Implications on Inclusion of Individuals of Minority Status In Person-Centered Encounter Groups

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Abstract

This article explores and discusses the experiences of individuals of minority status in person-centered encounter groups. Although encounter groups are inherently person-centered and open to expression of human experience, the authors of this paper have witnessed an emotional "shutting down" in some individuals of minority status who attempt to speak of their experiences as individuals of minority status. Although we contend the core conditions are sufficient for these individuals to have a meaningful experience in an encounter group, we believe not all members experience the core conditions and thus the conditions are not always being met; in particular the condition of empathy. We explore why empathy may not be communicated or received by both individuals of majority and minority statuses, respectively. We examine and discuss the concept of topical groups, as well as the potential of implementing person-centered facilitators who could aid in maintaining the core conditions during especially vulnerable exchanges where members in the group are having difficulty experiencing and communicating the core conditions.

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Introduction

Much of the current multicultural counseling literature has emphasized the need for sensitivity as it relates to diversity issues in groups. Anderson (2007) discusses the ways in which multicultural group work can be a powerful tool for healing using culturally informed assessments, interventions, and treatment strategies with group members. This type of group work advocates intentional multicultural competence and directive interventions. In our review of group work literature we found that there is a general emphasis that the, "therapist[s] must help the group move past a focus on concrete cultural differences to transcultural – that is, universal – responses to human situations and tragedies" (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005, p. 8). In this type of group work, the group leader makes assumptions about what is best for the group members.

As individuals who are passionate about the person-centered approach and person-centered encounter groups, we want to acknowledge our deep wish to maintain non-directivity at all times in encounter groups. We also agree that non-directivity is a major component in fostering a therapeutic psychological climate based upon Rogers' (1959) core conditions (Bozarth, 2005). So in an

attempt to more thoroughly understand our experiences of encounter groups we will explore factors that could affect the maintenance of the core conditions in person-centered encounter groups.

The concept of having a topical group or naming a group may imply an abandonment of non-directivity. However, we contend that having a group labeled a "diversity group" may help to create a climate characterized by the core conditions. The atmosphere in this type of "diversity group" may allow for the processing of individual differences and help those from diverse backgrounds feel freer to bring these issues out into the open. Additionally, the naming of a group may also imply that the climate is explicitly person-centered. Many group members who are individuals of minority status may be fearful to talk for a number of reasons, in less specific encounter groups. Such reasons may include feeling alone, feeling misunderstood about their cultural context, feeling responsible for educating the group about their own cultural context, or feeling the need to preface everything with a reference to their own experience, which may be shameful and lead to fears of being unaccepted by the group.

For example, the authors were members of an encounter group where a group member had been sharing a piece of her personal history. This person had attributed her intolerable feelings associated with this experience to her minority status. At one point, another group member questioned the speaker as to whether or not the cause of her emotional pain truly lied within her experience of being a minority. Other members in the group chimed in similarly, and few group members responded empathically or supported the original speaker's expression of her experience. The speaker began to cry and abruptly left the room. Observing this, and other similar experiences, caused the authors to wonder how members in the group could have responded differently during this encounter.

We propose that the implementation of topical "diversity" encounter group experiences and/or having facilitators who are particularly interested in maintaining the core conditions, might be steps in addressing some of the issues we have perceived in encounter groups. In general, we maintain that it is not possible for the core conditions to continuously be met in person-centered encounter groups. Additionally, we argue that if the core conditions

were always met, individuals of minority status would adequately receive empathy and the potential for harm would be greatly reduced. However, because this does not always occur, we believe that further exploration of these issues relating to diversity is important. We also endorse further consideration of the experiences of individuals of minority status, and how encounter group experiences affects these individuals. The purpose of this paper is to review Rogers' key ideas regarding the encounter group experience while reconciling our experiences of encounter groups as well as considering the role topical groups or facilitators could play in maintaining the core conditions.

An Introduction to Rogers' Theory on Person-Centered Encounter Groups

Beginning in the mid 1940's, the idea and awareness of groups throughout Western culture seemed to be spreading. Rogers (1970) describes his initial experimentations with groups at the University of Chicago in 1946 and 1947, when he and other individuals attempted to facilitate an experiential process focused around interpersonal relationships and personal growth for professional counselors of the Veterans Administration. He discusses how this experience helped to merge the inspiration of certain groups that were initially a mixture of human relation skills influenced by Lewinian, Gestalt psychology, and client-centered therapy (Rogers, 1970), into the person-centered approach and groups which Rogers defines as "encounter groups." Rogers describes this element of encounter groups by stating the following: "this tends to emphasize personal growth and the development and improvement of interpersonal communication and relationships through an experiential process" (Rogers, 1970, p. 5). He discusses in detail the artful process of encounter groups in relation to person-centered theory.

According to Rogers (1970), "trusting" in the group is an essential component of a person-centered encounter group. He describes his attempts to believe in the group and its members as an organism that is meant to develop as it will, and so there is never the intention to influence the group in any way. Brodley (2006) clarifies

how within person-centered theory, one is never attempting to make specific processes occur, based on the belief in the actualizing tendency and humans' natural tendency towards growth (Rogers, 1980). Thus in order to embrace an understanding of the person-centered encounter group, one must acknowledge the non-directive attitude. Brodley (2006) describes this attitude as a conglomeration of feelings, intentions, and behaviors conveyed that protect an individual's sense of freedom, self-determination, autonomy, and sense of self, while respecting and acknowledging requests or questions the individual might have and also responding in an empathic manner. To be non-directive in a group means to be empathically following the other members, and responding to them when compelled.

Rogers also discusses the concept of facilitators within his writings (Rogers, 1970; Rogers, 1980). Although facilitators are not necessary in order to conduct a person-centered encounter group, they may be helpful in that they take on the role of striving to provide the core conditions as frequently as possibly during the group experience (M.S. Warner, personal communication, June 10, 2011). Groups members or facilitators might know when to respond to others in the group, because they are deeply aware of themselves and strive to portray their actual experiences. This describes the concept of congruence (Rogers, 1957), one of Rogers' core conditions within person-centered theory. Individuals in the encounter group who embrace Rogers' (1959) core conditions also attempt to accept others' experiences with unconditional positive regard. Therefore although one is genuine with one's own internal reactions, there is an attempt to accept others' experiences as a reality and a striving towards empathic understanding and prizing. Part of the essence and artfulness of the theory is that a person may be able to place some parts of themselves aside in order to be empathic towards others in the group, and still not lose those parts of themselves.

Encounter Groups and Diverse Populations

Much of Rogers' later work with groups involved the bringing together of social and political parties in encounter group experiences. He traveled throughout the world and gained exposure to a diverse array of people and cultures as he facilitated encounter groups in places such as Japan, Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil, Austria, Hungary, Poland, France, Switzerland, Germany, Finland, Italy, Spain, the Soviet Union, England, Ireland, South America, Africa, and the United States (Rogers, 1989). In doing so, he was able to see the way in which the person-centered approach was applicable to all human beings, and wrote extensively about his experiences. Rogers writes:

> *In working with international groups, it is fascinating to watch the development of appreciation for the customs and beliefs of very diverse nationalities, races, and cultures. The reactions of the members and facilitators to the person-centered approach has been overwhelmingly positive. They speak of loss of fear in trying to communicate, a feeling of being heard, and an awareness of the beauty and richness of cultural differences (Rogers, 1989, pp. 443-444).*

Rogers further describes the way in which he feels diversity issues are generally addressed in person-centered groups where individuals of various backgrounds or minority status exist. He expresses how national, racial, and cultural differences seem to become unimportant in encounter group experiences as members discover themselves as individuals. Rogers describes how members seem to embrace the potential for closeness and understanding around more general "human" issues or statements that everyone in the group might identify with, and how cultural issues are often not discussed due to the focus of deeply personal issues (Rogers, 1989). Based on Rogers' personal experiences with encounter groups that have been comprised of diverse individuals and populations, it seems he feels confident that the person-centered approach, based upon the maintenance of the core conditions, seems to fit within the context of any human being.

Other client-centered theorists seem to agree with Rogers' views. Bozarth (Bozarth, 2005) discusses his personal experience in an encounter group, and relays that the experiences of the relationships formed between group members "trumped everything else" that occurred during the group process. He describes his belief that the most important factor in encounter group experience is the psychological climate created by the maintenance of the core conditions (Bozarth, 2005). This outcome can occur with or without facilitators, as group members may perceive the core conditions within the psychological climate from other group members in the same way as they would a facilitator.

Person-centered theory postulates that theoretical thoughts are not in the therapist's mind when responding to the client, and there is a striving towards being "in the moment" with the client in order to fully grasp an understanding of his or her experience (Rogers & Wood, 1974). Similarly, we argue that facilitators should also embrace this way of being in order to fully understand members of the group. This is so the facilitator does not become influenced by intrusive thoughts that might alter the way in which the person talking is presenting their experience. As Rogers indicates, "one does not enter a group as a tabula rasa" (Rogers, 1970, p. 44), however there are certain attitudes and ways in which a person might attempt to be "with" others while maintaining the core conditions. In *Carl Rogers Councils a Black Client,* Moodley, Lago, and Talahite (2004) discuss issues of difference in relation to client-centered therapy. They describe how in an individual therapy session, the therapist places any systematic ideas aside in order to orient himself or herself to the client and does not view the person in any categorical way. They note further:

> *The therapist enters the therapeutic relationship with a general knowledge of the universality of human nature, and openness to the myriad ways in which an individual may express that humanness. The therapist perceives the client before her/him in the present moment as unlike any client who will come before this client, or any client who will come after. This means that the therapist working in a non directive client-centered way would not make any assumptions about*

how the client's race and culture for example, had impacted the client's experience and development. This is not to say the therapist is not aware of racial and cultural issues as impacting on the client's experience. Rather it is saying the therapist is not preconceiving what the particular impact has been (Moodley et al., 2004, pp. 1-2).

This conceptualization of the person-centered theory in relation to diversity can also be applied to encounter group experiences. An embracing of the general understanding of "humanness" and "human tendency" is one of the central components of Rogers' (1959; 1970) theory and is discussed by several other person-centered theorists. However, the current authors wonder how an individuals of minority status i.e. race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability/disability, and even 'first time' encounter group members, might feel about the basis of the person-centered theory in relation to diversity components, and whether or not minority group members feel a sense of the core conditions in the encounter group experience.

Personal Accounts of Diversity in Encounter Group Experiences

In our experience in encounter groups, the topic of diversity or difference has tended to be specifically emotionally charged for some, if not all members of the encounter group. In *On Encounter Groups,* Rogers (1970) discusses a study that e concerned encounter groups in general, which showed an increase in the expression and intensity of feelings of individuals who were part of an encounter group experience. In *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy,* Yalom (2005) states, "cultural minorities in a predominantly Caucasian group may feel excluded because of different cultural attitudes toward disclosure, interaction, and affective expression" (p. 8). Additionally, multicultural theorists Rosenblum & Travis (2006) agree that diversity issues often elicit discontent, and individuals of minority status may feel isolated, invisible, and marginalized in relation to the majority culture. It would make sense that a group specifically focused on topics of diversity, or a group who organically seemed to be processing issues of diversity, would be even more saturated with feelings of intensity

and vulnerability and might appreciate an environment where the core conditions were explicitly sought after.

We have gained further awareness through our own experiences in encounter groups that it is possible that members in an encounter group who occupy a minority status are more apt to be emotionally "shut down," or not free to express themselves, when they perceive the majority of the remaining members in the group to occupy a social majority status. This seems more likely to occur when the individual of minority status feels alone or among very few others who occupy a minority status within the context of the larger encounter group setting. We contend that during an encounter group experience, sensitivity and awareness of others, respect, and a strong attempt to understand other group members from their own frame of reference is important. However as Bozarth (2005) describes, one of the most important factors found to be essential in the experience of encounter groups in relation to safety, is the psychological climate, and that the group is maintaining the core conditions. This is often an extremely difficult feat!

As we are attempting to be respectful of others, we do this in a way in which we are striving to provide empathic understanding towards others' experiences, particularly when issues of difference are being discussed. We believe that although we do not want to categorize any individual in the group, it may be helpful to be aware of basic cultural norms different than our majority culture, such as racism, power differentials, sexism, heterosexism, male dominated societies, etc. It is important to us that we refrain from assuming how these issues might have, or have not been experienced by others. However, a consideration of differences may be helpful so that individuals of minority status do not feel as though they must "preface" things they say in the group and teach others who are unaware, if others at least have a general level of knowledge. After all, many individuals who occupy a minority status are expected to have knowledge about the majority American culture in order to operate in western society.

Failure to Maintain the Core Conditions

We contend that Rogers' statements about the assumed overall "human being" experience can minimize the experiences of minority individuals who have been affected by current or historical racism, power differentials, sexism, heterosexism, male dominated societies, etc. Moodley et al. (2004) discusses Rogers' work in the "Right to be Desperate" and "Anger and Hurt," and describes how he seems less responsive than usual to the client's communications about racism and also seems cautious in his use of language in relation to race. However, the client did express responses that indicated he felt understood. Still, we do wonder whether talking about issues of difference could leave a person feeling vulnerable and whether or not this might affect the encounter group experience for individuals of minority status.

Generally the authors believe theoretically that the principles within the person-centered approach (PCA) can address issues of difference within the context of encounter groups, but our experience of the theory has been different than what has occurred in reality. For example, in an idealistic sense, if all individuals within a group are comprised of members familiar with the PCA, this might affect the nature of the group. If the group members were consistently striving to make an effort to meet Rogers' (1959) conditions to the extent that they are able, there may be no need for additional support in the form of a facilitator (we will discuss the benefits of having a facilitator in groups where the majority of members are not familiar with the PCA). It is our belief that the core conditions are sufficient, but that there are times when these idealistic strivings have not occurred, as in the example discussed previously in this paper. Specifically, we are referring to the core condition of empathic understanding and the perception of empathic understanding.

It has been our experience during some encounter groups that many individuals in the group do indeed experience empathy when a person is speaking in the group, but they elect not to communicate their empathy for personal reasons that are unknown to the potential recipient of the empathic communication. This sometimes leads the person who seeks empathic understanding to not be heard or received. They may feel that they have presented vulnerable and

personal information to the group, but that the majority of the group is not 'with them' in their process. This could be a result of individuals in the group genuinely not experiencing empathy, but this seems less likely especially in the context of an encounter group comprised of person-centered practitioners who are primed to be attuned to empathic experiences. Let us assume that more group members experience empathy than is expressed, and for various reasons many elect not to verbally communicate such reactions. What factors inhibit group members from communicating empathy in the context of a group? Some reasons may include shyness, feeling like an outsider in a clique of long-time group members, or assuming that others will speak up. There are likely as many reasons as there are individuals electing not to verbally communicate their empathy, but it is a question that may provide insight into why the core condition of empathic understanding is not being met in some encounter groups.

In addition to verbal empathic communications, empathy may also be communicated using body language (e.g. eye contact, facial expressions, focused attention on the speaker, etc.), although these means *may* be less impactful than verbal communication. What prevents the individual in the group who is presenting or processing an issue from receiving the verbal or behavioral manifestations of empathy? Are group members sharing personal reactions rather than expressing empathy? Is the individual unable to receive empathy because they are shut down or removed themselves from the group? We think these and other questions are important to consider in determining how the core condition of empathic understanding is not being met in some encounter groups.

Furthermore, when the topic of difference or diversity has been discussed, members are prone to becoming particularly emotionally charged and it seems, from our experience, that individuals of minority status can become emotionally 'shut down' in encounter groups in which we have observed/participated. In these instances, we assert that facilitators are important.

Can Facilitators or Topical Groups be Helpful with Issues of Diversity?

Rogers (1970) stated, "a facilitator can develop, in a group that meets intensively, a psychological climate of safety in which freedom of expression and reduction of defensiveness gradually occur" (p. 6). He goes on to say that certain factors such as mutual trust and reduction of defenses help contribute to the freedom in groups, which then lead to significant learnings. Therefore, facilitators may be helpful in providing a particularly safe climate, which embodies the core conditions when issues of difference and diversity are being discussed. Another essential factor to consider is the theoretical orientation of the facilitator. We assert that an encounter group with a facilitator of an orientation other than the PCA may look different than a group facilitated by individuals who embrace the person-centered approach (Bozarth, 2005). This is because the sole purpose of facilitators is to be members in the group who make strong attempts to provide the core conditions. The authors believe that if facilitators are present in groups at all, they should be familiar with the PCA and have an understanding of Rogers' core conditions. Sanford (1999) also agrees that, "a deep understanding of the PCA on the part of the facilitators is important…" (p. 24).

Bozarth (2005) describes how an individual's perception of encounter group experiences is affected by whether or not the individual perceived the conditions in other members in the group, not the facilitators. He describes how in groups where no facilitators are present, anyone can act as a facilitator. When individuals are able to feel a sense of congruence and are free of values of worth and can be unconditionally received and understood in the group, they are able to be more empathic towards other individuals (Bozarth, 2005). The authors agree with Bozarth's statements. However, we also contend that facilitators provide empathic understanding and possibly a more stable psychological environment at times when the conditions are not being met. Although we do not maintain that facilitators are always necessary in providing the core conditions, as members are fully capable of providing the same environment, facilitators can strive to assure they are particularly empathic and are

attempting to provide an environment which embodies the core conditions when issues of difference or diversity are being discussed. This may allow individuals of minority status to feel secure in times where the conditions otherwise would not have been met.

In *Experiences in Relatedness: Groupwork and the Person-Centered Approach*, Ruth Sanford (1999) elaborates about her experiences of being in encounter groups with facilitators. The authors agree with Sanford on key points regarding facilitators including: "it is important that someone provide the facilitative conditions" (p. 22). Sanford believes providing the conditions to be very important and describes how the provision of the conditions can look differently depending on whether or not the group is composed of members who are familiar with the principles within the person-centered approach. She also notes similar to Bozarth (2005) that if the group is primarily composed of members who are familiar with the PCA, then a person designated as a facilitator may not be necessary, because certain group members may act in a facilitative way (Sanford, 1999). Just as Sanford believes that facilitators are "…important, even necessary, if a growthful climate is to be provided" (Sanford, 1999, p.22) for groups where members have less familiarity with the PCA, we maintain that facilitators can be just as important in groups that are comprised of minority individuals and can help provide a "growthful climate" (Sanford, 1999, p.22) and a "climate of safety" (Rogers, 1970, p. 6) when discussions around difference take place in the group. There are several reasons that we believe this to be the case. In instances when diversity or difference emerge as a topic in an encounter group, the group facilitators can do much by being cognizant of their role of developing a "psychological climate of safety" (Rogers, 1970, p. 6) among all members, by striving to maintain the core conditions. Rogers noted as a facilitator he wants to,

> *make the climate psychologically safe for the individual.*
> *[Rogers] wants him [the group member(s)] to feel from the*
> *first that if he risks saying something highly personal, or*
> *absurd, or hostile, or cynical, there will be at least one*
> *person in the circle who respects him enough to hear him*

> *clearly... and listen to that statement as an authentic*
> *expression of himself (Rogers, 1970, p. 47).*

Rogers goes on to say that he desires for members to feel that they have someone psychologically with them in intensely painful or joyful moments in a group (Rogers, 1970). The authors wish to endorse this model of facilitation especially as it relates to individuals of minority status who may be sharing intimate parts of their experience.

In the documentary film *Journey into Self* (McGaw, 1969), which is one of Rogers' most well-known encounter groups, issues of diversity were discussed often in the group. Carlene, an African American woman in the group who identifies as "Negro", speaks of her experience of being a racial minority. She describes the experience of feeling that she is always "holding back" because she has to always think "Negro first" in her life (McGaw, 1969). She also speaks about how accepted she felt in this particular group. In this group the two facilitators as well as the group members as a whole, seemed to be invested in maintaining the core conditions, and appeared to have a desire to be empathic and accepting of those in the group. We use this example to illustrate that in groups when issues of diversity are being discussed and the group members or facilitators have an interest in maintaining the core conditions, it is less likely that individuals of minority status will have the experience we previously described as an emotional shutting down in the group. We assert that if this is the case, it would contribute to an outcome where members become more congruent than they were prior to being in the group.

Ruth Sanford provided an example of an encounter group which she refers to as "Witwatersrand 1986" which took place in South Africa and consisted of several diverse members, as well as facilitators who were highly familiar and knowledgeable about the PCA. She considered the group to have been successful[1] in times

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[1] **a person-centered group can be defined as effective when a significant number of members become more congruent than they were prior to the group. Congruence, by definition of the theory, is

when "feelings ran high" (Sanford, 1999, p. 25) and recalls an exchange between a Caucasian group member and an African American group member who shared her feelings about her wish that "…all the blacks would go away" (Sanford, 1999, p. 25). Sanford recalled feeling "hopeful" as members were honest and were allowed to fully be themselves and still be accepted. Despite a recognition in the group overall that they were far from settling all of their differences, they seemed to agree that they could "work together" (Sanford, 1999, p. 25). Additionally, Sanford noted that a survey given to the members of the group after it had finished indicated that the element that group members found most helpful was the manner in which "the facilitators listened deeply and let the members know that they had understood" (Sanford, 1999, p. 25).

Sanford (1999) also discussed her experiences of having departed from the traditional pattern of person-centered groups as she and her colleagues developed what they referred to as *Experiencing Diversity* workshops between the years 1994-1998 (p. 79). These groups, which were comprised of members who came from diverse backgrounds, were a product of Sanford's observation that most members in the person-centered encounter groups she had attended were white, middle-class individuals. She hoped the implementation of the workshops would reach individuals of minority status who were interested in the PCA. Sanford (1999) discussed that she noticed how certain group members had felt unsafe and disheartened in the person-centered encounter groups she had attended. Sanford noted that the *Experiencing Diversity* workshops were comprised of person-centered principles, and appeared similar to typical person-centered encounter groups, however she stressed the added importance of genuinely attending to and hearing each individual in the workshops where diversity was key. When this was achieved, she felt strongly that the *Experiencing Diversity* workshops were a truly rich experience of diversity exploration (Sanford, 1999). The authors support the notion of having a topical group or labeling a group "diversity" and making a particular effort to maintain the core conditions in such a group. We

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that the individual's self-concept becomes more aligned with her organismic experience (Rogers, 1959, p. 292).

also assert that it is likely individuals interested in exploring issues of difference would feel particularly safe and attended to in relation to such topics.

Final Thoughts

Within the scope of this paper, we explored have issues surrounding the experience of individuals of minority status in encounter groups. The authors discussed several of the trends that they have noticed and stated that individuals of minority status could experience difficulty expressing their true selves within the context of encounter groups when the psychological climate does not embody the core conditions. We also explored the notion that individuals in the group are not always able to experience or express empathic understanding towards others in the group. Lastly we presented ideas regarding facilitators and topical groups as possible means to better maintain the core conditions when issues of diversity are being discussed. We firmly hope that that this paper will stimulate further discourse, deeper exploration, and future research regarding these trends which we believe would contribute in a meaningful way to the broader person-centered and encounter group literature.

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