

CLIENT-CENTERED? PERSON-CENTERED?

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I want you to live with me three experiences that occurred this morning.

I turn on my VCR, and watch a videotape of a demonstration interview I held one month ago. I find myself living again the intensity of that relationship, the almost mystical bond that developed, the awesome process that ensues as the client struggles and dares to be more of his hidden, his unknown self. It feels so good to be a therapist, to let myself enter his puzzling world, to really hear his strange bursts, which are a mixture of crying and laughing, to keep in touch with him and in step with him as he tries to understand himself. I let myself feel, and be proud of, my own competence as a therapist.

Next I take up the journal I kept of my experience with groups of blacks and whites in South Africa. I am focusing on the four-day intensive training workshop in Johannesburg. I want to select, if I can, some portions that will be suitable for publication. But as I reread the account of those sessions, where there was so much bitterness and despair and fear and guilt, I begin to sense again the awful pain in being black in South Africa, the searing pain that oozes out from underneath the anger, bringing tears to all our eyes. And as I feel that atmosphere again, and let myself live again in that doubly black world, I let a feeling of real satisfaction creep in. My understanding and my presence helped them to drain the infection, the festering pus, out of their internal wounds, and to let the healing process begin. I am glad that I know something about being a facilitator.

Then I turn to my mail. There is a letter that, though not addressed to me, has been routed to me for reply. It is inquiring about a forthcoming conference. "Do you mean the [meeting] to be exclusively for those interested in the Person-Centered Perspective? . . . I do not like that approach. I think it has moved very far away from the careful empathic listening which I see as basic to the client-centered approach, and I would not want to be at a workshop which was all about that." She adds that she sees the person-centered approach "as being specific to the techniques developed by Rogers and others for the larger international workshops."

I sit here and mull over these three experiences. I suppose the writer of the letter would regard me as being client-centered in the demonstration interview, and person-centered in the Johannesburg group. She sees the two modes as being sharply different. For myself, I believe I am the same person, guided by the same principles, in both situations. Whatever capacity I have for sensitive empathy and "careful

listening" was more fully called for in the black-white group of forty than in the one-to-one relationship. How can anyone split the two experiences?

Yet the letter writer is sincere, and I have recently realized that for a number of people "client-centered" and "person-centered" have become labels for two different, even opposed, ways of being. To me, this makes no sense at all.

What I do recognize is that some persons believe that it is inappropriate to try to apply the learnings from individual therapy to other fields. They believe that the client-centered way of being is not appropriate to the classroom, or to a group experiencing interracial tensions, or to cross-cultural groups. I happen to disagree with them, but at least this is a sound question to discuss.

Others believe that the term person-centered is more easily misused, loosely used, or misunderstood than the term client-centered. That may be, but I still would like a term to describe what I do when I am endeavoring to be facilitative in a group of persons who are not my clients.

Such issues are useful topics for discussion, disagreement, and, I hope, for new and better solutions. But to speak of a "client-centered approach" and a "person-centered approach" as though they were entities opposed to each other is, in my estimation, a sure road to futile wrangling and chaos. I wish we might deal with the substantive questions that underlie that battle of labels.

Meanwhile, I hope I may be allowed to be one whole person, whether I am called upon for help in a relationship deemed to be client-centered or in one that is labeled person-centered. I work in the same way in each.