

The Empathy Complex...

Faster than a speeding 'lecture'!

More powerful than a 'workshop'!

Able to leap a tall 'empathy lab' in a single bound!

Not some 'factory' wherein a product is manufactured, no...

Welcome to *Empathy Complex*.

Your guided tour begins here...

We shall be taking a look at a hypothetical client who makes a hypothetical disclosure in a hypothetical therapy session, exploring how empathic understanding relates to this hypothetical context. Although the primary focus here is on empathic understanding, we can also make links with all of the other five necessary and sufficient conditions for client-centred therapy – they are essential and integral parts of the complex.

The first client-centred condition is that “*Two persons are in contact*” (Carl sometimes wrote of this as a *pre-condition*). How can I best prepare myself to be in contact with a client? I can, for sure, do my best to ensure an appropriate therapeutic environment. Perhaps more significantly, I can best prepare *myself* to be as receptive as I can be – trying to optimise my therapeutic way of being. I can strive to be as congruent as I can be - including trying to be aware of, yet setting aside, any of my own 'stuff' in order to be as fully present as I can be for this other person. This striving for congruence may involve a combination of long term activities (such as engaging in ongoing personal and professional development) and short-term activities (such as taking a few moments before meeting in order to calm and focus myself).

Let us suppose that contact has been established. Our hypothetical client says:

I feel such a fool! Why didn't I see it coming? How could I have been so blind? How could I have lived a lie for so long? How could s/he be so cruel? The bastard! How could I get taken in so easily? How could I be so stupid?

The second necessary and sufficient condition for client-centred therapy is that “One person, the client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable and anxious”. To begin with, let's take a brief trip through some of the feelings and meanings within this disclosure, linking with the second necessary and sufficient condition as we do so:

I feel such a fool!

I feel *foolish*. Quite what is this feeling? I guess I feel *embarrassed*. I guess I feel *ashamed*. *Stupid*. *Idiotic*. What do these feelings *mean* to me?

I guess I experience myself as somehow not as '*smart*' or '*clever*' or '*intelligent*' as I should be – that I am somehow *lacking* in some way, *not good enough*, *incapable*, *inadequate*...

Why didn't I see it coming? How could I have been so blind?

I *should* have seen it coming. I was *capable* of seeing it coming yet I *didn't* see it coming. This means that I am *inadequate*, that I do not live up to the standards that I am *able* to live up to, that I *should* live up to - I am *no good, bad* - a *failure*.

Words like 'should' and 'ought' and 'could' all imply a beliefs and values system. Where do these beliefs and values come from? Are they based on direct 'organismic' valuing - or might they represent values introjected from an external frame of reference?

Organismic Valuing and the Actualising Tendency

Client-centred personality theory tells us that as infants we experience the world at an 'organic' or 'organismic' level, deciding for ourselves what feels good, what feels bad, what feels nice, what feels nasty - and so on. Thus we have an 'internal locus of evaluation' and experience our environment in a direct, kind of 'unfiltered' way...

At the very core of our being is the *actualising tendency*, which serves to both maintain and enhance the experiencing organism. This actualising tendency is essentially 'good', tending towards growth, social co-operation, and responsibility. This actualising tendency is trustworthy.

Imagine an acorn: There is something fundamentally inherent, something in-born, something fundamentally innate within the acorn that strives to become a flourishing, healthy, fully mature oak tree. This 'something' is the equivalent of the human actualising tendency - my actualising tendency strives to ensure that my whole organism becomes as fully flourishing, healthy and mature as I can be.

The Self

Positive Regard

However, over time a part of our total organism becomes differentiated as the *self* (or *self-concept*). To begin with, I have needs for *positive regard*. This means that I seek affection (or liking, or love) from significant people in my life (my primary carers, for instance). In order to achieve this, I will learn to behave in ways that appear to please significant others - even if this somehow goes against my 'organismic valuing'. For instance, let us say that I have fallen over and grazed my knee. My primary carer tells me to be brave. Clearly, being brave is a *good* thing to be - and if I *am* brave I will receive more positive regard than if I am a coward. Being a coward is clearly a *bad* thing to be. But damn it - my knee hurts! My needs for positive regard overcome my organismic valuing. I do not cry. I 'put on a brave face' and show the world that I am brave. My organismic impulse to sob and reach out for comfort gets stifled...

Positive Self-Regard

I also have needs for *positive self-regard*. This means that I take on the values of significant others as if they were based on my own direct experience.

I fall over and graze my knee again. Accident prone, aren't I? This time, my primary carer is nowhere to be seen. Again I experience an organismic impulse to cry, to blurt out. However, I have taken it upon myself to see myself as brave - I *should* be brave - and I certainly don't want to experience myself as a coward, with all the reproach being a coward might bring. So again I stifle my impulse to cry. Aren't I brave! And the 'brave face that I put on' is somehow becoming more and more of a fixture, a more regular mask. Thus do I regulate my self-concept – maintaining and enhancing it.

In the first instance, I felt good about myself (my *self*) through pleasing another (my primary carer). In the second instance, I felt good about myself (my *self*) based upon beliefs and values 'introjected' from another *as if they were my own*. In other words, my needs for positive self-regard can become independent of the other person.

Conditions of Worth

My needs for positive regard and positive self-regard combine to form my *conditions of worth*. My conditions of worth are beliefs and values and attitudes which tell me what is good and bad, nice and nasty, worthy and unworthy, okay and not okay - et cetera - and which form a part of my *self-concept*.

Carl Rogers wrote of '*symbolisations* in the self-concept', and also of '*personal constructs*'. We can see that one of my symbolisations might be around my being a brave person. This may involve, or be linked with, all sorts of other personal constructs about bravery being good, about cowards being bad, about brave people not crying whereas cowardly people run away - and so on.

Carl also wrote of '*pre-symbolisation*' - which I have found to be quite a helpful way of understanding what 'symbolisation' means! Have you ever had that nagging feeling when you *know* that *something* is bothering you - but you can't quite 'pin it down' or 'put your finger on it'? When I am aware of this elusive, slippery *something* but haven't tagged it yet, my *something* is pre-symbolised. When I do 'pin it down' or 'put my finger on it' I have symbolised it.

The Actualising Tendency and Self-Actualising

Very often I have witnessed others believing that the actualising tendency and self-actualising are one and the same thing. *No they are not!* Far from it!

***Our self-actualising often serves
to thwart our actualising tendency.***

Let us return to our acorn for a few moments: Given the right environment, the acorn will grow towards becoming a fully flourishing, mature, healthy oak tree.

A fully flourishing, mature, healthy oak tree is what it is 'meant' to be - and this is what the *actualising tendency* strives for - **becoming**. Maximising potential, if you will.

Let us suppose, however, that the significant other in our young acorns life is the Gardner. The Gardner has a preference for fir trees. Our acorn soon learns that if it presents itself as an oak, it gets less water, fewer nutrients, is planted away from the sunshine, and so on. But when it presents itself as a fir, it gets all it needs. So the acorn now 'puts on a fir face' - just like I 'put on a brave face' - in order to achieve positive regard from the Gardner...

While 'putting on a fir face', our acorn feels good about itself, because it receives the positive regard it wants or needs. Our acorn takes these 'fir' values upon itself, as if they were based directly on inner experience, rather than seeing them as the values of the Gardner. As our acorn more and more sees itself as a fir, so it will strive to maintain its 'firness' in order to feel okay about itself - even when the Gardner is not around.

Thus *self-actualising* serves to maintain and enhance our young oak trying to be a fir.

The *actualising tendency* - that which strives to become a fully functioning oak tree - has been thwarted.

Life can be so unfir! Yet it isn't. Not for our acorn. Life becomes more and more fir. Doesn't it?

Congruence, Distortion and Denial

When I am *congruent*, I am in touch with all of my experiencing - I am self-aware, whole. I can integrate all of my significant experiencing with the way I experience and see myself. My experience and my perception of my experience are in harmony, if you will.

However, if my self-concept is threatened, I will not allow myself to be open to all of my experiencing. Remember: Self-actualising will serve to maintain and enhance my self-concept.

So: Let's return to my knee... Yes: I have grazed my knee again. My poor knee is taking quite a battering! This time, the graze is such that I cannot wholly ignore the pain. Yet I see myself as so brave - and I feel good about getting positive regard from others through being courageous and strong and, because I have introjected values from others as if they were my own, I experience an inner positive feeling when I am brave. Yet the graze hurts so much that a few tears trickle down my cheek. I am crying. Yet the reason for my crying *cannot* be that I am not brave and strong, for that would be too threatening to how I see myself. That would challenge my conditions of worth, be at odds with the personal constructs which constitute my self-concept...

Hmm... Is that someone peeling onions through that window over there?

Of course! It must be! I can now permit myself to experience the tears on my cheek, yet also convince myself that this is due to someone peeling onions. I am protecting my self-concept, maintaining how I see myself.

Carl Rogers wrote often of 'the experiencing of threat and the psychological processes of defence'. In this instance, the *threat* posed to my self-concept is that I am not brave, courageous and strong. I *defend* my self-concept by attributing my tears to something that is permissible – in this instance, the peeling of onions. In other words, I have allowed myself to acknowledge my crying, yet in a *distorted* fashion: I have 'twisted' my perception of my experiencing in order that it will fit into my self-concept without posing a threat to it. *I have defended my self.*

Next time I graze my knee I am in the company of a number of peers with whom I crave closer contact and acceptance. I am able to *deny* altogether my organismic impulse to blub. My needs to appear brave and courageous and strong completely thwart my organismic need to express pain through tears. In other words, the greater the threat to my self-concept, the stronger the defence. My personal constructs and my defences can become ever more rigid through the maintenance and enhancing of my self-concept, my self-actualising.

Where has my acorn gone?

Psychological tension can be seen as a conflict between my organismic valuing and my self-concept. Furthermore, there can be conflicts between the personal constructs within my self-concept. Let us say, for instance, that I have personal constructs around being open and honest, especially with and to people who mean a lot to me. Let us also say that I see myself as a caring, good friend. I then receive information that I know a friend would be deeply upset at hearing...

These two personal constructs of mine are suddenly at odds with one another. One facet of my self informs me that I should share this information with my friend - this is necessary if I am to maintain my view of myself as open and honest. However, nice and caring people are not responsible for causing hurt to a friend - so surely I should say nothing?

I feel such a fool! Why didn't I see it coming? How could I have been so blind?

Here we can see at least two aspects of the self: There is a self that is *being blamed* for being a blind fool - yet there is also a self that is *blaming* (the other self) for being a blind fool.

How could I have lived a lie for so long?

A part of me was *able* to see, *could* and *should* have seen; yet I was *blind*. It is *all my fault* for being so blind when I needn't have been.

How could s/he be so cruel?

I *don't understand* how s/he could have been so cruel - yet I thought I *knew* this person. I must have been *deceiving myself*.

The bastard!

Now I feel *angry* that s/he was so deceitful and cruel. It is so *unfair* on me, so *unjust*.

How could I get taken in so easily? How could I be so stupid?

Yes, I am such an *idiot* for not seeing what I *should* have seen... It is all my fault. I am *hopeless*. *I should have known better* - I *deserve everything I get* - I am *worth no more* if I am so *stupid*. I am worthless.