

Review of

***Understanding Person-Centered Counselling:
A Personal Journey***

By Christine Brown

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Reviewed by Ross Balcom

Understanding Person-Centered Counselling: A Personal Journey is a superb basic text on person-centered psychotherapy, vital reading for both students and seasoned professionals. Combining scholarly objectivity and personal testimonial, Christine Brown, an experienced therapist and trainer, has produced an informative and insightful work that lives up to its title; this book will, indeed, deepen readers' understanding of person-centered counseling. Because the person-centered approach is so widely misunderstood and undervalued today, this book is a very timely contribution to the literature. In the chapter-by-chapter overview that follows, I hope to convey something of its scope and richness.

Chapter One presents a brief overview of Rogers' life and work, tracking his development as a person, therapist, and philosopher of life. From his early Protestant religious roots to his emergence as one of the great psycho-spiritual liberators of our era, Rogers' story is one of progressive emancipation from limiting ideologies and dehumanizing practices. Rogers' person-centered approach, with its unbounded faith in the client's ability to direct the therapeutic process, is as revolutionary (and as unthinkable to some) today as it was at the time of its original formulation decades ago. Quotes from contemporary students and therapists highlight the continuing relevance of the person-centered approach. The author also recounts her own growth from a person crippled by introjected conditions of worth to a self-directed, highly congruent individual.

In Chapter Two, Brown offers a fine presentation of Rogers' "nineteen propositions." Her interpretations of the propositions (in which Rogers articulated the basics of the person-centered approach) are succinct, clear, and thoughtful, and are accompanied by "Experiential Exercises" that invite the reader to engage more personally and vitally with these fundamental propositions. In this way, Rogers' postulations can be better understood and assimilated by the reader. I recommend that even experienced therapists read this chapter carefully and undertake these exercises. Brown has provided a great platform for enhancing one's understanding of Rogers' original theory. (I should note that Brown presents exercises and questions to readers throughout the book, making this a very interactive and engaging work.)

In Chapter Three, "The Actualising Tendency," the author deftly handles issues relating to this core concept of person-centered

theory. For example, are the actualizing tendency (“the natural and uncensored experiencing of the organism to realise itself,” p. 43) and socialization necessarily in conflict? No, answers Brown; healthy socialization (socialization that does not impose “conditions of worth”) is supportive of the actualizing tendency. Culture and nature need not conflict; only pathological socialization places restraints on the actualizing self. To read her on this point (and I have merely summarized her analysis) is to admire her mastery of the fine points of Rogerian theory, which mastery she exhibits throughout the book.

Chapter Four offers insights on the tension between lived, organismic experience and introjected “conditions of worth.” These introjected conditions of worth profoundly distort our relations with ourselves and with others. She refutes critics who charge Rogers with undervaluing the social dimension in his work. Brown sees Rogers’ original theory as needing no amendment in this regard; rather, the extension of the three “core conditions” (empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard) to ourselves and others is fundamental to both Rogers’ theory and authentic social existence.

Chapters Five and Six examine the concepts of the “fully functioning person” and the “dysfunctional personality,” respectively. (I must confess that I’ve always found functionalist rhetoric distasteful. Do we, as humans, “function” or do we think, feel, act, love, hate, grieve, etcetera? The term “function” sounds so mechanistic and degrading applied to people.) Brown does a fine job of presenting the human realities represented by these terms, and does note in connection with the term “dysfunctional personality” that “Rogers believed that psychopathologizing clients and/or forcing diagnostic labels on people were unhelpful in facilitating an individual’s psychological adjustment and behavior” (p. 80). I couldn’t agree more, and I wish therapists would discard such terminology.

In Chapter Seven, Rogers’ “necessary and sufficient conditions” (empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard) are explained. These, of course, are fundamental to the person-centered psychotherapeutic relationship, and the author stresses that this relationship is the therapy in the person-centered approach. She asserts that the authentic person-centered therapist must not limit the extension of these core conditions to the therapeutic arena; rather, the therapist must make the practice of extending these conditions to self and others an integral aspect of his or her life. Though Rogers himself

was not so uncompromising in this regard, I find Brown's position commendable.

Chapter Eight, "The Other Characteristic and Relational Depth," enters the realm of the transpersonal and paranormal, a realm also explored in Chapter Nine. Brown quotes Rogers (from *A Way of Being*):

When I am at my best, as a group facilitator or a therapist, I discover "another characteristic." I find that when I am closest to my inner, intuitive self, when I am somehow in touch with the unknown me, when perhaps I am in a slightly altered state of consciousness, then whatever I do seems to be full of healing. (Rogers, 1980, p. 29)

Rogers also noted that in such states, the therapeutic relationship "transcends itself and becomes part of something larger" (Rogers, 1980, p. 29). Brown equates this with what she has termed "relational depth," occurrences of intense, profound rapport in therapy. Needless to say, person-centered therapy can be quite conducive to such occurrences. The level of communication between therapist and client in such episodes can attain remarkable heights, and the author describes a personal session as a therapist that involved a joint out-of-body experience (OBE) in association with intense emotional communion (pp. 108-109). As the author notes, precognition ("future sight") can also operate significantly in therapeutic sessions involving relational depth (pp. 113-114). Experiences of this sort often have tremendous healing effects. This reinforces my conviction that an embrace of parapsychology and transpersonal psychology will be key to the progress of psychotherapy (and of human relations generally).

In Chapter Ten, the themes of diversity and oppression are discussed. Discrimination and oppression distort all human relationships at this time, and psychotherapeutic relationships are no exception. Racism, sexism, ageism, and other forms of oppression are all relevant to address in any discussion of the abuses and limitations of psychotherapy; but most relevant, though little mentioned in the book, is the pernicious medicalization of human problems, with its poisonous, stigmatizing rhetoric of "mental illness" (in all its "diagnostic" categories) and the brutal practice of involuntary mental "hospitalization." This form of oppression generally goes

unrecognized as such. Person-centered therapists should be at the forefront in challenging these quasi-medical strategies of radical invalidation and dehumanization.

Experiential therapies are the subject of Chapter Eleven. The person-centered approach can be productively augmented with therapeutic approaches involving heightened sensory awareness, contact with nature, and artistic expression, to yield impressive results. The parameters of Rogerian therapy are being reshaped by an ever-deepening appreciation of the needs and capacities of the human organism-in-evolution. This productive integration of new therapeutic insights and practices into the person-centered approach should not be confused with a cheap, opportunistic eclecticism.

In Chapter Twelve, "Criticisms, Controversies and an Interconnected World," Brown notes that person-centered therapy "remains one of the most misunderstood and mismanaged of all the psychological modalities offered today" (p. 153). She adeptly rebuts criticisms from various sources, including such luminaries as B. F. Skinner, Martin Buber, and Rollo May. In response to Rollo May's concern that person-centered therapy conduces to "narcissism," she quotes Rogers' observation that "self-love does not lead to narcissism but to sound action of a realistic nature" (p. 157). Later in the chapter, she asks readers to consider that "social essence and individualistic development [can] merge harmoniously together" (p. 160).

As her experiences presented throughout this book attest, Christine Brown has undertaken a profoundly transformative journey using the person-centered approach. This makes her a very capable guide for others. Readers who seriously engage with this book will be well-prepared for their own journey into Rogerian self-actualization; and they, in turn, can become capable guides for others. Read this book, and urge your students and clients to read it also. The person-centered approach has a future, and that future is now.