

## **The Dialectic of Therapeutic Qualities in Rogers**

**By David Brazier**

This article is a plea for openness to experimentation and dialectical development within the person-centred approach and its humanistic derivatives. The work of Carl Rogers was radical and ground-breaking and brought a wonderful spirit of freedom into the world of psychotherapy, a spirit that still remains alive despite the smothering effects of professionalisation and of attempts to reduce therapy in general to a catalogue of mechanistic protocols. Even so, we should not take what he said as inviolable holy writ. There are contradictions within the approach and these are its strength not its weakness.

Carl Rogers, back in the 1940s, proposed that the mere reflection of feelings might constitute a more profound manner of psychotherapy than the more directive styles then current. In some ways this was a development of the logic of psychoanalysis to a more radical level. In psychoanalysis what is of interest is the unconscious motivation of the client. We could call this the hidden will. In order to bring some clues about the nature of this hidden will to the surface of consciousness it was necessary to follow the spontaneously emergent signs thereof in the emotional life, utterances and behaviour of the person, especially those that were free from rational control. The technical difficulty was that any comment upon such spontaneous process tended to have a disruptive effect upon it. One could not bring the unconscious to consciousness without interrupting, at least to some degree, the natural flow of the unconscious itself. Interpretations, therefore, had to be rare and parsimonious. Rogers then advanced a method of empathic response that enabled the therapist to be relatively more active while still minimising the disruptive effect.

Therapy depends upon a harmony between client and therapist and this attunement constitutes a kind of trance. Initially, Rogers' method still involved a considerable self-restraint on the part of the therapist. Whatever interpretations the therapist was tempted to advance had to be suppressed. Only reflections within the frame of what had already been shared by the client were permitted. This non-directive method required a great discipline on the therapist's part and learning such a method constituted a rigorous training of considerable value. Essentially it created an environment in which the client had optimum opportunity to make his or her own self-interpretations.

When Rogers moved to Chicago this methodology was refined into Client-Centred Therapy. The primary elements of the methodology were

1. a strong belief on the part of the therapist in the potential for self-actualisation in the client.
2. an ability to consistently make empathic responses in a manner that at least to some degree conveyed that empathy to the client
3. unconditional acceptance of what the client presented, manifesting as an absence of judgement or blame

#### 4. genuineness.

More extensive practice with the method led to some revision in the idea of empathy. What had initially been a reflection of feelings gradually became the making of empathic understanding responses. The method was often misunderstood as repeating client's words back to them, but what was really required was a response that demonstrated that the therapist understood and vicariously participated in the client's feelings, without fully identifying with them: to demonstrate an understanding of the client, as if one were the client, without ever losing touch with the "as if" condition. Thus the therapist retained a residual distance and separation from the client while vicariously immersing herself in the client's world.

The question of genuineness necessarily raised some questions. If the therapist is setting aside her own interests, concerns and even her ideas about the client, in order to immerse in the client's world, then there is a very real sense in which she is not being herself. In fact, the genuineness condition meant that the therapist was genuinely willing to let go of her own world in the service of helping the client out of a genuinely felt compassion: an altruistic stance. In order for empathic responses to be "congruent" the therapist had to allow herself to enter into a kind of empathic trace. When in this state, empathic responses would spontaneously emerge from her own unconscious. The best points in therapy occurred when therapist, and perhaps the client too, were in a "slightly altered state of consciousness".

Later, John Shlein and myself were, independently of one another, to realise that entry into such an empathic trace depended not just on the therapist relating to the client in an unconditionally positive way, but rather upon a parallelism of perceptual focus between client and therapist. In other words, in order to be in a state of profound empathy with the client the therapist needs not only to be appreciating what the client is feeling but, more importantly, perceiving what the client is perceiving. Feelings are a function of the client's relationship to their object world. If the focal element in that world changes or if the manner of perceiving it changes, then the feelings change. Reflection of feelings at a deeper level thus requires that one participate in the substratum of those feelings. This analysis, in my own case, owed something to a parallel study of concepts in Buddhist psychology, in which introspective studies have generated a wealth of material over more than two millennia. The point was that the therapist needs empathy not just for the client, but for the client's others. This led to the development of the Other Centred Approach.

In the OCA the therapist shows empathy not so much by reflecting feelings and more by inviting exploration of the client's perceptual world: not so much "So you feel such-and-such about your mother" and more "Tell me more about your mother... I have the sense she is present for you at this moment." In some ways this breaks down the separation between the empathic method and such action techniques as psychodrama where the client's world is explored by enactment and three dimensional representation. While OCA may not necessarily move into such action methods, the imaginative

representation of the client's world can become vivid. When it does so feelings are more intense.

All of this illustrates the fact that the simple idea of reflection of feelings is actually only the surface of profound depths in the client. The basic factors in the life of the client are the will and the object. The will is, as we observed at the beginning, often hidden, and it is for this reason that psychotherapy requires subtlety. The will, whether hidden or not, always has an object. The object, however, due to its participation in the empirical world, is not generally immediately or totally subject to the client's will. The object world resists our wishes. In this simple fact lies all the dynamic of human life. Furthermore, the same object may be the target of more than one will in the client, or, to put it differently, the will may be conflicted. I love you and I hate you may both be true. Go away and I want you back can readily co-exist.

Where there is a will and an object there will be a feeling. Beneath the surface of manifest feelings, therefore, swarms a whole menagerie of creatures of the will. The client-centred therapist, therefore, soon found that the divide between reflection and interpretation was not a solid boundary. An understanding response inevitably had to participate in some understanding of the will and some appreciation of the manner in which the object of the will was being construed. Rogers became aware of the latter part of this analysis, asserting in his later years that empathy was more concerned with perceptions than feelings as such.

Some of this dialectical development of methodology has been mediated by the slipperiness of the English language and especially the imprecision of the word "feelings". One can be angry - and anger is a feeling - because one's desire is frustrated, but is desire a feeling? Is frustration a feeling? Further, it is common English usage to say such things as "I feel that he is getting in my way." In this case, no emotion is being directly referred to. Here "feel" refers to a thought which is itself an interpretation of the actions of a third party. All of this makes precision in regard to what is and what is not permitted in the lexicon of the strictly Rogerian therapist difficult of definition. It does, nonetheless, seem worth the effort to attempt close readings of what Rogers and his followers have meant in their attempts to define a mode of therapy that facilitates the naturally emerging self-development of the client. Probably complete precision of definition is not possible in the nature of the material, but the attempt does often yield new subtleties in the approach.

In some ways, the sheer elegance and simplicity of Rogers' formulation of his method has been an obstacle to development. In a way that is highly ironic, given that Rogers' whole life philosophy is one of growth and open-frontiered development, his pronouncements have left a sense that they are the last word and that one cannot tamper with the method without committing some kind of heresy. However, a closer examination reveals that empathy has a sub-structure, that unconditionality is an ideal that in full form is beyond human capacity, that positive regard inevitably involves a judgement about what is positive, and that what is congruent depends upon what state the person in question is in at the

time.

There are thus inherent dialectical dilemmas within the approach. A judgement about what is "positive" sits uneasily with an idea of unconditionality. A demand for empathic understanding may set off tremors in the therapist the congruent expression of which cannot be guaranteed even to sustain the relationship, let alone be therapeutic. We should not flee from nor disguise these dilemmas, but rather enter more fully into them, allowing such antitheses to generate new syntheses in order that our own understanding continue to advance, debate within the approach remain fertile, and the methodology not deteriorate into a simplistic technique, misunderstood by almost everybody.