Third Edition

Skills *in* PERSON-CENTRED

Counselling & Psychotherapy

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1

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

THE IMPORTANCE OF THEORY

Person-centred theory is simple, elegant and universal. Just as an appreciation of atoms gives rise to an understanding of the whole of the physical world, so can an appreciation of person-centred theory give rise to an understanding of the complexity and richness of human experience.

People can come to counselling in extremes of psychological pain or experiencing strange thoughts and behaviours. If we are not to be frightened or overwhelmed, we need to have an understanding of *why* they are in such a state and *what we can do* to be of use. When we listen to the sheer awfulness of another person's life, it is human to feel inadequate. *How can I, in one session a week, hope to make a difference in the face of such suffering?* One possible response is to remove ourselves a little – to disguise those feelings of inadequacy behind an elaborate analysis of the causes of the pain rather than allow ourselves to hear the suffering. Another is to rush into 'helping' – offering suggestions and solving problems in an attempt to make the other person's life easier. Both of these responses help us to cope with the person, and with our own inadequacy, while distancing ourselves from their misery.

And yet ... What is the *point* of someone expressing such agony? Won't it do more harm than good? Surely it's better to help a person to get on with their life rather than wallow in misery? *He's feeling worse now than when he first came to see me. Person-centred therapy isn't working – I'd better try something else.*

Without theory, how can we have any confidence in our way of working? Unless we have a hypothesis about what is happening and why, we will tend to fall into our own insecurities when the going gets tough. Theory is the map that guides us through territory which is alien and can feel dangerous. It helps us to stick to the path, however rocky, instead of panicking and running into the woods.

WHAT IS THEORY?

For us to work effectively with others, we need a set of assumptions or hypotheses which answer the following questions:

1. What do we mean by 'person' and 'personality'?
2. How do we understand the way that people develop?
3. What do we consider to be 'normal', 'healthy' or 'adjusted'?
4. What do we consider to be 'abnormal', 'unhealthy' or 'maladjusted' and how do these states arise?
5. How can people move from 4 to 3?
6. How can others best assist in this process?

The person-centred hypotheses are as follows.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'PERSON' AND 'PERSONALITY'?

Colloquially, when we speak of someone's personality, we mean a combination of their characteristics and qualities. For the purpose of theoretical understanding, however, we need a technical definition and in client-centred theory we posit two components to personality: *experience* and *self-structure.*

We define experience as sensory input; the information that comes through our five senses and from internal or visceral feelings. This is often referred to as organismic experience to underline that we are using its technical meaning. Experience is informed by current happenings (I am cool or warm, interested or bored and so on) and also by past experiences. We can react at a gut level to a present event or to another person according to past happenings, even when the gut reaction is not necessarily appropriate to what is happening now. In fact experiences that were extremely frightening and threatening, particularly when we had little or no control over them, can feel as though they are held in every cell of our body.

The self-structure is our model of the world around us and of ourselves. It grows as a child learns to name and organise experience – to symbolise it in awareness. It becomes our way of understanding the world and it enables us to 'fit in' to family, society and culture in order to be valued and loved.

Person-centred theory gives us a model in which the person is always striving to integrate their organismic experience of the world with their self-structure. When the two are at odds with each other, the person experiences uncomfortable, or even painful, emotions and it is this discomfort or pain which might bring someone into counselling.

HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND THE WAY PEOPLE DEVELOP?

Experiencing, or organismic experiencing, is simply that: the capacity of the organism to experience. We see, we hear, we touch, we smell, we taste, we sense our own inner sadness or happiness, anger or calm. This experiencing is essentially neutral – neither

01_Tolan_Cameron_Ch 01.indd 2 10/6/2016 12:45:41 PM

healthy nor unhealthy, neither good nor bad. It simply *is.* Without the self-structure, we would not be able to construe any of this experience or give it meaning.

In order to recognise and then name something, we need a framework and familiarity. With everyday objects, colours and so on, adults are likely to name them for the young child without distortion and without judgement. It seems natural to most parents to engage in repetition and emphasis with babies: 'Mummy', 'nose', 'spoon', 'cup', 'red', 'doggy'…

Along with some words will come other, underlying, meanings in which emotions are communicated, for example, 'No' (disapproval), 'Dirty' (disgust), 'Clever' (delight). Thereafter 'dirty' might be something to avoid. The self-experience of revelling in the oozy coolness of mud will be distorted. 'Clever' might always be a matter of pride or envy. The sense of superiority which sometimes goes along with it might not be recognised.

The self-structure is our basis for explaining and making sense of our experiences. It encompasses everything that a person holds about themselves and about the world. Some beliefs are built through our own experiences. Others are based on the prior beliefs of family. (Family in this sense meaning the group, or groups, of people concerned with a child's upbringing.)

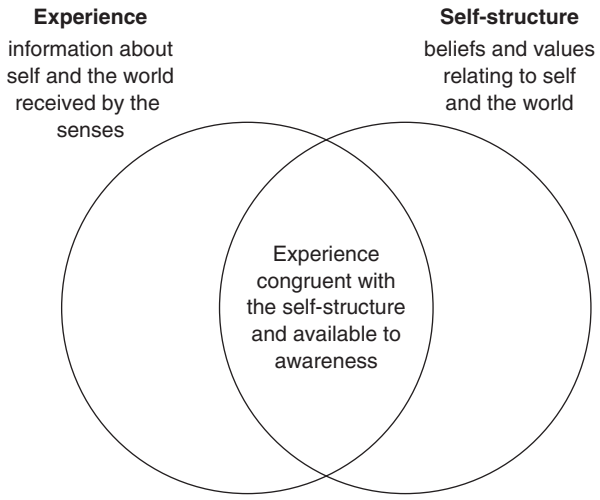

Figure 1.1 The Total Personality

It is as though parts of the self-structure are 'handed down' within families and cultures. *If you don't subscribe to this view of the world, you're not one of us!* The more we have to strive to be accepted, the more we cling to these 'handed down' views, even when our own experience tells us something different. Take, for example, a member of a social grouping which holds a prejudice in common: 'black people are …'. 'But', an outsider says in surprise, 'what about your friend Quibilah?' 'Oh', replies the group member, 'she's *different* – she's such-and-such, is Quibilah, not like the rest at all!'

How much experience of black people would it take to revise this person's self-structure? The answer is that experience alone will never suffice. That person's *acceptability*, often at some deep level, depends upon their believing that *black people are*

01_Tolan_Cameron_Ch 01.indd 3 10/6/2016 12:45:41 PM

… If they were to move into another grouping which held a contrary view, they might, in time, amend their self-structure in order to become acceptable in the new group. But only when they felt themselves to be accepted *despite* their opinions and prejudices would they truly be able to evaluate their experiences for themselves and change their self-structure accordingly.

The self-structure is initially formed according to the values and injunctions of parents and other carers. *Conditions of worth* are transmitted to children, who learn that they are acceptable or lovable if they behave, think and feel in certain ways. The development of the self-structure usually entails building in such ideas about self and about the world as though they were absolute truths rather than opinions or points of view. These are known as *introjected values.*

EXAMPLES

- I'm no good at maths.
- Men don't cry.
- Gay men are effeminate.
- I'm a high achiever.

The need to be valued and loved is overriding, so the development and maintenance of the self-structure is important. Experience that conflicts with the self-structure will be distorted or denied.

EXAMPLES

- Experience: I do a sum correctly;
  - *Distortion: It must be a fluke. (I'm no good at maths.)*
- Experience: I'm upset and I'm getting choked up;
  - *Distortion: It's getting stuffy in here. (Men don't cry.)*
- Experience: I didn't realise Winston was gay. He seems normal;
  - *Distortion: He's different from the rest. (Gay men are effeminate.)*
- Experience: I'm not getting this right;
  - *Distortion: They haven't given me enough information. (I'm a high achiever.)*

WHAT DO WE CONSIDER TO BE 'NORMAL', 'HEALTHY', 'ADJUSTED' OR 'MATURE'?

The self-structure does a valuable job in a number of respects, particularly in that it enables us to make predictions. Although it is not in our awareness, we can usually

01_Tolan_Cameron_Ch 01.indd 4 10/6/2016 12:45:41 PM

anticipate correctly that the ground beneath our feet will be solid and that water will move about. We can also predict how the people around us will react if we talk or behave in certain ways.

As individuals, we are flexible where there is no conflict between our experiences and self-structure. We can predict or recognise what is acceptable to us and to others and make choices without distorting or denying our experience. We can change our judgements and values according to *our own* experience.

Also, the more someone is able to integrate their own experiences into their self-structure – in other words, the more self-accepting they become – the more they are able to understand and accept others.

WHAT DO WE CONSIDER TO BE 'ABNORMAL', 'UNHEALTHY' OR 'MALADJUSTED' AND HOW DO THESE STATES ARISE?

We all need a degree of predictability. The world is only a safe place when we can be reasonably sure of 'what will happen if … '. The self-structure gives us that safety – but at a price. The price is that we shut out experiences which do not 'fit'. None of us can hold the totality of our experience, past and present, in awareness and we are all prone to distort or deny aspects of experience. The self-structure keeps out of our awareness experience which does not have a bearing on our ability to function well in our own society and culture. But some of our out-of-awareness experiences can come to hinder our ability to make choices and to fulfil our potential.

If we are not aware of important areas of our own experience, we cannot make flexible choices based upon balancing our own and others' needs. People often judge themselves according to whether others find them acceptable or wanting. Their *locus of evaluation* is outside of themselves. Even when someone is making their own judgements, these can be based on a system of values built into the self-structure which are not influenced by experience (*introjected values*).

EXERCISE

In the second part of each of the examples below, what might be the introjected values which are leading to denial or distortion of experience?

I'm so happy, I want to sing and dance. But since I'm in church and it would be seen as disrespectful for me to give way to my impulse, I'll wait.

One should concentrate on prayer when one is in church.

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01_Tolan_Cameron_Ch 01.indd 5 10/6/2016 12:45:41 PM

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What an unfair thing to say in front of other people! I think I'm going to cry. But I don't want to get a reputation for weakness. I'll go out of the room now and then tackle it with him later, when there's just the two of us.

Remarks like that are beneath me. Sticks and stones ...

I still miss my mother. This morning, when I saw the first snowdrops, I just sat for a while and thought of her and cried.

I've always been a strong person with plenty of interests. I find that keeping active stops you from dwelling on the past.

I'm dissatisfied with my job. My parents will be very distressed and angry when I tell them, but I'm going to retrain as an artist.

I'd love to get away for a proper holiday this year. But my patients need me to be there for them. I can't afford to get depressed. Anyway, what do I have to be depressed about? I earn three times as much as my Dad. And Mum's so proud of me being a doctor ...

HOW CAN PEOPLE CHANGE?

There is a drive within every individual towards accepting important experiences into the self-structure, and therefore into awareness, which is called the *actualising tendency*. Where the rigidity of the self-structure prevents this, a person will experience uncomfortable feelings and emotions. As with physical discomfort and pain, the purpose is to alert the individual that something needs attention. It is for this reason that feelings are important in person-centred therapy.

Nevertheless, the self-structure is there for a good reason. For example, being quiet and compliant may have been crucial to the child's receiving love or acceptance. So it would be threatening to acknowledge any organismic experiences of rebelliousness. However, distorting or denying those rebellious feelings to maintain the self-structure will lead to anxiety. The balance between lived and felt experience and the need to be loved and accepted can be precarious.

Perhaps later the individual's environment changes. The *I am a quiet, compliant person* part of their self-structure may now be preventing them from achieving their full potential. It may even be preventing them from receiving the love and valuing from others that at one time it ensured from their parents.

So the actualising tendency is now working through their uncomfortable, dissatisfied feelings – prompting them to acknowledge their rebelliousness and urging them to change the status quo to become more assertive.

But losing the love and valuing which has previously been conditional upon them being quiet and compliant is a frightening prospect. The self-structure may be so rigid

01_Tolan_Cameron_Ch 01.indd 6 10/6/2016 12:45:41 PM

that, to begin with, it distorts the uncomfortable feelings that are prompting change. *I need to get a new job/move house/get married … then I will be happy.*

The actualising tendency is not so easily sidelined though, and the feelings will become stronger and stronger. This can give rise to considerable emotional pain, coupled with the anxiety of a self-structure under threat.

How can such a tension be resolved? If the self-structure is threatened from outside, it will simply become more rigid.

EXERCISE

Work in groups of three or four. Each member of the group thinks of one of their own conditions of worth. One member tells the others about this aspect of themselves and the others try to convince them to change it. They may stop the exercise as soon as they wish. Repeat for all members of the group.

Notice how open you are to the others' arguments or how defensive you become. In particular, notice your feelings in both roles and discuss them at the end of the exercise.

If you found yourself growing tense, feeling uncomfortable, anxious or attacked, consider the fact that you were sufficiently aware of your condition of worth *knowingly* to have chosen it. The strongest conditions of worth are those which are not available to such awareness. They are experienced as reality or truth. Others who do not perceive the truth are misguided or obstinate. Such 'truths' are defended with passion because they are part of the self-structure. They are not amenable to logic.

HOW CAN OTHERS BEST ASSIST IN THE PROCESS OF CHANGE?

So is the actualising tendency fighting a losing battle against the self-structure? If such were the case, no one would ever change. What enables one person to adapt their self-structure where another clings to it?

Remember that a central purpose of the self-structure is to enable the individual to 'fit in' and receive acceptance, love and respect. If that individual is accepted and valued by others around them, the self-structure is doing its job. But conditions of worth may still be in force. A workplace, for example, has its own culture and values which can either reinforce or challenge the self-structure. New conditions of worth can be imposed. *We value people who … work long hours*, *vote right-wing*, *go to the pub at lunchtime* and so on.

There are, clearly, degrees of acceptance. The more someone is accepted for their whole self and not just if they fit another person's ideas of what is appropriate, the less threatened will be their self-structure. If the self-structure is not under threat, experience is less likely to be distorted or denied.

01_Tolan_Cameron_Ch 01.indd 7 10/6/2016 12:45:41 PM

So the task of the person-centred therapist is to provide an environment characterised by a lack of threat to the self-structure. In such an environment, a client will be able, gradually, to recognise and name experiences which they have denied to awareness and their self-structure will change accordingly.

MORE ABOUT THE SELF-STRUCTURE

Carl Rogers writes that there is 'no sharp limit between the experience of the self and of the outside world' (Rogers, 1951: 497). In this book, I am using the term self-structure to encompass both the self-concept and a person's beliefs about the world and other people in general. So the self-structure includes the individual's unique *map of the world* (including assumptions and expectations of others) as well as their self-concept.

There is, of course, a connection between the self-structure as the whole and the self-concept as a part of the whole. The general belief, *There is a God*, is usually allied with, *I believe in God*. The general belief, *Homosexuality is unnatural*, is usually allied with, *I am a heterosexual*. But such beliefs have a bearing not only upon the self-concept, but upon the individual's view of other people. Strongly held convictions can be perceived as self-evident 'truth'. The person who *knows* that there is a God will see non-believers as misguided or deluded or even wicked. This kind of construing of reality seems to go beyond the individual's view of self and the term *self-concept*. It is, however, an important aspect of personality.

Similarly, a woman who holds the view that *men should not cry* is likely to feel uncomfortable and embarrassed in the presence of a tearful man. Such a belief will probably also affect the way she brings up her children. And yet it is not a belief directly about herself, so it makes more everyday sense to describe it as a component of her self-structure rather than her self-concept.

That an individual's *world view* is a part of their self-structure is borne out by how threatened they can become if this is challenged, and how they are able to distort and deny information which conflicts with it. Someone whose belief in racial superiority is based upon introjected values will defend that view in the face of mountainous evidence to the contrary. Employing logic or reason will be ineffectual since any challenge is a threat to the self-structure and will give rise to an emotional, not a reasoned, reaction.

It is for these reasons that the term *self-concept* is used in this book only when referring to people's beliefs about themselves. *Self-structure* is used to encompass people's world view as well as their view of themselves as an individual.

NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT

In 1957, Rogers wrote about the conditions that he and his colleagues had identified as providing the non-threatening climate in which people could begin to acknowledge and integrate those experiences which had been held out of awareness. This was a radical departure from previous psychotherapeutic practice in that it placed more emphasis

01_Tolan_Cameron_Ch 01.indd 8 10/6/2016 12:45:41 PM

on the *qualities* or *attitudes* of the counsellor rather than specifying what the counsellor must do. In 1959, he presented the following as necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic change:

1. Two persons are in contact.
2. The first person, 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 in the relationship.
4. The therapist is experiencing unconditional positive regard for the client.
5. The therapist is experiencing an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference.
6. The client perceives at least to a minimal degree conditions 4 and 5, the unconditional positive regard of the therapist for him and the empathic understanding of the therapist. (Rogers, 1959)

The terms contact, congruence, incongruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard all have technical meanings and will be described in full in later chapters.

THE THERAPEUTIC CONDITIONS

The importance of the therapeutic conditions cannot be understood without an understanding of the person-centred model of development and change. Although practitioners of many other counselling schools now accept the evidence that empathy, congruence and acceptance are important, they are often unaware that there are six conditions, not solely three (the so-called 'core' conditions), and do not believe them to be *sufficient* to bring about change. Why do we?

The simple answer is the *actualising tendency*. If it is your hypothesis that people have such an inbuilt motivation to change, then your task is to help it to do its work. If your basic assumption is different, then you begin to diagnose what is 'wrong' and formulate plans to teach or show a client how to achieve change.

Person-centred theorists often use the analogy of a plant to describe our concept of growth and change. No one can *make* a plant grow. But if someone provides the right conditions – soil, nutrients, light, water – it will become the best plant it can be. No one can alter the genetic material of the plant, so no amount of effort will change a rose into a poppy. All you can do is surround it by what it needs and watch it bloom.

The actualising tendency strives to achieve harmony between experiencing and self-structure so that we can both be ourselves *and* live in the world. When the two are out of balance, we feel distress, pain, discomfort, anger – the organismic 'voices' that motivate us to change.

In person-centred therapy, we seek to create a climate in which the actualising tendency can work more effectively to achieve that harmony. We are not in the

01_Tolan_Cameron_Ch 01.indd 9 10/6/2016 12:45:41 PM

business of changing or jettisoning someone else's self-structure. They still have to live in *their* world, not in ours. We listen to the self-experiencing 'voices', but we also listen to the voice of the self-structure. We hear and respond to the struggle of someone who wants to find a more satisfying way of living, but is afraid of alienating and losing friends and family. That fear is a real fear, although we cannot know whether it is based upon a true or a false prediction.

EXAMPLE

People don't like me.

This belief probably has two components. One is the introjected values of parents or other childhood caregivers. The other is the accurate experience of the organismic self.

The baby has no expectation of being liked or loved, but learns from his caregivers lessons like *I am a nuisance*, *I am naughty*, *I can't do things right*, and so on, which become introjects. When he encounters others, he shrinks from contact, having learned not to expect that he will be accepted. They, too, find him 'difficult' – a closed, surly child. At this point, his accurate, organismic experiencing is added to the introjects. By the time he reaches adulthood, the *people don't like me* element of his self-structure is based upon both introjected values *and* experience.

Person-centred theory tells us that any attempt on the part of the counsellor actively to change a client's self-structure, whether through reasoning or persuasion, subtly or overtly (*Oh, but you're a really nice person* ... or *If only you would let people get to know you* ... or *Why don't you try* ...), will be threatening to the self-structure and will cause anxiety. However well-intentioned, such attempts only add to a client's sense of not being good enough. The self-structure has two basic ways of dealing with the threat. One is to refuse to comply – *That wouldn't work because … I tried that and … This counselling isn't working … You are a bad counsellor …* The other is to comply and fail – *I did what you said but … When it came down to it, I couldn't … I tried my best, but … I'm just a hopeless case, you're wasting your time with me …*

Encountering the world in a new way is a real risk. Person-centred counsellors know this and they accept *the whole person*. When a client is expressing a desperate wish or longing to change, the counsellor is also accepting of the client's (perhaps unspoken) need for the safety of staying with what they know. When a client is bewailing the terrible relationship they are in, the counsellor is also accepting of their (perhaps unspoken) reasons for staying in that relationship.

It is all too easy, when a client is continually saying that they want to change job, or leave an unsatisfactory relationship, or take up playing a musical instrument, to find yourself getting impatient and mentally shrieking, *Well, why don't you get on with it!* The question is a good one. Take away the impatience and substitute unconditional positive regard and the mental question becomes more like, *I wonder what your good reasons are for not making the change yet?*

01_Tolan_Cameron_Ch 01.indd 10 10/6/2016 12:45:41 PM

Personality change is a slow process. It is not usually a single substantial moment of discovery or enlightenment, but is a series of small adjustments – minor ripples which spread gradually to affect a person's way of being. The counsellor's task is not one of actively making, or even suggesting, changes for a client, but one of creating a climate in which clients can come to know and accept themselves:

> I (as a counsellor) am here as another, flawed, human being, willing to encounter you with honesty and openness (psychological contact and congruence). I understand that you are unhappy and want to change the way you are (empathy). I also believe that, fundamentally, you are okay, that you have understandable reasons for the way you are and that you will make changes when you are ready to take that risk (unconditional positive regard).

SYMBOLISATION IN AWARENESS

Symbolisation is a naming or some other representation of an object, event, feeling and so on. When something is accurately symbolised in our awareness, we know it fully. We can see it in our mind's eye and name it in words. It is not a vague and shadowy thing, associated with feelings of dread or fear. Nor is it a chocolate-box picture, false and bright.

If we experience something that is not accurately symbolised in awareness, it seems to linger somewhere in us, awaiting a time when we are ready to re-experience it and integrate it properly into our self-structure. In the process of re-experiencing and re-symbolising, our self-structure alters to accommodate the now-accurate symbolisation. This is something that happens over time if the core conditions are present.

The changes that occur through counselling are usually subtle and gradual as the self-structure loosens to accommodate experience which was previously denied or distorted. As this loosening takes place, the experience becomes more accurately available to awareness. The example below shows how, over several weeks, the process might happen.

EXAMPLE

My childhood was a happy one. My parents loved me and wanted the best for me.

I remember being forced to do homework for long hours when my friends were playing in the sunshine.

Of course. They were right, weren't they? I did well in my exams and now I have a good job.

They never listened to what I wanted. I have a picture of myself pleading to be allowed to go to the youth club with all the others.

They did it because they wanted me to do well. The youth club was unimportant.

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01_Tolan_Cameron_Ch 01.indd 11 10/6/2016 12:45:41 PM

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But at the time, it was crucial. I sobbed in my room for hours. I told my friends that I had to do my homework, but I could see they thought me a swot. I was always an outsider, wearing the wrong things because I could never get my mother to buy me proper clothes for a teenager. I looked too young and I didn't have the same experiences as the others. As I'm telling you this, I'm feeling the loneliness and exclusion – of not fitting in.

I have had a lot of advantages, though. I earn much more than I could have done if I had frittered away my teenage years on discos and cinemas. I'm very well respected in my field.

I'm still an outsider. Colleagues chat and laugh with each other and I feel excluded – on the edges of the comradeship. They think I'm too uptight.

I do my job well. I don't see why I can't get promotion just because I didn't watch what everyone else watched on telly last night. It's rubbish, that programme, anyway.

I don't understand what they're laughing about. I wish I knew how to be accepted. I've never felt really accepted.

Mother and father loved me. They're proud of me.

They didn't understand me. They didn't accept me. They didn't want to know how much it hurt me not to have real friends. Friends I could invite into the house, like other kids did.

I know they were right, in one sense. They wanted the best for me.

I still ache inside when I think of the other kids going off to the youth club without me. I was so pleased when they asked me to go with them. So excited.

My parents knew that the key to financial security was exams and University. They never had that. They scrimped and saved all their lives for us. They still give me things now even though I'm far better off than they'll ever be.

There's still something missing from my life. I don't know how to make friends. I feel awkward with other people – always on my guard, in case I say the wrong thing. I put on a good show, but inside I'm always miserable.

My parents did their best for me. But they didn't realise how lonely I was. I'm just beginning to understand it myself.

It is as though an important experience that is not symbolised accurately gets locked somewhere in ourselves, awaiting the moment when it can be freed. Like a caged bird under a cloth, it can be ignored for long periods of time, but from time to time it flutters and squawks in protest. It cannot fly away until the cover is lifted, and this involves seeing, touching, hearing it once more. What was dismissed as a dove, may in reality be an albatross. What was once seen as a vulture may turn out to be a wren. The important thing is that the bird is acknowledged for what it actually is.

01_Tolan_Cameron_Ch 01.indd 12 10/6/2016 12:45:42 PM

Sometimes, a person will have no concept or framework within which to place their experiences. The cry *I don't know what's happening to me* often occurs when there is no means to symbolise the experience.

EXAMPLE

I am a college student working in my holidays. My boss, a man in his forties, seems to take every opportunity to get physically close to me. He makes flattering and very specific comments about my body.

I am uneasy but I do not acknowledge this. My self-structure bids me to be polite to my elders and deferential to people in authority.

I do not recognise my unease for what it is. Instead I experience a feeling of nervousness and embarrassment: I feel silly because I do not know the correct way to behave.

I have no known framework for this situation. I am trying hard to fit it into the patterns of older people complimenting me on my looks or my ability. It does not fit into my known experience of flirting (at which I am not very skilled anyway) because the man is not in the right age range.

I cannot name what is happening. It is easier to act as though it has not happened and put it down to my own inadequacy. I don't tell anyone else because I am afraid of looking foolish.

I read an article in a magazine about sexual harassment. I am overjoyed. My discomfort has been validated and I now feel able to trust it and to explain what is happening to me. I have words and a concept that empower me.

A similar thing happens in therapy when the counsellor accepts and tries to find words for the client's experience. Naming it through empathy is very empowering: *This* did *happen to me. I* did *feel distressed. It* was *frightening*.

Some experiences are never named in some families, for example, a family which does not accept angry feelings might say to the child: *Don't be naughty, You're over-tired* or *You're not yourself at the moment, dear – go and lie down*. A client whose experience has never been named might describe himself as having 'this awful feeling inside of me'. When the counsellor, in empathy, names it as 'anger' – or 'sadness' or 'loneliness' – the client can begin to symbolise it more accurately in his awareness.

ACCEPTANCE OF OTHERS

Person-centred counselling has often been criticised for its 'unrealistic' belief that people are essentially 'good'. This is a misunderstanding of the theory.

People undoubtedly do harmful things to themselves and others. We would see this kind of behaviour as arising from distortion and denial of self-experiencing. It is an

01_Tolan_Cameron_Ch 01.indd 13 10/6/2016 12:45:42 PM

attempt on the part of the individual to meet their own, very real, needs. But because they are not able to experience their needs accurately, the person cannot attempt to meet them in a straightforward way.

Our hypothesis suggests that the more congruent a person is, the more accepting of others they can be. Why should this be?

Congruence is the capacity to admit organismic experiencing fully into awareness, without the need for distortion or denial. Experiencing involves taking in information through the five senses and also being aware of internal, or visceral, information. What we then make of the information depends upon our self-structure.

The information available to us is the whole of our world, known as our *phenomenal field*. It includes all the other people with whom we have contact, whether brief or prolonged. We have seen how we can distort and deny experiences to preserve the self-structure. How does this apply to our experiences of other people?

CASE EXAMPLE: DARAIUS

Daraius grew up in a household whose membership was ever-changing. His father and, later, his brothers were often away working on construction sites, his mother periodically in residential mental health care. His elder siblings resented having to look after him.

A strong element of Daraius's self-structure is a distortion of distress, in himself and in others. In his world, showing distress is weakness and causing or prolonging distress in others is pleasurable because it attracts respect, albeit in the form of fear. This is the only form of acceptance and status which Daraius had in his young life, and the only form he now recognises.

Daraius is now an adult. He sneers at distress in others and enjoys the sense of power that other people's fear gives him. His organism's yearning for close and intimate relationships is denied to his awareness and his need for acceptance is distorted so that frightened respect will, in part and fleetingly, satisfy it.

Daraius threatens serious harm to another person. If he were to experience her with the congruent part of himself, he would be fully aware of her terror, her pain and her distress. All of this would be received by Daraius, through his senses, as his experiencing of the woman he threatens to harm.

Discussion

The question, therefore, is: *Could he harm her?* Is it possible for a congruent human being to cause needless pain to another? Or must that human being deny or distort their organismic experiencing – be less aware or unaware of the true feelings of the other – in order to do harm?

The drive towards symbolisation seems to be a strong one. Experiences which affect us greatly almost struggle of their own volition to bring themselves into our awareness. It is as though our organismic selves are saying to our self-structures: *I'm not going to let you ignore me. This* did *happen* (or *this* is *happening). It is important. Pay attention.*

01_Tolan_Cameron_Ch 01.indd 14 10/6/2016 12:45:42 PM

There are a number of ways in which the struggle for symbolisation can become apparent, including recurrent dreams, flashbacks, voices and visions.

One example is of a woman who felt unaccountably insecure in herself. She puzzled over this for a number of years, but reason and logic did not provide any answers. Her parents had been loving and concerned for her welfare. Of course, they sometimes ignored her needs or thwarted her wishes, but no more than other parents. So why was she gripped on occasion by anxiety and distress? One counsellor, psychodynamic in approach, told her that she must have had a traumatic childhood, but this she rejected angrily.

A second counsellor listened to her feelings of distress and abandonment. Into the woman's awareness came a recurring dream she had had in her childhood. She was on one side of a road, on a broad pavement. There were houses on either side. On the other side, walking down the opposite pavement, were her parents. No matter how hard she tried, she could not attract their attention. Throughout the dream and on awakening she experienced intense feelings of distress, panic and abandonment.

This awareness led to another. She had always known that when she was six months old her parents had left her for three months with her grandmother and aunts so that they could find work and a new home in another part of the country. Her mother's mother and siblings often referred with great affection to the time when they looked after her. She was 'theirs' in a way that her younger sisters and brothers were not.

She was then able to connect the dream and the event. Even though she had no actual memory of being left behind by her parents, her organism was symbolising the power of the event in the best way it could: through a dream. Her self-structure 'knew' that she was loved and well cared for. But organismically, she also 'knew' that she had been abandoned.

Once she had expressed the pain of this abandonment, her self-doubt and anxiety became much reduced.

The first counsellor was, in fact, correct in her surmise – there was a 'trauma' in the woman's childhood. But the woman herself was not aware of this and the counsellor's words were too far removed from her self-perception to be accepted by her self-structure. The first counsellor was in her own frame of reference rather than the client's and the client rejected her expertise.

Flashbacks are another common way in which important experiences which cannot be easily integrated into the self-structure are brought (sometimes again and again) to the fore.

EXERCISE

Norman goes regularly to a night club. It is a place where he knows most of the regulars, at least by sight, and he is known to the door and bar staff. He feels at home there. One evening, late on, he is enjoying himself with friends. Everyone has been drinking and dancing – not to excess, but so that the atmosphere is relaxed and convivial. The fire alarm sounds, and everyone makes jokes,

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01_Tolan_Cameron_Ch 01.indd 15 10/6/2016 12:45:42 PM

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waiting for it to be turned off. Then, within a surprisingly short time, there is a smell of burning and pandemonium breaks out. Norman gets himself out of the building. He remembers little of those few minutes, except that at some level he knows that he had to kick, punch and trample to get to fresh air. Seventy-three people died in the fire.

Norman's self-structure is his way of *making sense of the world*. Are there aspects of the above event which he might be inclined to distort or deny because they conflict with his understanding of how the world is?

His self-structure also tells him how he *should be* in the world. Which of his own feelings or behaviours might he want to put from his mind?

However much someone might wish to put a terrible event from their mind, it is part of their history – part of who they are. Flashbacks are one mechanism for nudging them to pay attention to the event – and counselling can give them the acceptance that they cannot yet give themselves.

CONCLUSION

It is important for a counsellor or therapist to have a sound theoretical base for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most important is to give us an anchor when the going gets tough. Therapy can be a lonely business at times, particularly when we are travelling with clients through their most painful experiences. They may be feeling deeply hopeless, worthless, abandoned, alone. And they may continue feeling that pain for an almost unbearable length of time.

As therapists, we would not be human if we did not wonder at such times whether we were being as helpful as we could be. A thorough understanding of how and why psychological pain arises, of how we can help and why our means of helping works, enables us to continue to stay in psychological contact with our clients. Without such clarity, there is a great temptation to 'try something else' in order to bring relief to our clients (and, of course, ourselves).

NOTE

The basis of person-centred theory can be found in the XIX Propositions which Carl Rogers outlined in *Client-Centered Therapy* (Rogers, 1951: Ch. 11). These Propositions deal with two main areas: the theory of personality and the theory of how to facilitate change. There are expanded aspects of the theory in, 'A theory of therapy, personality and interpersonal relations as developed in the client-centered framework', Rogers (1959). However, although this was published later, much of it was written earlier and the confusing (and, in my view, redundant) material about the actualisation of the self-concept was omitted in the XIX Propositions.

01_Tolan_Cameron_Ch 01.indd 16 10/6/2016 12:45:42 PM

FURTHER READING

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Mearns, D. and Thorne, B. (2007) *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* (3rd edn). London: Sage. (This edition is completely revised and expanded.)

Merry, T. (1999) *Learning and Being in Person-Centred Counselling*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books. (Chapters 2 and 3.)

Sanders, P. (2006) *The Person-Centred Counselling Primer*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.

WEBSITES

There are a number of useful papers available on the Internet. Three person-centred websites which have good links to other sites are:

The World Association for Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling at www.pce-world.org

The British Association for the Person-Centred Approach at www.bapca.org.uk

The Association for the Development of the Person Centered Approach at www.adpca.org

01_Tolan_Cameron_Ch 01.indd 17 10/6/2016 12:45:42 PM