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An “open-centered” recipe for relationship?

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A theory not an article of faith

There is a sentiment amongst practitioners that "person-centred" goes hand-in-hand with Carl Rogers's formulation of six "necessary and sufficient conditions" which must be met in order to achieve therapeutic personality change. For example, in its requirements for entry to the list of person-centred counsellors, the British Association for the Person-Centred Approach has come close to making this an article of faith. However, and without intending any disrespect to Carl, taken at face value, the necessary and sufficient conditions claim is absurd. *Necessary and sufficient* means *if and only if*, and even hard science is leery of claims that strong. A useful hypothesis needs to be strong enough that it can be shown false; if not, it is scientifically valueless. It does not need to be so strong that it is almost certain to be false. I am not the first to think these things, and I am not the first to make public noises. Most recently, Campbell Purton has argued powerfully and elegantly that the necessity and sufficiency statement is a step too far.¹ As Campbell points out, the statement seems to rest on the additional hypothesis that all psychic distress

is rooted in introjections of conditional acceptance, those ubiquitous "I will love you if..." clauses that litter most inner landscapes and human relationships. They are usually, but not necessarily, experienced in childhood, and they are something most of us experience to some degree. The conditions Carl Rogers posited as necessary and sufficient for healing are then the unique antidote to our wounding experience. Unfortunately for this line of thought, it doesn't seem to be the case that conditional acceptance *is* the source of everything that brings clients to therapy. Campbell cites other common factors such as post-traumatic stress, lose-lose choices, bereavement, and childhood deprivation rather than *conditionality*.

Campbell is taking a step well beyond previous critiques of necessity and sufficiency. Outside the client/person-centered tradition, it has long been a commonplace that while the therapeutic conditions are certainly useful, and may even be necessary, they are most definitely not *sufficient* because there are other things which a good therapist needs to be doing. And from inside the tradition, Jerold Bozarth has replied by arguing that the therapeutic conditions are *not* "necessarily necessary" in all cases, but they *are* "always sufficient".² What Campbell is suggesting is something rather more radical which those of us working within the client/person-centred tradition would probably prefer to ignore: there is a fallacy at the very centre of our theory. We can draw a veil over this embarrassment, and carry on as if

everything is fine. We can retreat to the halcyon days of the 1950s and call ourselves client-centered purists. We can seek "integration" with other theoretical partners in order to shore ourselves up. Or perhaps we can grasp the nettle and recognize that there is a need to revision the client/person-centred tradition for the 21st Century.

I say *re-vision* not replace, or lose, or throw out with a little old-fashioned bath water. Re-visioning is integral to the spirit of that tradition. Explaining his own view of science and theory, Carl Rogers described "the network of gossamer threads" which comprised psychoanalytical theory and wrote of the damage caused by Freud's "insecure disciples" when they turned gossamer into "iron chains of dogma".³

A timely question

In the spirit of Carl's metaphor, I want to map out a little initial revisioning which coincides with an environmental obsession I have had for as long as I can remember. It seems to me that if we are willing to relinquish claims to necessity and sufficiency, then the therapeutic tradition in question promises a basis for relationship with the whole of what some call *the created order* and not just with other human beings.

I shall begin by taking three related steps.

- First, it is important to remember that the therapeutic way of being which characterises client/person-centred practice

predates the theory. Client-centred therapy was around long before those gossamer threads woven to explain its efficacy, and it is *that therapy's way of being*, not any particular theorisation, which is the heart of the tradition. Although interesting and important, theory is an inescapably flawed attempt to enunciate—and provide a doorway into—a logically and existentially prior body of practice.

- Second, once shorn of their claim to absolute sovereignty, the therapeutic conditions enunciated by Carl Rogers still remain an insightful way to conceptualise the client/person-centred way of being, and their practice remains a useful way to begin acquiring it.
- Third, once the theory is held lightly enough, and in the spirit of the moral umbrella question, it becomes possible and reasonable to ask whether the way of being is anthropocentric in its focus or potentially more generous. In other words, is the way of being necessarily human-centred, concerned only with human beings and their welfare, or might it have wider concerns and application. Client-centred and person-centred therapies are limited in this way because they seek to help wounded human-beings, but *What about the way of being itself, is it necessarily human-centred?* One way of seeking an answer is to try to answer a further but more precise question: *Do the six therapeutic conditions map onto a nonhuman locus of attention?*

Opening the locus of attention

In sketching an answer to that question, I'm going to look briefly at each of the six conditions described by Carl, but I won't be discussing them in their original order.

The unconditional positive regard, or UPR, the prizing or love which a therapist offers their client, maps onto trees, cats, mountains...without difficulty. It is easy to love a tree; sometimes, it is easier than loving human beings, I find.

Empathy, too, is not that difficult to extend to most living things. Cats have feelings, purposes, furry cat-shoes to step into. This may be called "anthropomorphizing", but I don't think we need be put off because anthropomorphising is a respectable ethological tactic these days. What is more, empathising with members of another species is not restricted to human beings. The primatologist Frans de Waal has recently described how a female bonobo (think "pygmy chimpanzee"; a slimmer cousin of the chimps befriended by Jane Goodall) rescued a stunned starling, climbed a tree in order to release the bird to its own element, and, when the starling failed to escape the bonobo's enclosure, sat beside it for the rest of the day while it recovered the strength to fly away.⁴

Trees may seem a bit harder to empathise with, but I think most gardeners know empathy for their floral friends. Mountains? Speaking personally, I feel things for mountains that are sometimes overwhelming, and the well-being of a beloved

mountain is of great importance to me. I'm not alone, and I can even call recent developments in neuroscience to my aid.

The experience of empathy is associated with observable brain activity and a kind of neurological mirroring. For example, if I see you drop a big rock on your foot, things will happen in parts of *my* brain that mirror what is happening in those parts of *your* brain. Not everything that is going on for you will be mirrored, that is why I don't literally feel your pain; what I will experience are the emotions, expectations, and other less direct feelings associated with a big rock landing on one's foot. Furthermore, some researchers think that human brains have evolved areas dedicated to empathic identification. In other words, humans and perhaps to a lesser degree several other kinds of mammal are hardwired to "do empathy".

Of course, this is empathising with other humans...but wait for it. Brain scanning has demonstrated that the same kind of activity occurs when, for example, we observe a big rock dropping on a cow's hoof, or—and this may surprise some folks—we watch a big rock rolling down a mountainside and slamming into a second big rock. It seems that humans are not just wired for empathy; we are so *well* wired for empathy that we are able to empathize with inanimate objects.

This does not mean we cannot sometimes legitimately employ the psychological "shields" which allow us to make use of objects for our own purposes, and there remain complex questions regarding

such legitimacy. My point, here, is simply that we are innately empathic creatures and that our empathic ability is not limited to other humans.

UPR, empathy...that's two out of the three *core* or *counsellor* conditions, the oft-cited keystone of person-centred being. The other condition is that the therapist be congruent, or genuine and authentic, within the counselling relationship. Can genuineness and authenticity be offered to a nonhuman? I think the answer is, *Of course it can*, but this probably only applies to creatures enjoying a high degree of sentience.

However, there are two stages to congruence. First, there is openness to one's own experiencing, a kind of inner honesty and acceptance. Second, there is congruent relating and being in the world. The first stage is about how one relates to one's self, and the second stage is about relating to others. Even if one cannot easily be said to be in congruent relationship with a mountain, one can be congruently oneself upon the mountain and act towards the mountain from a place of personal congruence. The more I reflect upon this, the more it seems potentially very important to the way we treat the nonhuman world, and I shall be returning to a closely related theme at the end of this discussion. To conclude the present discussion of congruence, I shall simply note that the three counsellor conditions are *inseparable* in practice: one cannot be empathic and acceptant while holding back on congruence.

I now want to turn the traditional account of the counsellor conditions on its head for a few paragraphs. They are intended to contribute to a therapeutic environment promoting growth and psychic healing in human beings. They are there for the sake of the client. But they do affect the counsellor as well.

Routinely seeking to offer the counsellor conditions to others changes the person who is making that offer. At least, that is my experience, and I think I see the same thing in my colleagues and students. Speaking personally, I find that the changes run in two directions. I am more acceptant, a little less ego-laden, gentler, more perceptive, more empathic, more desirous that whatever is gets its moment in the sun, its chance to flourish. I am also more angry, more enraged by the suffering and damage which humankind is causing to itself and everything around it. Both these tendencies, if generalized, will help safeguard Earth from human depredation and foolishness. Therefore, it begins to seem to me that offering, non-anthropocentric, counsellor conditions to the nonhuman world is not only possible, doing so will tend to promote personal changes which will contribute to environmental sanity.

Carl Rogers stated six therapeutic conditions, and I have now described how three of them—the *counsellor* or *core* conditions—might apply to a nonhuman locus of attention. That leaves three to go.

Contact, psychological contact, was the first of these. The therapist needs to work at that, and I see no harm and much good in a genuine attempt to be in contact with the nonhuman. I don't mean that we should get silly; we just need to notice the way the leaves move, the paws go down; put ourselves in the way of experiencing rain against the cheek; be open to the other, the nonhuman other, in a way analogous to the openness of a counsellor to their client.

Condition number two was that the client be anxious, vulnerable, incongruent. *Does it map at all?* In a way, I think it does. Earth and everything on it is vulnerable, much more vulnerable than humans ever imagined until recently. We need to be aware of that, I think, and hold it in awareness.

The really tough condition is the last one: "the client *perceives*, at least to a minimal degree...the *unconditional positive regard*...and the *empathic* understanding of the therapist." With highly sentient creatures, both are possible, and I don't mean only those creatures which have evolved alongside us as dogs and cats have. Try walking in the Canadian bush, in moose country, without a gun and without any ill intent towards moose. They abound. Take a gun and go look for dinner. *Where are the moose?* It may be said that moose just know what guns are, but I remember meeting a mother moose with her little one when I was lost and on a very narrow lakeside trail. Mother moose with their young are dangerous. I forgot that in my delight at meeting Mistress Moose

that afternoon. We stopped, and gazed, and I felt her lack of ill intent towards me as I think she felt mine. We both moved aside a little, and we passed beside each other on that narrow trail.

Can vegetative lives somehow experience or otherwise be affected by our intent, our feelings towards them? There is some positive evidence—try routinely saying ugly, negative things to a plant, and see what happens—and science is interested in this matter.⁵ As for the rest of creation, how much do we really know?

A recipe for all relationship

In sum, I am suggesting that Carl Rogers's therapeutic conditions can be read as a recipe for a way of being with the nonhuman world, with Earth's other creatures and living things, with her bones and substance. That will serve the cause of environmental sanity in two ways. It will tend to change how humans relate to and behave towards the nonhuman. It will tend to change humans in ways which will make us better suited to live as citizens of an ecological community.

So where does all this leave us?

If I temporarily set aside precise and formal statements of the therapeutic conditions, and I think more generally about the way of being they generate, it seems to me that, as a therapist, what I offer to a new client is genuineness, acceptance, absence of judgement, and a willingness to really try to understand what it is like being them. Over time, and as I give my close attention to the

client, I find warmth, tenderness, and a deep desire for their well-being has grown within me. I am inclined to think that is just how it is to be human. If we offer this stuff, and if we attend, a kind of love takes root within us. And I can find no reason why the offering, and the attending, should not be to the whole of what some call *the created order*. In time, a kind of love will take root inside one if it is not there already, and then there will be no doubt that it all belongs beneath what I think of as *the moral umbrella* and warrants our consideration.

The focusing connection

When, at the very beginning of this article, I offered a list of possible responses to the fallacy at the heart of person-centered theory, I did not mention Gene Gendlin's *experiential focusing* option. I shall mention it now and in conclusion because I think it too points beyond merely human-centered relationship and towards environmental sanity.

Gendlin's development of the client/person-centered tradition involves bringing what he calls the "felt sense" into awareness. The felt sense is kind of difficult to explain but much easier to demonstrate. For most people, most of the time, it is experienced as an initially unclear and under-defined awareness located between the throat and the abdomen. Pay it gentle attention, and it resolves into a clear and certain knowing which feels entirely trustworthy. The felt sense isn't, for example, going to answer questions like, *Is there life on Mars?* But it can answer such

questions as, *What do I need in order to feel okay right now?* or, *What is it I'm experiencing when I reach for the battery produced eggs on the supermarket shelf because they are cheaper than the free range eggs?* Personally, I find that it can also answer seemingly more cerebral questions like, *What is this argument missing that makes it seem incomplete?* But, in any case, it is the second of these questions which really matters, *What do I need...right now?*

What do I need right now?

My hunch is that if and when enough people are living in awareness of their felt sense of this question—whether conceptualised that way or not—and enough people are in possession of a trustworthy answer, then humankind's relationship to "the environment" will take on a whole new aspect because so much of what we do need right now is nonhuman. If that sounds a bit abstract and even unlikely, ask what kind of a dwelling place most people seem to choose given opportunity. *Does it have a garden? Does it involve living creatures other than humans? Does it contain indoor plants? Why?* What is it we know about ourselves, our own well-being, and the kinds of relationship we need, but deny to full awareness?

¹ Purton, Campbell (2004) *Person-Centred Therapy The Focusing-Oriented Approach*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

² Jerold Bozarth (1993) "Not Always Necessary but Always Sufficient" in David Brazier *Beyond Carl Rogers*. London: Constable and Constable.

³ Carl Rogers (1959) "A Theory Of Therapy, Personality, And Interpersonal Relationships As Developed In The Client–Centred Framework". S. Koch ed. (1959) *Psychology: A Study of a Science* vol.3. New York: McGraw–Hill Book Company.

⁴ The claims I make regarding science, bonobos, and empathy are taken from: de Waal, Frans (2005) "The empathic ape". *New Scientist*, issue 2509, 23 July 2005, page 17; Phillips, Helen (2004) "Is empathy and animal quality?" *New Scientist*, issue 2444, 24 April 2004, page 15; and Cohen, Philip (2004) "Humans are hardwired to feel others' pain". *New Scientist* online news service 19:00 19 February 2004, citing *Science* (vol 303, p 1157). They are available on the *New Scientist* database accessible through the Internet.

⁵ Current scientific thought about the possible analogues of sentience and intelligence in plants can also be tracked through the pages and the online archive of *New Scientist*. The most recent article I have found is Phillips, Helen (2002) "Not just a pretty face". *New Scientist*, issue 2353, 27 July 2002, page 40.