This missive may suffice To sketch what drew me Feeling as I do Still far from free When broken from the core I cried in desperation The other heard me For the first time maybe In empathy So I in self acceptance Flawed and human Can now return this Gift to thee. **Person-centred practitioner**

The essential tenets of the Person-Centred Approach have often been compared to Buddhist principles (see Brazier, 1995) and the focus on empathy has been compared to the compassion of Jesus Christ. However, it may be of interest to the non-religious and non-spiritual to note that empathy and compassion were central to the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), whose ideas

inspired both the French and American Revolutions and affected the development of modern political, sociological and educational thought (Damrosch, 2005).

Rogers was also one of a school of scholars who advocated non-directive teaching and learning. The first tentative Rogerian teaching principal is:

We cannot teach another person directly; we can only facilitate his learning.
(Rogers, 1951: 389)

This philosophy of teaching encourages students and lecturers to jointly engage in the co-creation of the learning agenda, which by nature organically empowers students to take responsibility for their own learning, interpretations and insights. In turn freedom of thought and expression results for the learner.

What impact has the self-directed learning process had on me?

The Rogerian attitude to facilitating learning rather than directing it does appear to have significant positive impact and value for many. It seems this process is highly challenging but personally rewarding, as is typically expressed below:

Self-directed learning challenges me to solve my own problems and in this I discover just how much I am capable of, which in turn boosts my confidence and self-esteem. **Linda Harvey – 1st year Diploma student**

I found myself taking responsibility for my own learning process, which elevated my self-awareness in relation to my strengths and weaknesses. I also learned so much about myself and what I needed to work through to gain confidence in my own belief systems. It's an on-going journey of self-discovery that elevates my awareness beyond all expectations; I realise my abilities and my limitations. The process is challenging but also extremely valuable. **John Sivill – qualified counsellor**

Rogers applied his theories in areas of social conflict and travelled extensively during the latter years of his life. Acting as a catalyst for transcultural communication he was able to facilitate discussion between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, between Blacks and Whites in South Africa and he visited Russia where he facilitated creativity and communication workshops (Cohen, 2000).

By 1980 Rogers had vast experience in the field and introduced us to what he deemed as the '*mystical and spiritual characteristic*' (Rogers, 1980) which appeared to emerge in psychotherapeutic alliances when profound connectedness between client and therapist was achieved. He was aware that many would part company

with his conceptualisation of such occurrences and what these may mean to both the psychotherapeutic process and the nature of human existence. This *other characteristic* and *relational depth* (Mearns and Cooper, 2005) will be further explored in subsequent chapters.

In 1987 Rogers had a severe fall, which fractured his pelvis. His pancreas failed the evening after a successful operation following this fall, and Carl died a few days later. He was survived by his son and his daughter, Natalie Rogers, who is well known for combining the philosophy of her father with expressive arts in order to enhance the communication channels between client and therapist (Rogers, 2000).

The recognition of Rogers' work and philosophy, and his willingness to apply this transculturally in situations of conflict across the world, led to his nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. Sadly notification of this nomination arrived shortly after his death in 1987.

In relation to the clinical practice and the *animate living beingness* of the Person-Centred Approach, Rogers' purpose was only to offer us various central hypotheses that unify the exploration for greater knowledge in our endeavour toward developing more effective human and psychotherapeutic relationships. His expressed intention was to offer us dynamic concepts that can be constantly revised in the light of our personal and practitioner experience and our professional research findings (Rogers, 1951).

In many of his written works Rogers was amazingly transparent and shared intimate details of his experiences and his life, which perhaps revealed his 'feet of clay', leaving him open to personal criticism. However, for me, it is in this very openness that Rogers demonstrated that he lived his philosophy through his imperfect humanity, not his professional expertise.

Since his death, person-centred theory and practice has been advanced and sometimes altered through the concepts developed by person-centred writers and theorists working in the field. Yet for me, Rogers' ground-breaking concepts were essentially accurate; his enterprise was beautiful and enriching, and he has emotionally and psychologically freed many.

In the pursuit of developing your own understanding of person-centred philosophy and practice it is vital that you study Rogers' original writings as well as subsequent person-centred authors in order to discover your own unique, self-directed place within the *Tribes of the Person-Centred Nation* (Sanders, 2004; Warner, 2000).

Reflection Point

Hopefully it is evident to the reader that the times in which he lived and his life experiences greatly affected the philosophy Rogers developed. It is highly important for a therapist, particularly a person-centred one, to understand how and why he/she has arrived at choosing his/her psychotherapeutic

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approach. Without understanding or appreciation of our personal experiences and philosophy it is impossible to set these aside in order to meet our clients in their personal experience and world-view. Take time to reflect on: (1) What initially led you to wanting to become a counsellor? (2) What has brought you to study of the Person-Centred Approach? (3) What is your current personal view on how and why psychotherapy works?

The Author's Personal Journey

As you read the following consider:

- How my experiences impacted on me at the time.
- How these experiences affected my self-experiencing and behaviour as I grew into adulthood.
- How my experiences led me to becoming a person-centred practitioner.
- How your experiences have impacted on and affected you.

In stark contrast to Rogers' childhood isolation and lack of exposure to difference, I grew up in Peckham, a working-class constituency of London, during the 1950s, surrounded by human diversity from an early age. However, this did not mean that I was allowed to organically accept the cultural and colour differences that I experienced around me.

When my mother informed me that 'Indians' were moving in to run the corner Oil Shop, I found it very odd when she also told me that I must 'welcome and be nice to them'. I waited excitedly for their arrival but was also puzzled by my mother's statement, which had inferred I and others might not 'be nice' to them.

After meeting the new neighbours for the first time I stormed home incensed, because my mother had animated me about nothing; they were only Asians and not the Red Indian Chiefs (Native Americans) I'd been expecting. However, I was still mystified as to why anyone might not welcome the new people. This experience left me wondering '*What is wrong with Asians?*'

A similar conversation took place when a West Indian family moved in next door. I was bemused as to why my parents thought I might not be polite to our 'coloured' (Black) neighbours.

I grew to love Dora, an ample-busted, huge, dark woman who always beamed whenever she saw me, and her husband, Charlie, whom she dwarfed, always showed great interest in me. When this couple had their second child I visited their house frequently and I was fascinated by the different décor and the different smells in their home and I loved exploring it.

By this time, however, I'd realised that people had different status in society. This was obvious to me not only in relation to race and colour but in relation to gender and class as well. I come from turn-of-the-twentieth-century, impoverished Italian immigrant stock but my family, an extended one, had lifted itself; we were comparatively well off and had become British. The high street on which we lived was the street on which the better people resided (of which I was one) and the road to the right of us was where our low-class neighbours lived. It was an unspoken rule that the children from this divide did not mix or play together. I complied with these *societal conditions of worth* as if they were an expression of my own self-developed values.

I was given a great deal of what money could buy and I gained the sense that I was better than many but not as good as some. However, I grew up with the *introjected* idea that I came from a 'better family', yet most of the time I felt displaced and unacceptable either within or outside of my family unit. My demonstrated, *congruent sense of self* was proving to be unacceptable to those around me.

One of my first memorable encounters with the unacceptability of my own intrinsic values and desires occurred when I was very young and my playmate, a boy, peeped under the outside lavatory door to catch a glimpse of my bottom. His furious mother caught sight of him and chased him up the garden path as I protested. I liked the fact that he wanted to look at me and I could not understand why he should be told off if I wasn't angry. As he'd been looking at me, surely, wasn't it my choice? The adults did not agree. This was a clear message to me that it was indecent to exercise what I believed to be my own options in relation to my body; the first time I clearly remember *conditions of worth* being placed on me, although at the time all I knew was that I was '*in the wrong*'.

I attended a private primary school from the age of three, but again, unlike Rogers, I was unable to successfully demonstrate my keen interest in learning. Dyslexia played havoc with my ability to express my intelligence and I sensed that I was strange and different. I longed to feel '*the same as*' but my parents were so often unable to deal with my feelings that I came to believe what I felt was weird and wrong; my mother told me this frequently enough. I began to deny my emotions and inner experiencing and have come to realise that this denial divorced me from much of my existential experience, capacity to protect and define myself and both my creative and scholarly aptitudes.

To a large extent during my formative years I, slowly but surely, began to reject my sense of self, replacing this with a concept of myself largely based on who others told me I should be. As a result I became highly *incongruent* and driven by a need to be accepted by others and to feel loved. Paradoxically this incongruence led me far away from the love and acceptance I craved, especially the love for and acceptance of myself. It took a long time, a great deal of personal distress and person-centred psychotherapy in order for me to be able to identify and eject the major introjected conditions of worth that crippled my connection to self.

However, these realisations (once I'd made them) formed the core of my draw to becoming a person-centred practitioner. I now believe my self-directed

definition and my psychological and emotional adjustment comes from being in touch with and aware of my visceral, and sensory experience (being congruent). I have re-developed the ability, for the most part, to be acutely in touch with my feelings, which in turn has allowed me to develop a profound capacity to be in touch with and understand the emotional, felt experience of my clients. As a therapist I have found this naturally defines and leads the person-centred psychotherapeutic process to a successful outcome through my clients' felt experience of being understood emotionally.

Recommended Further Reading

Jeffrey H.D. Cornelius-White (ed.), *Carl Rogers: The China Diary* (with a Foreword by Natalie Rogers). Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books, 2012

Pete Sanders, *The Tribes of the Person-Centred Nation: A Guide to the Schools of Therapy Associated with the Person-Centred Approach*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books, 2004