

Failing or Fortunate:

**Clarifying The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions
For
Client-Centred Therapy...**

Striving in Revising?

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Introduction

As the ideas which follow began to formulate and emerge, and again as I began to type, the idea of suggesting a revision of the Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Client-Centred Therapy felt like - well, felt almost akin to sacrilege! Sacrilege? Are the Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Client-Centred therapy something '*sacred*'? Or might the Necessary and Sufficient conditions be *dogma*? Although they have been thoroughly researched and tested, might the Necessary and Sufficient Conditions remain hypotheses for you and I until we have experienced our own truths directly? Further - might my hypothesis be your dogma, or, indeed, vice-versa? Another possibility: Might 'solid dogma' from significant others serve to challenge values introjected from yet *other* significant others?

For example: The concept of *unconditional* positive regard struck me as pretty radical when I first encountered the writings of Carl Rogers – and Carl himself wrote that unconditional positive regard was one of the most 'revolutionary' aspects of client-centred beliefs. Yet when I first read about the concept of unconditional positive regard, I had no current experience of either experiencing and offering or of receiving unconditional positive regard – I believed that I would *like* to experience, offer and receive it – but the experiencing came later. Thus one set of introjected values (around the *absence* of unconditional valuing) was challenged through my introjecting – at least to some degree - the values of Carl Rogers. One set of hypothesis - or dogma - was replaced by another, if you will. Only later did experience affirm these values, attitudes and beliefs.

My *experience* as a trainer, as a supervisor, as a practitioner, as a client – my experience as a *person* – later left me feeling, then thinking, that *something*, some significant element, was missing from the Six Necessary and Sufficient Conditions. What was that something? What could that significant element possibly be?

A History: Carl Rogers and Client-Centred Therapy - The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions

In 1959, Carl Rogers published his necessary and sufficient conditions for client-centred therapy:

1. That two persons are in *contact*.
2. That the first person, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of *incongruence*, being *vulnerable*, or *anxious*.
3. That the second person, whom we shall term the therapist, is *congruent in the relationship*.
4. That the therapist is *experiencing unconditional positive regard* toward the client.
5. That the therapist is *experiencing an empathic* understanding of the client's *internal frame of reference*.
6. That the client *perceives*, at least to a minimal degree, Conditions 4 and 5, the *unconditional positive regard* of the therapist for him, and the *empathic* understanding of the therapist.¹

There is a very real sense in which I introjected these necessary and sufficient conditions. They became, if you will, internalised *conditions of worth* - integral aspects of my concept of self. Yet they also connected in a meaningful way with my 'organismic valuing system', because the writings of Carl Rogers somehow seemed to speak to (that is, connect with) many aspects of my inner experiencing, past and present.

Yes, along with many others I suffered the confusions and angst over just how *many* conditions there were and which were 'core' conditions! Carl Rogers himself wrote, at different times, of *five* necessary and sufficient conditions - condition one being seen as a

pre-condition... Indeed, Carl also wrote of *four* necessary and sufficient conditions - conditions one *and two* being seen as *pre-conditions*... Carkhuff first wrote of the three '*core*' conditions in 1969...

I confess that I am no longer very much interested in 'the numbers game' - rather, I seek the *essence* of the necessary and sufficient conditions.

Another History: Trainee, Therapist, Trainer and Supervisor...

When I was a trainee counsellor, I recall 'giving myself a hard time' if I failed to experience and/or offer the Necessary and Sufficient Client-Centred Conditions, and I also recall receiving negative feedback from others (trainers, peers and supervisors) if I failed to experience and/or offer them. As a client-centred therapist, I still from time to time give myself a hard time (and occasionally have been given a hard time in supervision) if I fail to experience and/or offer the conditions. It is with some shame that I recall that as a trainer and supervisor I too have at times been critical of those (again, including myself) who have failed to experience and/or offer the conditions...

Thus in terms of client-centred personality theory, it is as if, on one level at least, the conditions necessary and sufficient for client-centred therapy really did become an introjected value derived from an external locus of evaluation - subsequently symbolised in my self concept as a condition of worth. Here is another brief illustration of how this might happen:

A colleague of mine, Steve Wyatt-Simmonds, recently facilitated a counselling *skills* training session. The students had programmed to look at 'what person-centred is and is not' and commenced with blank 'Do' and 'Do not' columns on the board. The first word to appear in the 'Do not' column was 'rescue.' The group were unanimous that rescuing was a 'no no', agreed in their understanding that the *person-centred* practitioner does not rescue people. Feeling uncomfortable with the judgmental feel of the whole 'Do/Do not' approach, Steve asked the trainees *why* rescuing was seen as such a bad thing. The most informed answer he received was 'because that is what our previous tutor told us.' Whatever happened to *experiential*, student-centred learning? Here was a group of students acting out, at least to some extent, a style of implementing counselling skills based on what they

had introjected from a teacher.

Yet if I *experience* myself attempting to rescue another, then look inside of my self, I can see that my tendency to rescue comes from a 'good' place - it is not something I need to 'beat myself up for,' feel inadequate about, or ashamed of. However, as a *client* I may not *experience* my therapist attempting to rescue me as all that psychologically helpful or facilitative of growth and autonomy - especially in the longer term. Such *experiencing* may lead me to question the therapeutic value of my impulse to rescue. Further - if as client I can *experience* a significant other (my therapist, for example, or a training facilitator) striving to experience and indeed achieving a measure of unconditional positive regard for me and empathic understanding of me, then I am likely to feel very fortunate. As a therapist, if I can experience at first hand the process implications of my striving to experience respectful empathy in terms of the opportunities this offers for growth, then my impulse to rescue will recede. My move away from rescuing will be personally meaningful to me, being based now on my internal valuing system rather than because I have been *told* not to rescue by some other authority figure. In other words, I am likely to move from an introjected condition of worth (from an external locus of evaluation) to a more therapeutic way of being derived from an experiential, internal frame of reference, something I have witnessed in myself and with another.

Yet Another History: Client

It eventually dawned on me that as a client I did *not* 'harshly impose' these *perfectionist* conditions onto my therapist, provided that the therapist was *striving* to respect me, empathise with me and understand me (from my own frame of reference). In fact, while not quite the exact opposite, certainly my experience was significantly different:

While as the *therapist* I would metaphorically beat myself up if I didn't experience myself as deeply congruent and experiencing profound unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding at all times (equally, and with the client perceiving my profound respect and empathy at all times too), as the *client* I most certainly did *not* want to experience my therapist as somehow superhuman! No, what had most meaning for me *as a client* was certainly *not* profound therapist congruence, or 'perfect' unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding. Indeed, experiencing acceptance and empathy that was *too*

profound would, at times at least, have been over-threatening, too scary, over-intrusive. I might become more vulnerable and anxious as a consequence. Such experiencing of threat and intrusion would not have left me the space and freedom to discover and explore for myself.

In fact, what I experienced as most therapeutic most of the time was that here was a fallible human being who was prepared to *struggle with me* most of the time - neither leading me nor way behind, but alongside me as I stumbled, ran, stood still or went backwards on my journey. What was most therapeutic for me most of the time was that someone was *striving* to offer unconditional positive regard to me, *striving* to experience empathy with and understanding of me (and, perhaps in a less obvious or direct way, *striving* to be congruent).

Thus my experience as a client was (on one level at least) at odds with what I had experienced as a trainee, therapist, supervisor and trainer. Might this represent a clue as to the *something* I sensed that was missing?

Yet One More History: Carl Rogers Re-Visited – Liberation and Validation?

Although my thoughts had already begun to form, watching Carl on the RTE (Dublin) programme 'Personally Speaking... Carl Rogers' (recorded on November 5th 1985) really helped my experiences and thoughts to substantiate, to crystallise. The interviewer, John Masterson, said to Carl:

One of the requirements you place upon yourself is to unconditionally accept and have unconditional positive regard for the person who you are trying to help. That presumably must be very difficult in some cases...

To which Carl replied:

No, that's a slight misunderstanding. What I have said is that I am very fortunate in the relationship if that feeling and attitude exists in me. I am very fortunate and the client is very fortunate if I can feel I really accept you fully just as you are.

This comment was and is extremely liberating for me. For many years my introjected value, my condition of worth, was that experiencing and offering the conditions was both necessary and sufficient - and if I *failed* I would give myself or be given a hard time...

The client-centred conditions had become, at times at least, a stick with which to beat myself up, or to be beaten up with, or, worse still, a stick with which I would beat others up. Now, some 26 years (1959 to 1985) after first postulating the necessary and sufficient client-centred conditions, here was Carl saying "No, that's a (slight) misunderstanding." Well, I'm sorry Carl: I too am guilty - of more than a *slight* misunderstanding! I believe I owe myself an apology and hundreds of trainees, too, for all the *unnecessary* 'beating up'! So witness my contrition: I am truly and sincerely very sorry.

Yet I have experienced a process of liberation too: I can now *feel really very fortunate* if the conditions exist within me, rather than *feeling a failure* if they don't. Furthermore, as a trainer, I can now attempt to facilitate a climate within which trainees might have the opportunity to work towards feeling really very fortunate themselves, rather than a negative, critical climate wherein a *conditioned condition* may lead to feelings of inadequacy or of not being good enough, of being 'bad.'

Carl continued:

Sometimes that's very difficult. I held an interview with a young man in South Africa. I didn't know anything about him. It turned out he was an officer in the South African army. Now for me, that meant a real... It meant that I stretched my empathic abilities to their very limit, to try to be with him, to try to understand him, to try to be caring toward him. I didn't feel I did too well - and yet I've learned since that interview really changed the course of his life.

My observations as therapist, client, trainer and supervisor all indicated to me that absolutely '*spot on*' unconditional positive regard and/or empathic understanding were frequently experienced by clients as being like a 'zap right between the eyes' - more often than not unwelcome and even unhelpful. Likewise, unconditional positive regard and/or empathy that were *way off* the mark were not experienced as therapeutic either. However,

approaching unconditional positive regard and empathy (*becoming* more empathic and understanding) seemed both more authentic and more acceptable. Yes: Respectful empathic understanding that was *close to* the mark was usually received as being very helpful - the process appearing to be that, providing the client experienced the therapist as *striving* to be respectful and empathic, the client would willingly further explore - very often clarifying for the striving self (the client) through the process of clarifying for the striving other (the therapist).

I have more and more come to believe that the *striving* of the therapist to experience and offer acceptance and empathy is at least as important (at times perhaps even more significant) than any *actual* achieving of profound or absolutely accurate empathic understanding or the 'perfect offering' of unconditional positive regard. If a person can unconditionally accept me without effort, that has far less meaning for me than the person who has to strive to be a compassionate, respectful companion to and with me. The person who can effortlessly 'read me like an open book' is far less therapeutic for me than the person who struggles to *be with me* as I struggle to know, understand and *be* myself. Perhaps, just maybe...

Maybe even if my therapist feels that s/he has not done so well... If I have experienced my therapist as *striving* to be the necessary and sufficient conditions then that encounter will have significance, offering opportunities for growth to me.

Back to 1985 Carl:

So... I feel that if I can be genuinely understanding, try to listen not only to the words but to the meaning, try to understand the person that's hidden within each of us - that's helpful.

If I really care about this person in an unconditional way - that's helpful.

If I can really be myself in the relationship, not, not a professional expert, not a quote 'psychologist', not a psychotherapist, just me in that relationship - that's helpful.

All those things are possible and when they come together, that creates a very powerful climate for change, for growth, for drawing out the potential of the client.

If I try, if I try... **Striving!**

Congruence: An Illustration

It might prove helpful to take a brief look at Carl's comment "If I can really be myself in the relationship, not, not a professional expert, not a quote 'psychologist', not a psychotherapist, just me in that relationship - that's helpful." Regrettably, there are some people who seem to take such words as meaning that '*anything goes*' in counselling - which I believe is another misunderstanding of client-centred therapy. Furthermore, counselling trainees have often expressed conflict, contradiction or confusion between two views expressed by Carl Rogers; one that the therapist strives to be "transparently real", genuine and authentic (inner experiencing matching outer expression), and the other that congruence does not mean "impulsively blurting out every passing feeling." Perhaps an exploration of the concept of congruence might serve to illustrate:

Is congruence a 'state' or a 'process'? It could be convincingly argued that at any given moment I either am or I am not congruent - which would suggest a *state* of being (although 'state' may mean different things to different people at different times). On the other hand, I strive to maximise my congruence *prior* to entering a therapeutic relationship in order to be as congruent as I can be in that relationship - and this, for me, is very much a *process*. Further: Can I offer to myself the conditions most likely to tend towards congruence - and/or am I willing to seek those conditions elsewhere (a perhaps compelling rationale for personal therapy or equivalent activity)?

Often I have witnessed debates formulated around '*communicating congruence*' - and some people erroneously believe the communication of congruence to be a necessary and sufficient condition for client-centred therapy...

Yet Carl's 1957 'integrative' statement about therapeutic conditions had as condition six that the therapist *communicates* conditions four and five (unconditional positive regard and

empathic understanding) - *not*, note, the communication of congruence (condition three). My understanding is that the change in condition six made by 1959 (Carl's *client-centred therapy* statement) - Carl's amendment to 'the client *perceives*, at least to a minimal degree...' - was an attempt to move away from the teaching or learning of communication *skills* and *techniques* and to move towards the notion of developing a client-centred *way of being*. Again, note that it was still not deemed necessary and/or sufficient for the client to perceive, at least to a minimal degree, congruence.

In fact, it is my firm belief that rarely if ever can I directly communicate congruence, precisely because I see congruence as a *way of being*, not something that I *do*. A *communication can be congruent* - yet for me that is very different from *communicating congruence*. Yet if clients kind of 'imperceptibly' sense my incongruence, might my congruence be somehow – however 'imperceptibly', sensed too?

One way of describing congruence is as an absence of denial and distortion in the 'experiencing organism.' Carl reminds us (Proposition Eleven²) that experiences may either be symbolised, perceived and organised into some relationship with the self (i.e. congruent); or ignored because there is no perceived relationship to the self-structure; or denied or given a distorted symbolisation (i.e. incongruent) because the experience is inconsistent with the structure of self.

If I see my *whole* self as a composite of many personal constructs (my self-concept, or self-structure) *as well as* 'organismic valuing', then when congruent (more a process than a state) I will experience a kind of free-flowing access between all relevant aspects of my being. I cannot imagine myself as therapist ever 'communicating my congruence' to a client by saying something like 'Right now I am not denying symbolisation to or distortedly symbolising into a relationship with my self-structure any of my perceptions of my experiencing on the grounds that they are inconsistent with my self concept!' However if, for instance I am experiencing empathic understanding of a client and I voice that in some way, I *am* making a congruent communication - though I am *not* communicating my congruence.

I believe that the essence of the meaning of Carl's comment "If I can really be myself in the relationship, not, not a professional expert, not a quote 'psychologist', not a

psychotherapist, just me in that relationship” is that it is rarely helpful to present a professional *facade*, to take on the role of the ‘expert’ or the ‘psychologist’ or the ‘psychotherapist’ *while denying other significant aspects of my whole being* – or vice-versa.

If we are to be committed to the necessary and sufficient conditions and further, if we are to be true to the notion of wholeness, let us not forget condition two: That the first person, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of *incongruence*, being *vulnerable*, or *anxious*. What is the value of client-centred *theory* unless it informs client-centred *practice* in some meaningful way?

It is my view that a *denial* or *distortion* of those significant aspects of me that have learned and developed client-centred personality theory, therapeutic process (and, yes, the necessary and sufficient conditions) would also be inauthentic in that I would not be *wholly* present with the client. The necessary and sufficient conditions would be *incomplete*: If condition two (client incongruence) was to be omitted (denied or distorted) from the necessary and sufficient conditions, all client-centred personality theory would be lost. A truly authentic representation of the necessary and sufficient conditions for client-centred therapy clearly requires that *all* necessary and sufficient conditions be present, not just some of them, nor a 'pick and mix.' Thus it may be a case, at least to some extent, of not just 'going with the flow' (or 'anything goes') but '*going with and knowing the flowing (the growing)...*'

Another illustration: A client makes racist remarks in a counselling session, which I find deeply insulting and offensive. One option I have is to challenge this racism in some way - and any voicing of my feelings could be said to represent my inner experiencing and outer expressions being in harmony. Am I being congruent? In this instance, no...

A client makes racist remarks in a counselling session, but my unshakeable belief in unconditional positive regard 'come what may', together with my deep held belief in the actualising tendency being inherently positive, co-operative and social results in the racism not being acknowledged in any way. Am I being congruent? In this instance, no...

In the first example, I may be denying those significant parts of me which believe in client-

centred theory and the necessity and sufficiency of the six conditions. In the second example, I may be denying those parts of me that believe racism to be unwarranted and also denying my affronted feelings. For me, being authentic, genuine and “transparently real” means being *wholly* present, not just present from the ‘neck up’ (intellectually, theoretically, cognitively, academically) or only being in touch from the ‘neck down’ (with feelings and emotions). In addition, in terms of my ‘neck up’ alone, if I think of my self-structure as a collection of personal constructs (perhaps similar to the ‘configurations of self’ work of Dave Mearns), then neither do I wish to deny myself access to any significant parts of my self-structure.

The more I am in touch I with my *whole* being - a kind of free-flowing access between significant aspects within my self-structure and my organismic self - the more I can make informed choices about what I *do*, and how I *am*.

Furthermore, my belief is that if I am being inauthentic, clients sense my lack of genuineness in some (perhaps almost *imperceptible*) way. Another example: I recall being fed up with working in further education recently - ‘the system’ was getting me down (hard to believe, I know - you’ll just have to find some acceptance!). After a couple of weeks of this, I voiced how I was feeling to a training group, together with my concern that my ‘being somewhat off form’ might have been sensed in some way and may have been misconstrued. One trainee commented “Thank goodness for that! I thought it was something I’d said...” There was, on my part, no ‘impulsive blurting out of every passing feeling.’

Rather, my feelings (fed up with one area of my work and concerned about potential misperception in another area) had been persistent. I found the time to explore my self and make discoveries and choices informed, I hope and believe, through maximising my congruence through minimising any denial or distortion.

Understanding the interplay and interconnectedness between *all* of the six conditions is to begin to know the rich weave of the *process* of client-centred therapy.

I really like that sentence, so here it is again:

Understanding the interplay and interconnectedness between *all* of the six necessary and sufficient conditions is to begin to know the rich weave of the *process* of client-centred therapy.

Client-Centred Therapy:

The necessary and Sufficient Conditions Revised?

Having reflected upon personal experiences, the experiences of others and the 1985 RTE interview comments of Carl Rogers, dare I be courageous enough (albeit cautiously and tentatively) to offer a revised version of the necessary and sufficient client-centred conditions?

1. That two persons are in *contact*.
2. That the first person, whom we shall term the client, is in a state or process of *incongruence*, being *vulnerable*, or *anxious*.
3. That the second person, whom we shall term the therapist, *strives to be congruent* and *achieves congruence*, at least to a significant degree, *in the relationship*.
4. That the therapist *strives to experience* and *achieves*, at least to a significant degree, *unconditional positive regard* toward the client.
5. That the therapist *strives to experience* and *achieves*, at least to a significant degree, an *empathic* understanding of the client's *internal frame of reference*.
6. That the client *senses*, at least to a minimal degree, Conditions 4 and 5, the *striving to experience* and the *achievement of experiencing*, at least to a significant degree, *the unconditional positive regard* of the therapist for him, and the *striving for empathic* understanding by the therapist.

If I can strive to the best of my ability to most closely approximate the necessary and sufficient client-centred therapy conditions when counselling, then I believe that I am

offering a nurturing environment within which others may grow. I like this sentence, too:

If I can strive to the best of my ability to most closely approximate the necessary and sufficient client-centred therapy conditions when counselling, then I believe that I am offering a nurturing environment within which others may grow.

Closing Remarks

If I am to engage with client-centred therapy as I would aim to engage with a client, then I will not omit any of the six necessary and sufficient conditions, as to do so would represent a denial or distortion of wholeness - client-centred therapy would be incomplete.

However, this paper is not intended to be complete - for instance, condition one has not been explored. In both of Carl's versions of the necessary and sufficient conditions (1957 'integrative' and 1959 client-centred), the final statement is that the client perceives *at least to a minimal degree* the therapist's unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding...

Is '*a minimal degree*' measurable or quantifiable? Can clients provide us with any clues as to what a 'minimal degree' might mean? Is the 'minimal degree' similar for all clients, or might some clients need more of a 'minimal degree' than others? For certification purposes, do trainers and trainees have a shared understanding of what a 'minimal degree' means - and is there any consistency between training programmes?

I have now included *striving* within conditions three, four, five and six - which feels very right to me. I have also used the word 'significant' rather than 'minimal' in conditions three, four and five. However, I am aware that further questions now arise around the meaning of 'significant' in 'the therapist strives to experience and achieves, at least to a significant degree, unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding'. As with client perception of the conditions, can we quantify the degree to which the therapist needs to achieve the experiencing of unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding? Again: Can clients provide us with any clues as to what a 'significant degree' might mean? Is the 'significant degree' similar for all clients, or might some clients need more of a 'significant degree' than others? For certification purposes, do trainers and trainees have a

shared understanding of what a 'significant degree' means - and is there any consistency between training programmes?

It seems to me that my *striving* to come as close as I can to approximating the conditions is consistent throughout therapy, whereas my *achieving* of unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding is not. This might represent an opportunity to more closely link with client-centred therapeutic process theory: I do not expect, for instance, to achieve the same depth of empathic understanding in session one with a client as I would hope to experience in session fifteen...

Likewise, the more aspects of the client I have come to sense and understand, which takes time, the more able I am to strive and achieve unconditional positive regard for each and every aspect of the client.

There is a sense in which all that I have learned and all that I know is history, not here and now. In the here and now, I can but strive to approximate the Necessary and Sufficient Conditions as closely as I can. I am aware of the apologetic tone of some of this paper – yet I am also aware that there has been a transition for me, from failure and a lack of self-acceptance to self-acceptance and feeling really very fortunate if meaningful conditions exist between myself and another. This for me is an uplifting message of hope – and if I can transform in a positive way, others can too.

As always I hope to have provoked something and welcome feedback. I thank you for your attention.

With respect
Steve Vincent

References

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2. **Carl Rogers.** 'A Theory of Personality and Behavior' in 'Client-Centred Therapy',

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