

**A Training Trip  
Through Empathy...**

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Scenario:

A trainee has chosen to raise awareness, ideas and issues around empathy through relating three separate stories to the whole group. The gist of the first narrative is around an anthropologist making contact with a different culture: When walking through the forest the anthropologist finds many of the plants beautiful and asks about them - the responses received are around whether or not the plant is edible. A plant the anthropologist finds especially beautiful is described as 'nothing' as it has no food value.

Many thoughts and ideas triggered for me as this tale was being told and I requested space to voice and explore some of them. The trainee paused momentarily, voiced his wish to continue with the other stories and then continued. I chose to hastily scribble down my thoughts as I did not wish to lose them.

I want to try and say something about empathy using my own process (and the dynamics between myself and this trainee) as an illustration. First, the thoughts that occurred to me:

You and I are walking through a garden of which you have some knowledge and I have little. I see a plant and think that it is beautiful. I ask you what it is and you say "a rose". Ahhh.... Does *naming* something bring us any nearer to empathy? Or might naming something be more to do with *identification*? Might labelling something 'capture' the essence of something - or might naming something lose the essence? Or...?

As a counsellor supervisor, I often hear of how a therapist experiences an almost instant 'bond', a 'chemistry', with some clients yet not with others. This link is often described as 'instant empathy' - yet my experience has been that more often than not the therapist is *identifying* with the client rather than empathising... Further - on some occasions one outcome of exploring these issues has been that the therapist's positive regard has been

somewhat more *conditional* than s/he had hitherto believed... Another example of this might be that often in supervision the therapist wants to explore issues around clients with whom s/he is experiencing difficulty. Yet if we take a close look at the therapeutic relationship with clients the therapist does *not* intend to bring to supervision as there is no perceived difficulty, we often uncover more conditionality than with the 'difficult' relationships...

... And yet the *striving* to experience and communicate the core conditions might be experienced by others as equally therapeutic (if not more therapeutic) than any 'actuality' of the core conditions. Isn't the *striving* all important?

Now we are back in the garden. This time there are four of us. We all recognise a plant as a rose and we all appreciate its beauty and this generates positive feelings within each of us. "Nice rose", "nice rose", "nice rose", "nice rose"... We might assume that as we each share the same naming and each experience something positive that we are, to some degree, in empathy with each other. Are we?

I link this with the first core condition proposed by Carl Rogers in 1957: "Two people are in psychological contact". What factors may influence psychological contact? What depths might there be to psychological contact? How might psychological contact initially founded on identification move into empathic contact - what processes might be involved?

When looking at empathy, we often explore 'frames of reference'. There is *your* frame of reference and there is *my* frame of reference. Empathy is often described as the therapist entering the client's frame of reference. We might also think in terms of *common* reference points. Carl Rogers wrote of how we might use our own frame of reference and common reference points as tentative guides on the way to entering the frame of reference of another...

... Yet Rogers cautions us - he wrote of 'perception-checking' the accuracy of our empathy and/or understanding. In this instance, it might be fairly safe to assume that we are all looking at the same plant when we use the word "rose". We might *understand* that the object of our gaze is this particular plant, there is a mutuality, perhaps a degree of

understanding. We might also sense that we are each of us experiencing something positive.

However, Alpha appreciates the rose because of its lovely scent. Beta appreciates the rose because s/he finds it visually attractive in-itself - it's shape, its contours. Gamma appreciates the contrast between the colouring of the rose and the surrounding foliage. Delta happens to have a particular liking for the taste of rose tea. Thus while it might be reasonably safe to understand that we all share the same object of attention and sense that each of us is experiencing something positive, we are at this stage unaware that for each of us the beauty of the rose is founded upon different qualities of the rose. Thus in this instance *identification* is of some value - there is a limited *common* frame of reference. A starting point, perhaps. Yet in labelling, naming, or 'symbolising' the rose, we might be losing some of the essence both of that which is the rose and our own, individual, experiencing of it.

A rose by any other name would smell just as sweet!

*Empathy*, however, is around entering the client's world of *feelings* and *meanings*. Over the years, several client-centred theoreticians moved from the word 'empathy' to the term 'empathic understanding', in the belief that empathy was not only around feelings and emotions, there was the client's world of cognition and meanings (et cetera) to be encountered too.

My own view is that 'understanding' in itself might not be all that helpful a term - I can understand that the object of our gazes is a rose and I can understand that you are feeling something positive - however, I do not experience this understanding as a particularly profound experiencing, it lacks 'relational depth'. Understanding kind of feels like it comes from my frame of reference - a kind of intellectual exercise intended to inform me of what it is that might be going on for you. I am certainly not feeling your emotions and sensing your meanings *as if* they were my own...

Nowadays, some theorists write of 'affective empathy' and 'cognitive empathy'.

*Affective empathy* might be linked with feeling the clients emotions *as if* they were your own.

*Cognitive empathy* might be linked with sensing client meanings. In fully engaging in the client's world (being a companion with the client in the client's world of feelings and meanings) I nevertheless retain my sense of self - I do not get lost in the client's world, or overwhelmed by it (and, if my unconditional positive regard is truly unconditional, hopefully I don't direct the client or feel underwhelmed, either!).

I happen to know that both Epsilon and Iota suffered bereavements recently. Both described graphically how the graves were strewn with roses. When they see this rose, tears appear... I *feel* for Epsilon and Iota. Is *this* empathy?

No. It is *sympathy*. I feel great compassion and caring for them both. The 'for' is the give-away: I am feeling sympathy *for* them, not empathy *with* them. Epsilon's loved one suffered drawn out, agonising, tormenting pain and to die was a blessed relief. Epsilon's tears primarily represent the joy and relief of knowing that this loved one is no longer in great pain. Iota's tears are primarily of grief, the shock at the unexpected loss of a loved one - yet also positive in that Iota is now able to look at the rose, coming to terms with the loss. Both appreciate the experience and the remembering, albeit one of joy, one of grief...

Kappa... Have I mentioned Kappa?! Kappa was badly lacerated as a child, falling and rolling through a field of thorny plants. For Kappa the rose is a declared enemy... Anything with thorns represents danger and pain. How rewarding that there is no slope and that the rose is over there, out of harms way..... Then there's Lambda, who recently had *the* most romantic evening - many roses involved - and upon spying this rose what a rush of good and sensual feelings triggered... Or Omicron, whose first date involved a rose - the breakdown of the relationship also involved a rose being torn in half and flung in the face... Much pain, yet now a realisation of how good it feels to be out of an abusive relationship.

So: We've all encountered this rose. We've all identified this plant as a rose. We've all felt something affirming, meaningful and positive as a result of encountering this rose. Yet for Alpha the meaning of the rose is around scent, for Beta around visual attraction,

for Gamma around contrast, for Delta around taste, for Epsilon around relief, for Iota around grief, for Kappa safety, for Lambda romance, for Omicron non-abuse...

A couple of links: First, common reference points *may* serve as a guide to my entering the frame of reference of another. Yet how dangerous *may* may be!

A client says “rose” and I think ‘Ah, yes, rose, I know rose’ and I assume that we have made a connection. Yet is this client Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Iota, Kappa, Lambda, Omicron...?

What *general* common reference points might there be? Gender? Ethnicity? Age? Occupation? Many, many, many... Dare I *assume* that *any* common reference points indicate accurate identification, understanding, or empathy? Perception-checking!

If I am a therapist and Alpha becomes a client, I can try and enter, as fully as possible, Alpha’s world of feelings and meanings as if they were my own (while maintaining my own sense of self). If Beta becomes a client, I’ll try my best to do likewise. And Gamma, and...

***How unconditional  
is my unconditional positive regard?***

As it happens, I too experienced the loss of a loved one and felt joy and relief at the ending of tortuous pain. I experience an immediate connection or rapport with Epsilon, experiencing this client as being really open to acknowledging, owning and working through a whole range of feelings and meanings. I don’t need to take this to supervision - we’re working really well together.

Kappa on the other hand... Kappa I need to talk about. Kappa won’t stay focused, talking about this, talking about that, talking about the other - talking about just about anything except the damn roses! I sense that Kappa feels ashamed that the fear experienced is maybe ‘childish’ or ‘irrational’ or whatever - I sense this but I just don’t know and it keeps going around and around and around and... Supervisor: Help!

If I am thinking of Epsilon as a 'good' client and Kappa as a 'difficult' client... Am I extending the same unconditional positive regard to both Epsilon and Kappa? Am I 'really' more empathic with Epsilon? Or more understanding? Or is my process more to do with identifying? What prevents me feeling the same *qualitative* connection with both Epsilon and Kappa?

Now suppose I am facilitating a *group* comprised of Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Iota, Kappa, Lambda, Omicron... How many frames of reference can I enter at any given time? What might the gestalt '*group rose*' be?!

Anyway: I began (paragraph three!) by saying that "I chose to hastily scribble down my thoughts as I did not wish to lose them." Although I have elaborated upon my hastily scribbled notes while typing them up, in essence they were that which has gone before. To return to my initial theme of using my own process:

I wanted (or needed) to voice my thoughts. The trainee wanted (or needed) to continue narrating - and did so. Where is the empathy and/or understanding between us? What *gets in the way of* my (affectively and/or cognitively) empathising with another?

Clearly, in this instance, '*my own stuff*' (my wants, my needs) was more important to me at that time than listening to, hearing, and attempting to empathise with a trainee. Yet to have *pretended* to listen and be more interested in the trainee than myself would have been incongruent, a facade... It might be argued that the trainee did not extend a great deal of respect to me by continuing and I did not respect the trainee by choosing not to be attentive. So: My own needs not only sabotaged any capacity for empathy I may have had, my unconditional positive regard was 'blown away' too...

What might have enabled empathy and prizing? I had no feeling for why the trainee wanted or needed to continue... The trainee could not have sensed my thoughts without me communicating them in some way...

My hastily scribbled notes were a mixture of the rose connections and what was happening internally for me:

My first *feeling* (affective) was of stimulation - the trainee's tale had triggered some thoughts. As I began to note these thoughts, my feeling of stimulation grew into more a feeling of excitement - not only was I having thoughts but they felt creative, useful, thoughts - and they just kept right on coming and coming!

Then there was a kind of intellectual reaction within me (cognitive) and I began questioning whether this was all about capturing thoughts which might facilitate learning or whether I has some kind of agenda around or need to 'score points', to be seen as 'knowing' or 'spontaneous' or 'creative' or...

If the trainee had been therapist and I had been client...

There was a mutual recognition of the two of us wishing to speak. There might have been an element of identification. There was certainly an understanding that we both wished to speak at the same time.

An empathic appreciation of where I was might have been around feeling my stimulation then excitement and also sensing a degree of uncertainty as to whether my intent was to facilitate learning or score points...

Yet now my feelings of stimulation and excitement have subsided somewhat - there is an emerging feeling of anxiety around whether my personal need is to facilitate or to enter into some kind of competition with a trainee... I start thinking about my self concept and how I have constructed my role as person-centred facilitator...

I feel tension and conflict - even if my thoughts are constructive and creative and useful and there is no personal hidden agenda, might the trainee nevertheless experience the session as having been hijacked or sabotaged by me? Might my thoughts be given more status or credence than the trainee's contributions?

Now I am feeling uncertain, a little 'rocky', a little anxious, unsure...

I 'go into my head', I begin to rationalise...

... I try and 'encapsulate' my conflict by thinking in terms of being responsible *to* the trainee as compared with being responsible *for* the trainee - yet nevertheless still anxious around not abusing a personal construct around it being 'right' to be responsible to not for as a justification for 'riding rough-shod' over someone's feelings...

Then I think that there may be a conflict between my being responsible to/for the individual trainee and responsible to/for the group. New *thoughts* trigger: My cognitive process is one of acknowledging that I *do* have knowledge and experience and that these are valuable resources to the group if I choose to share them. Yet this *feels* arrogant, patronising... And if I begin to explore where my self concepts around 'patronising' and 'arrogant' come from - another 'can of worms'!

Then worse still! ('Worse'?!). Whether or not I *feel* patronising and/or arrogant, will I be *experienced/perceived* as patronising and/or arrogant? My goodness! Another 'can of worms'! Suddenly I'm right into my *conditions of worth* - my needs to be liked, to be valued. If we get into where *these* conditions of worth came from... Is there a sudden tie between feelings of rejection, feelings of anxiety, a fear of further rejection - might these form a powerful, self-generating 'cocktail' of bad, bad feelings?

A whole sequence of new feelings emerged - do I feel secure or uncertain? Respectful or disrespectful? Powerful or disempowered? Yet there was also a sense of growing calm... It was as if through *permitting* myself to be both certain *and* uncertain, to feel both secure *and* insecure, powerful *and* disempowered, excited/stimulated *and* stuck I became somehow more whole...

... And this felt okay.

Can I/we learn anything from my process? Remember: Although some of my thoughts have been embellished at this writing-up stage, I am writing of an experiencing over a period of no more than five minutes, and definite factors were:

*Cognitive stimulation; feeling excited; being respectful (requesting space); experiencing creativity; feeling useful; continuing excitement (almost like an 'amplification circuit'); feeling rejected (no space given); wanting to be authentic; experiencing doubt (facilitative*

*versus competitive); wanting to be both spontaneous and considered; more uncertainty; anxiety; tension/conflict; concern for the feelings of another; concerned about perceptions of relative status; feeling rocky, anxious, even more unsure; worrying around responsibility (to/for); fearing that I might abuse personal beliefs; acknowledging positive aspects of myself (experience/knowledge); feeling arrogant patronising; feeling very anxious about being perceived as arrogant/patronising; wanting to be liked and valued; feeling secure and uncertain; respectful and disrespectful; powerful and disempowered; stimulated and stuck; scared and calm; whole...*

Not alot for under five minutes! And there was probably more...

This tells me a number of things about the **client-centred core conditions**:

I want to be cautious about the nature of '**psychological contact**'. On the one hand, my own frame of reference and common reference points might serve as tentative guides to entering the world of another - on the other hand, identification and labelling might detract from experiencing and perceiving rather than enhance them.

My process of moving between a range of feelings, thoughts and behaviours in such a short period of time links for me with client-centred beliefs around the *process* of therapy and 'one person, the client, being relatively **incongruent**' - certainly at times I felt vulnerable (especially when my conditions of worth/self concept felt threatened), defensive, anxious, lacking confidence...

My being **congruent** does not have to mean that all aspects of myself are in agreement or harmony. My being congruent is more to do with my being in touch with different aspects of myself - permitting these aspects accurate symbolisation and conscious awareness. It is through this self awareness that I am able to make and own choices. This is my 'freedom to be', if you will.

This has the consequence of affirming for me that there is a difference between a *congruent communication* and *communicating my congruence* - if at this moment I am genuinely feeling irritated by you and I express my irritation, that may well be a congruent

communication. If at this moment I authentically feel deep respect for you and let you know this - it may well be a congruent communication. I am unlikely, though, to say to a client or a trainee 'Right now I am in touch with many different aspects of myself' or 'Right now there is a minimum of denial and distortion between my experiencing and my perceiving and symbolising of my experiencing'! Congruent is something I can try my best to *be*.

I'm reminded of someone saying of Carl Rogers as a therapist "Yes! He's really got it!" Someone else says "No... He hasn't *got* it, he *is* it"...

This whole process serves to remind me of the complexities, the 'layers' if you will, of **empathy**, understanding, sensing meanings...

It reminds me of how easily my empathy can be blocked - by my own feelings and thoughts; by my own 'buttons being pushed' - if something taps into significant aspects of my own being, how easy it is for me to get 'hooked into' that; by being scared of the 'as if' quality of empathy (sensing the client's world of feelings and meaning as if they were my own) - am I resilient enough to enter this world without losing my sense of self, without becoming lost in this world, or being overwhelmed (or underwhelmed) by it?

This process reminds me of my constant struggle to experience **unconditional positive regard**, and how I need to constantly review the extent to which my positive regard is *unconditional*. It generated a 'monitoring poem' for me:

*If encountering some feels quite easy  
And connecting with others feel hard  
How authentically unconditional  
Is my positive regard?*

And... If I had not permitted myself this self exploring process, if I had 'blocked off' or 'shut down' - if I had not been self accepting and attempting to experience and own my feelings, my thoughts, my behaviours... For me, this is akin to **receiving the core conditions**.

This whole exercise also affirms for me a number of things concerned with **client-centred theory of personality**:

Of most significance to me at this moment is the affirmation that I am *not* a ‘dichotomised self’. I am not a *thinking* person at one time and place, a *feeling* person at another time and place, a *doing* person at yet other times and places - I am a *whole* person, I am a rich mixture of profoundly *interconnected* feeling, thought, and behavioural processes... (Yet so often my learning and expectations of me have been that theory belongs over *there*, personal issues belong in *that* group, practice is in *this* room...) In experiencing and then writing this, there have been many links for me with my self concept, with introjected values/personal constructs, with my conditions of worth...

I end by stating that this also affirms for me how *vital* (in different senses of the word - vital as in ‘important’ and vital as in ‘alive’) is the struggle, the *striving*, to experience congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard. I do not have to be perfect - it is mostly my striving that is therapeutic. As Carl Rogers said of unconditional positive regard “we are most fortunate if it exists between us”. It feels most rewarding to strive to maintain and enhance client-centred core conditions within me and between us.