

Client-Centred Therapy: Conditions, Process, and Theory

Steve Vincent

Introduction

I have selected and typed-up a few extracts from a counselling session conducted on Thursday 7th June 2001 in the belief that exploring issues arising from it might have value in demonstrating and illustrating my understanding of elements of client-centred philosophy and beliefs, core conditions, personality theory and therapeutic process.

I am aware that in ‘putting my practice out into the open’ like this I become open to negative and positive criticism, both of which I have, at long last, learned to welcome. For many years reluctant to ‘stage demonstration sessions’ - in the belief that modelling goes against authentic self-development. I am now offering public scrutiny of my work, my *way of being* with clients. I now know that the less defensive I can be about my practice - no matter how hard that may be at times - the more I can learn and *become* the best therapist that I am able to become.

The client, who I have named ‘Chris’, is in his fourth session with me. I have numbered therapist communications for ease of reference. The first extract is from near the beginning of the session: -

Extract One - Transcript

Chris: (*Loud*) ... We had a right barney Saturday! I got so *narky* – *really* angry! I was shaking with rage, shouting and banging and... She was scared. *Really* scared. I’m not one for throwing punches or anything like that, but I came very, very close to that and when I’m narky I can be loud - very loud! (*Pause, then more calmly though quite rapid:*) We’d promised each other a new start and weekends would be special – our special time together. We’d arranged to go out for the day, and then when I turned up, she’d arranged to see a friend!

Th01: You felt like the special time set aside for just the two of you had been sabotaged – and boy were you mad!

Chris: Yeah – too right! She should have said to her friend that we’d already got plans. Or at least she could have said “I’ll phone Chris and see if we could all go out together” but no – she’s so damn selfish!

Th02: Like she didn’t give you a thought...

Chris: Yeah! And when I said, “Why didn’t you ask me first?” or “Why didn’t you say we were already committed?” she said, “Well, you’re always saying you want to meet my friends”!

Th03: So not only did you experience her as thoughtless and selfish, it was like this was all *your* problem – that this was what you wanted all along. Yet for you, your promised special time together was lost... Like you’ve been betrayed...

Chris: Yeah! Too right!

Extract One - Reflections

Congruence, Unconditional Positive Regard and Empathic Understanding

As Chris was speaking, I had a fleeting image of his intimidated, cowering girlfriend – and my heart went out to her. It would have been easy (and tempting) to become judgmental and critical. At the same time, I would not wish to be seen (and, perhaps more significantly, I would not want to experience myself) as a man who condones or colludes with (male) aggression. I allowed myself these momentary thoughts, feelings, and images – how long does that take? It seems to me that I can allow myself access to different parts of me in fractions of seconds. I’m sure I read somewhere that thoughts travel at terrific velocities! By the time I spoke at Th01, I felt that I was respectfully striving to enter the world as my client experienced it. I felt like I was experiencing some understanding (or ‘cognitive empathy’) and this I offered. I kind of had a glimmering of underlying feelings and thoughts, yet nothing I felt I could rely on at this time. Besides, my experience of attempting to communicate too much empathy too soon is that I may very well prove to *myself* just how extraordinarily clever I am in that moment - but it is rarely in the interests of my *client*. It seems to me that if my empathic understanding is to be as fully sensitive and respectful as it can be, it needs to include an awareness of where clients are in terms of their own processes.

Again at Th02, I experienced a minimal and fleeting temptation (again, a fraction of a second, or a second or two, maybe) to shift the focus towards the girlfriend. I am aware that words like ‘should’ and ‘ought’ and ‘must’ can trigger a reaction in me – like wanting to protect or defend the girlfriend from the client’s demands. Again, I believe that I communicated understanding and maybe a little empathy in my tone of voice. I believe that staying with the client in his feelings and thoughts was accepting and respectful.

I presented the transcripts and this paper in a training group, and two course members acted as therapist and client. Afterwards, one comment from the trainee role-playing the client was that when the therapist said, “Like she didn’t give you a thought” she felt calmer as a consequence of receiving acceptance. Yet at one and the same time, the client also felt that anger was welcome – the therapist communication was received as a kind of invitation: “It’s okay to be angry, if you wish.”

My belief is that had the client’s anger *not* been accepted, the session would have gone off in a very different direction...

By Th03, my fleeting feelings and thoughts from outside of the client’s frame of reference were even more fleeting and minimal. I think that I felt his “Why didn’ts” and felt the threatening, plaintive tone almost kind of on behalf of his girlfriend – I very briefly imagined her saying “I just can’t win with you, can I?”! Yet I overwhelmingly experienced myself as striving to enter the client’s world as he sees it, feels it, thinks about it, and experiences it. Thus while I wish to be open about my momentary ‘slips’ into brief thoughts about the client’s partner, I also want to celebrate what I felt was, overwhelmingly, my authentic client-centredness.

Again I look at the transcript now and wonder whether I might have communicated some of my sensing of what it *meant* to Chris to feel betrayed...

His anger had already been acknowledged, though clearly there were more underlying feelings and thoughts. Still: no rush - it’s his world!

Client-Centred Philosophy, Attitudes and Beliefs

In my experience (some few years as a trainer, for instance), one of the most queried aspects of client-centred beliefs is the idea that, given the right conditions, people are intrinsically forward-moving, co-operative, responsible and trustworthy organisms. People have said

things like “Look at all the *evil* about us! How can you *possibly* believe that people are basically *good*?” Well – my own understanding of Rogers and client-centred therapy (and the person-centred approach) is that *given the right conditions* people tend to grow and develop in trustworthy, responsible, constructive and creative directions. All too often, though, our actualising tendencies are thwarted by the conditions of worth embedded in our self-concepts.

How could I be authentically accepting of this tall, strong guy who rants and raves and shakes his fist in his girlfriend’s face? How could I behave in a way which, whether I intend it or not, to all intents and purposes condones or colludes with such abusive, aggressive behaviour? Client-centred therapy is ‘too soft’ or is characterised by ‘woolly thinking’ are other comments that have been made to me. We shall see!

As I am writing this I am struggling with trying to find what feels like a ‘right’ and appropriate balance between self-exploring and taking a critical look at the therapeutic relationship (which sometimes has a defensive feel to it, and I have stated that I want to be open rather than self-protecting), and celebrating myself and client-centred therapy (which feels either patronising or arrogant).

I guess I shall have to rely on your attempts to empathise with and understand me.

Therapeutic Process

I read Rogers and especially his five-stage process model in ‘On Becoming A Person’ that identifies the following client characteristics – phases or stages – within a helping relationship: -

1. Experiencing of the **potential self**
2. The full experiencing of an **affectional relationship**
3. The **liking of one's self**
4. The discovery that the **core of personality is positive**
5. **Being one's organism, one's experience.**

I believe that if I can strive to come as close as I can be to *being* the core conditions of client-centred therapy, I can predict that those characteristics are likely to unfold in therapy. Indeed, by the end of this paper, I hope to have illustrated at least four of the above characteristics - in just one therapy session.

Extract Two - Transcript

Chris: ... So I got really angry. It's like I've been working really hard on my jealousy and what's *she* done?

Th04: You feel you've been trying so hard to sort yourself out – partly for her – and you've moved a long way through...

Chris: (*Interrupts:*) Not 'a long way' - no. I think I've sorted it! I took it all on as my problem, but now I'm thinking that actually it's hers! In the heat of the barney I said "Okay – let's split up for a couple of months and *this* time we'll *both* try and sort ourselves out, not just *me*! She said "I need you" and "I want you" and "I love you" and even "I want your children" for God's sake – but "Okay, let's split for a couple of months if that's what you want... I'll always be here waiting for you". Then her mom and two or three other people (including my sister) phoned me the next day to say that she'd phoned them telling them that she'd finished with me – for good! It's unbelievable! She must be a compulsive liar!

Th05: Your big issues over the last few sessions were jealousy and trust. Now you feel you've dealt with your jealousy – but how can you trust someone who lies?

Chris: Yeah! And I was trying to tell her mom to believe *me*! But why should she... It's *her* daughter, after all...

Th06: A couple of words keep occurring to me... One is *indignation* and the other is *integrity*...

Chris: Yeah – indignation! Too right! *I* know I've told the truth – yet everyone believes *her*!

Th07: And integrity is around wanting to be believed because you know that you have been truthful.

Extract Two – Reflections

Core Conditions

Clearly my empathic understanding was not one hundred per cent accurate at TH04. Yet I feel okay about this. I once wrote a paper entitled ‘In Praise Of Being (Slightly) Off-Beam’, in which I ventured the view that absolutely accurate empathy and understanding all of the time – without fail – was unlikely to be as therapeutic as is the case when the client experiences their therapist as striving, to the best of his or her ability, to see, feel and understand the client’s world from the client’s perspective. Effortless empathy? Nah!

In this instance, the client quickly corrected me. In correcting me, the client seemed to take further ownership of his experiencing of himself. I puzzled for sometime afterwards as to whether my inaccuracy might have fuelled the client’s anger – but I don’t think that that was how it happened. Rather, I think that my striving for empathic understanding, in an authentically respectful way, invited and welcomed the client’s anger. I also reflected upon whether or not I might have been protecting myself from the client’s anger by saying ‘moved a long way through’ rather than ‘sorted’. I don’t believe this to have been the case, either. I felt accepting of and open to whatever feelings and meanings were flowing within the client at that moment – I’m sure of it.

Th05 was, I feel, understanding – and my tone of voice, I believe, captured something of the client’s vexation and anger. I again felt, very fleetingly indeed, almost disloyal to the client’s partner – yet again I want to celebrate my striving to be there with and for my client.

It is only by allowing myself to experience such fleeting thoughts or images – that is, through not denying them symbolisation or only allowing them a distorted symbolisation in my conscious awareness – that I can be congruent in the relationship. It seems to me that this is an illustration of what Carl Rogers meant when he bemoaned the fact that some people seem to think that ‘being congruent’ is a reason for “impulsively blurting out every passing feeling.” No, no, no! Carl wrote (Rogers and Sanford, 1980. In ‘Learning and Being’ by Tony Merry, PCCS Books, page 73): -

Being real involves being thoroughly acquainted with the flow of experiencing going on within, a complex and continuing flow.

It means being willing to express the attitudes that come persistently to the fore, especially perhaps the negative attitudes, inasmuch as the positive ones can rather easily be inferred from behaviour and tone.

Blurting out my fleeting thoughts would have been *incongruent*, for they were not *persistent*. In addition, another aspect of my being “acquainted with the flow of experiencing going on within” is my deeply ingrained beliefs in client-centred therapy – and these inform the choices I make from moment to moment – my very *way of being* when I am with a client. To have ‘blurted out’ would represent a denial of the beliefs and attitudes that I hold so dear.

In other words, to have denied the experiencing of thoughts from outside of the client’s frame of reference would have been incongruent – and to voice the thoughts would have been incongruent because that would have been a denial of my commitment to client-centred therapy.

Th06 fascinates me. The client had used neither of these words, yet *indignation* and *integrity* sure seemed to fit. Although I fleetingly considered my options before speaking, I trusted my instinct and went with these words. The client certainly hooked-into the word indignation – it seems that his ‘righteous and angry’ self was uppermost at this time. Nevertheless, I had also heard an almost pleading kind of quality in his tone of voice – a desperate yearning to be believed.

Throughout the opening phase of this session, I experienced myself as feeling around in the client’s world – delicately and sensitively, I hope. I felt myself becoming immersed in his frame of reference, and I hope that I successfully communicated some of my sensing.

Therapeutic Process

It seems to me that already we can see a shift here from an external to an internal locus of evaluation – from the client being angry at his partner for being ‘a compulsive liar’ to him feeling hurt due to not being believed. The client also feels wounded because he sees himself as making many efforts – which he feels have not been reciprocated.

Had I not been unconditionally accepting of the client’s anger, I wonder if we would have so readily moved towards these underlying feelings of hurt, of feeling wounded...

Extract Three - Transcript

Chris: It's so frustrating. Earlier on that evening I was Mr Softy, rubbing her feet. She loves me doing that. Then later Mr Ogre takes over and I'm shaking and trembling and fuming and ranting and raving and raging...

Th08: Like there's two apparently quite different parts of you...

Chris: It's weird. It's like I'm somehow behind and above myself watching me shaking my fist at her. It's horrible – but I can't stop it.

Th09: You really don't feel good about the you that's in a fury... You can see it happening but it's kind of beyond your control.

Chris: Yeah!

Th10: It feels like there's three you's now! I have a sense that the you that's watching Mr Ogre feels really detached...

Chris: Yeah. It's like I'm watching me – I'm watching Mr Ogre and wondering what the hell he's up to and I'm wondering where Mr Softy's gone and...

Th11: It's really perplexing and you desperately want to understand...

Chris: Yeah! I *hate* Mr Ogre. I want rid of him! I want him *dead*!

Th12: It's like he takes over and he's really a part of you you could do without.

(Long silence)

Th13: You know – I'm not sure where this is coming from and I'm not so sure about saying it – but I have a real visual image of you watching Mr Ogre from above and behind. And I have this kind of hunch that when Mr Ogre's in your girlfriends face, if Mr Softy (wherever he's got to) or you were to tap him on the back he'd turn on Mr Softy and say 'Fuck off! Can't you see I'm trying to keep you safe!'

Chris: What? (*Pause*) Yeah... Yes – that’s it exactly! You’re right!

Extract Three - Reflections

Core Conditions

I believe that I was congruent throughout this segment. I did not at the time (and nor do I upon reflection) experience myself as denying or distorting any significant experiencing to awareness. I believe that I was authentically respectful throughout, too. When I look at my process of empathic understanding, I was trying really hard to see how Chris’s world was for him. While I believe that ‘affective’ empathy was present (witness my acknowledgement of his not feeling good about himself when in a fury, his feeling of detachment, his confusion and desperation, and his almost loathing towards one aspect of himself), during this phase I also experienced myself as most desperately trying to *understand* (or ‘cognitively empathise’) with what his world meant to him. I now wonder what might have ensued had I stayed at a feeling level...

... Yet connecting at only an emotional level feels like it lacks *wholeness* – the whole of me would not have been engaging with the whole of Chris, and the whole of Chris would not have been experiencing the whole of me. In other words, I, he, and we would have been *incomplete* in the experience.

I am intrigued by my process at Th13. I had been striving very hard to immerse myself in the client’s world of feelings and meanings, and this visual image just came to me. Visual images of this kind, in a therapy session, are very rare in my experience! I felt startled – a kind of ‘where on earth did that come from?’ sensation - this was most certainly not an intellectual process! However, I trusted the image, believing that it was generated and informed through my immersion in the world of the other – and, after all, the client *had* spoken of one part of him watching another aspect of his self.

I now ask myself whether or not it was ‘right’ (that is, client-centred) to voice Th13 at all. These kind of explorations are, for me, the staple diet of both my ‘internal supervisor’ (my private reflections upon my work), and of my professional, person-centred supervision. I question whether I was being ‘directive’ or valuing Mr Ogre above Mr Softy. Indeed, was valuing Mr Ogre *my* idea, and therefore not *client*-centred at all? After all, the client wanted Mr Ogre dead!

I stress that I do *not* internally intellectualise about theory when I am striving to be as close as I can be with a client. I do not for one moment in a session think along the lines of, “Aha! This Mr Ogre personal construct is functional, serving to defend other aspects of the client’s self-concept from perceived psychological threats hence reducing anxiety and tension!” However, I *did* experience the power of the imagery, and trusted in the empathic flow between us...

Therapeutic Process

A brief comment here, and this is that the client seemed to have moved significantly from an external (‘it’s all the girlfriend’s fault’) to an internal (Mr Ogre) locus of evaluation.

Personality Theory

As stated, in a session, with a client, I am not particularly mindful of client-centred personality theory – my faculties are more consciously directed towards listening, hearing, feeling what it is like for the client, sensing underlying feelings and meanings, and striving to understand the client from his own frame of reference. How fascinating, though, to make links with theory in reflective moments and in supervision!

Here we have three apparently quite different aspects of self – two of them self-as-object configurations (Mr Softy and Mr Ogre) and one self-as-process (the ‘I’ looking at ‘me’). Is there any relationship between them?

If there is no client awareness of any relationships between the different aspects of his self, will an awareness develop? It seems like Mr Ogre and Mr Softy are newly disclosed symbolisations from within his self-concept – he has not revealed them to anyone else before, ever – and indeed only recently have they been revealed to himself...

What a humbling privilege for me to witness a client becoming more aware of his inner world – to be his companion as different aspects of his being gain a more full awareness and understanding! And the client’s self-as-process - the ‘I’ watching ‘me’ – felt like it was a completely new emerging awareness. No wonder Carl Rogers described therapy as “acting as midwife at the birth of a new personality” (RTE Dublin television interview, 1986)!

Core Conditions – Again

I would like to offer a further flavour of my internal and professional person-centred supervision. As a client-centred therapist, it is most adamantly *not* my intention to ‘move clients on’ or to somehow ‘steer’ a client through a pre-ordained process. My intent at each and every moment is to strive as hard as I can to be as close to offering the core conditions as I can be.

I will, though, reflect upon and make links with and between my practice and client-centred personality theory. In this instance, I can explore whether I am able to experience – and therefore to offer – genuine unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding in equal measure to each and every aspects of the client’s self-structure as they are revealed to or sensed by me.

I can go further, and explore whether there might be equivalent elements of ‘Mr Softy’ and ‘Mr Ogre’ and ‘Detached Observer’ within me. If there are, how do each of my configurations of self relate with each of the client’s personal constructs?

It is through such exploration that I can strive to be as fully present (which presence gives full recognition to my client-centred beliefs) with a client as I am able to be.

Extract Four - Transcript

Th14: You’ve spoken for a while now about your anger, your indignation, your frustration...
Each time we pause, it looks like there’s tears kind of just behind your eyes. The pain’s not too far away...

Chris: (*Grins:*) I’d rather be angry than hurting!

Th15: Like you can somehow cope with being angry – but pain? No, I don’t want to go there...

Chris: Yeah... I can *deal* with my anger... (*Pause*) No! I can manage my anger. (*Silence*)

Th16: You don’t feel so confident about managing your hurt.

Chris: I feel butterflies in my stomach. Sometimes my stomach really hurts. When I'm righteous and angry, I don't feel those things anymore.

Th17: Your anger feels really useful – it stops you feeling hurt and that makes you more stable, somehow, more safe...

Chris: Yeah. I love her... I want her... Yet I hate her, too. And when I'm hurting, it's much easier to hate her than love her.

Th18: Yes. You can manage that anger – you can hold it together.

Chris: Yeah! Too right!

Extract Four - Reflections

Core Conditions

I was aware that the client was communicating with more than just his words and the way they were spoken. I recall at Th14 wondering – again only momentarily - whether or not it was okay to acknowledge his unspoken hurt (I used the word pain, he came back with hurt – so 'slightly off-beam' but again this feels okay as I was striving to empathically understand). I had but a second or two to make a choice. One part of me was kind of saying something like “stay with the client's words, what is in his conscious awareness – is he even aware of the moisture behind his eyes?” while another part was feeling emotionally connected with his dammed-up tears...

I processed both and made a conscious choice that, for me, is what congruence is all about – neither denying nor distorting symbolisation to any significant aspects of my experiencing. I believe that my communications were a mixture of affective and cognitive empathy – I am aware that I was striving really hard to both feel what it was like for him and to understand.

Personality Theory

Client-centred theory states that experiencing denied to awareness and/or experiencing granted only a distorted symbolisation in awareness nevertheless remains available to consciousness given the right conditions. Rogers wrote, for instance (in the Nineteen

Propositions), about how as he was sat writing he could feel the pressure of the seat upon his buttocks. The chances are that until you read (or heard) this, you were unaware of your own bottom, yet your buttocks are probably now in your awareness. I cannot be sure in this instance whether or not the client was aware of the moisture in his eyes. If he was aware, then it only seems reasonable to have acknowledged this non-verbal communication. If he was not aware, then he certainly became aware.

Proposition Three states that “the organism reacts as an organised whole to this phenomenal field.” To sense something approaching wholeness yet communicate something only partial is to bring incompleteness into the relationship. Did Chris perceive his moist eyes? Did his experience his moist eyes or did he deny that experiencing to awareness? If I were to communicate something only ‘at the edge of awareness’ (something yet to be symbolised), can I rely on the client’s defences, and trust that the client will ‘change tack’ or ignore my efforts to communicate with that aspect of himself?

One theory is that the self-as-object is functional. Personal constructs serve a purpose – one of which is to maintain the self-concept. Our selves can protect us, defend us, keep us safe. One function of the self is to enable us to predict the world about us, thus serving to help us feel secure. In this instance, ‘Mr Ogre’ was serving to protect the client from having to experience his hurt. He could *manage* his anger – be *in control of* his anger – but he sure didn’t feel like he had the resources to do likewise with his pain.

Like Freud and others before him (and a great many since, too), Rogers believed that once ‘material’ is in conscious awareness it also comes under our control. Thus if Mr Ogre becomes more fully accepted and understood through increasingly accurate symbolisation, might the client’s become more “fully functioning”?

For me, all of this links back to my ability to experience *unconditional* positive regard. If I can only stay with the client, rather than reacting conditional to such ‘evils’ as anger and aggression, I discover, time and time again, that ‘beneath’ or ‘behind’ these apparent negative aspects lies a self which is inherently good. There is nothing inherently ‘bad’ or ‘evil’ in protecting the inner part of me that yearns to respect and be respected, to understand and be understood, to love and to be loved. Mr Ogre can be an *ally*, not an enemy to be done away with at all costs.

Therapeutic Process

It seems, to me, that the client was more able to manage his anger, and I was more able to manage his pain! It was as if he had become, over the years, kind of self-accepting of his anger – but pain? No. I anticipate that as the client continues to receive authentic and non-threatening unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding from the therapist, so he will become more accepting, respectful and understanding of different aspects of his self-structure, his way of being.

When role-playing these extracts with a training group, one comment was that the moments of significant client movement seemed to be linked with the moments when the therapist took a risk...

I'm not so sure about this. Perhaps process is a little like client-centred thinking about the personality – an integrated whole. It seems to me that even moments of apparently startling self-discovery are irrevocably linked with the whole process.

I earlier stated an intent to link this therapy session with Carl's five stage 'model' of therapeutic process: -

- **Experiencing of the potential self.** It seems to me that, to some extent, the client's 'Observing Self' might be linked with his potential self... The 'I' that is watching 'me' - the *self-as-process* – may well represent some kind of 'mediator' that will permit more and more of the client's experience into conscious awareness, without so much denial and distortion. My belief is that after just four sessions I have witnessed this client experiencing several significant glimpses of his potential to become more whole.
- **The full experiencing of an affectional relationship.** I believe that my striving to be unconditionally respectful of all client feelings and meanings has great significance. The client has been able to *be* in his anger, to *be* in his confusion, to *be* hard or soft as he chooses - and without negative criticism and harsh judgement. He certainly hasn't experienced *me* as wishing any parts of his self dead – although he has, I believe, experienced me as fully accepting of that part of him that wishes another part of his self dead. He has also experienced me as being accepting of that part of him he wishes dead.

Remember, too, that the client felt accepted enough to feel able to disclose never before shared aspects of his self.

Let this not pass without mention of authenticity and empathic understanding, too. My experiencing and offering of unconditional positive regard would have had far less impact (possibly even no impact at all) if it had been feigned. Likewise, some pretence at empathy and understanding, or some 'wooden' implementation of skills, would have had far less impact than a genuine and compassionate empathic way of being. I believe that I was as fully me as I was able to be in the counselling relationship, and this gave great meaning to necessary and sufficient conditions four and five.

- **The liking of one's self.** In large part as a consequence of experiencing an affectional relationship, the client is able to move beyond his anger and discover that it is functional - protecting him from feeling hurt. While he might want his hurt to go away, I doubt very much that he would wish the part of him that hurts dead. I believe that he will become more accepting of many aspects of his own self-structure and, as a consequence, will become more accepting of others.
- **The discovery that the core of personality is positive.** It occurs to me that rather than seeing Mr Ogre as an enemy – to be done away with at all costs – Mr Ogre may well be offered the core conditions by the client himself. As a consequence, Mr Ogre has the opportunity to grow in trustworthy and constructive ways, becoming an increasingly loyal ally, rather than a feared enemy. The client may no longer need to feel so bad about his self.
- **Being one's organism, one's experience.** It is perhaps too early in the process to claim any substantial evidence of movement towards this. Yet client-centred therapeutic process theory states that if the therapist is able to experience and offer authentic unconditional positive regard then certain client outcomes are predictable. And I do predict that Chris has begun his journey towards becoming more whole.

And I am privileged to be a companion to him on his journey.