

Pas de Deux: A Student's Journey in a Person-Centered Independent Study Experience

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Abstract

A graduate student reflects on her experience of an independent study of the Person-Centered Approach (PCA). She recounts her initial difficulties with the approach as practiced by one of her professors. She describes a subsequent episode with the professor and considers the episode in terms of her personal growth, the goals of her independent study, and implications for her professional counseling work.

Introduction

I am nearing the completion of an extraordinary learning experience. I am a graduate student in counseling, seeking to work with K-12 students in the school system. As my time of formal study draws to a close, I find within myself a desire to know one theory well and have a base from which to draw support in my professional work. I am exploring the Person-Centered Approach (PCA) as a possible theoretical and practical base for my future practice. I was drawn to the PCA through my course readings, class discussions, and my struggle adjusting to the approach *as practiced by LA* one of my professors. In working through my difficulties with the professor, I experienced great freedom and great excitement in the learning process. I subsequently asked the professor to work with me on an independent study. The independent study experience was far deeper and more engaging than I had hoped it could be.

My Difficulties Adjusting to the PCA as Practiced by My Professor

My academic experiences had accustomed me to viewing professors as experts. They lectured, handed out the required and necessary information, and tolerated students' ideas. Student engagement was often professed, but not facilitated. They were in charge, set the standards, and I was to do what they said. As an eager student, I worked diligently within this system. However, my first two courses with the person-centered professor challenged my notions of academic process, structure, and responsibility. In the opening weeks of those courses, I thought that I would never be able to relate to the professor, and that I might not achieve the B grade needed to continue in the graduate program. At the end of the courses, I wrote to the professor saying that I wanted to share my transformation with her, both as a way of expressing my gratitude to her and also as a way of better understanding what had happened in me. The two courses were slightly different emotionally for me. However, the process was fundamentally the same so I will describe what transpired as a single flow of events.

The first class was basically straightforward. I met the professor, received the course information, met the other students, and left feeling that I could handle the work. During the next several classes, I became unsettled. I experienced the professor as very much present, listening, attentive, teaching. Yet I also experienced a gap that I was not comfortable with. I did not pick up from the professor the pattern of support and encouragement that I had experienced from other professors. The gap became a chasm for me. I became very frightened of receiving a low grade. I lost sleep over this and began physically dragging.

Something kept nagging at me, however. I knew I could do the work. I felt convinced that the professor was as fully engaged in listening and teaching as she appeared to be. But I did have an answer to a basic student question, "What does the professor want?" or, more precisely, "What do I have to do to get a good grade?" I feel a bit embarrassed now, after this process has run its course, to realize that that was really my question. I squirmed in my seat over what to do. I considered dropping the courses or taking them at a later time.

After the third or fourth week, I finally decided that I would do my best, learn the most I could, and accept the professor's decision about my grade. In other words, I took ownership of my portion of my course. The professor had a gift for creating a stimulating learning environment. My colleagues were a unique and interesting mix. The material was vital to my program and intriguing. I began thoroughly to enjoy my classes.

After I took ownership and began to enjoy the process, I suddenly realized that that was what the professor had wanted for me as a student. That experience of ownership was what the chasm had left a space for. What a gift! What a feeling of freedom, a feeling that flows over me again as I describe it.

I wrote to the professor, thanking her for having the courage to teach as she does. From my experience, she stood alone in her approach to teaching, and to teach so differently would no doubt be a challenge for her. I was deeply grateful for the opportunity to study with her, and later I asked her to work with me on an independent study of the PCA.

My Independent Study Experience

I began the semester with a working title: Person-Centered Therapy and Emotionally Disturbed Adolescents. The professor and I met once each week to process my experience of the readings. As I began to appreciate more deeply the trust and respect for both parties that is integral to Rogers' (1959) thinking, the sessions themselves became an integral part of my processing. The changes I experienced can be seen in the changes I made to my study titles.

I learned that the person-centered way of being is rooted in the foundational attitudes of empathy, genuineness, and unconditional personal regard (Bozarth, 1998; Rogers, 1980). The six core conditions that Rogers (1959) described as necessary and sufficient must occur for positive change to occur (Bozarth, 1998):

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. (Rogers, 1959, pg. 213)

Within the first weeks, after reading Rogers (1980) and Bozarth (1998), I thought that the independent study title should be: The Person-Centered Approach with Children Who are Diagnosed as Emotionally or Behaviorally Disturbed. Certainly this was too many words for the computer format in the Registrar's Office, but it is more reflective of my growing understanding that the PCA is a way of being engaged humanly with another human being.

The contemplated change in title for the independent study also reflects my growing understanding of the limits of diagnostic labels, the de-humanizing effect that the classifying process can have on both client and counselor. The latter may pigeonhole the former, possibly shutting down vital, open interaction (Bozarth, 1998; Rogers, 1977). As Bozarth (1998) states, the person-centered "counselor seeks to have no presuppositions about what a client might do, or be, or become. . . . Using external frames of reference are, at best, interferences that effect clients' inclinations to find their own directions and ways at their own pace" (p. 127).

As the independent study continued even further, the question of a title for the course became moot. I began to relish the freedom to learn and the companionship of my professor as I engaged in understanding what was happening in me as I encountered the PCA readings. I began to realize that my primary study text was my professor herself. Her way of being with me as an educator facilitated my exploration (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Each week the readings discussion took us to new places, led by my interest as a student. I truly felt the exhilaration of learning as described by Rogers (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994), "the insatiable curiosity... to absorb everything [I] can see or hear or read about a topic that has inner meaning" (p. 35).

Ultimately I realized that the independent study was about me, about the mutuality of the person-centered learning approach, about the depth I could reach in being truly open in the presence of a genuine, empathic, prizing companion (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994).

The Episode

As I was leaving one meeting with my professor, she mentioned that the weekly faculty meetings have a marvelous open person-centered quality. I was so happy to think that these people who are providing such a caring atmosphere for me may be experiencing this approach with each other. I said this to my professor. As I said the words, I did feel a bit flat in emotional expression. I could sense my habitual hesitation. If time had stopped and I were to describe my sense of self at that moment, I would have said that I was being

respectful of the professor's personal space, offering my feelings, but not intruding on her personal experience.

As it was, the professor simply nodded and moved on in the conversation. I felt bereft, because she is a very expressive and responsive person. I knew that if she understood how very touched I was to hear her sense of the faculty meetings, she would have responded to me and to my feelings. I therefore decided to repeat my statement because I thought that she had not understood. Indeed, I had failed to convey my feeling. My words described my feeling but my expression and tone and body had held back the fullness of what I was feeling. The sixth condition outlined by Rogers (1959) had not been met. My professor had not perceived my intended empathic understanding.

I did know intuitively that there was something lacking in my movement towards her. I also knew that I was the one who had to make the effort to communicate my feelings, or the moment of my deeper self-giving would pass. I did not want that moment to pass. I wanted to convey what I felt and I wanted to know that she had perceived my feeling as well as my words. So, I pushed myself and restated what I had said:

M: It's important to me that you understand how glad I am that you professors have such depth in your meetings.

P (her face registering surprise and attentiveness): I did not know that.

At this point, I was startled, but really not surprised. We talked then about what had happened and had not happened between us in this interchange, looking for words to express the feelings. My professor shared her felt sense that I might be refusing to share myself with her. I could feel the truth of this. We were at the end of our session, and so closed our conversation, but the echoes continued within me.

The following day, I had a driving trip of several hours. In the solitude of the moving car, I contemplated my inner stirrings. The word "refusal" resonated within me. I sensed however that refusal was not the deepest layer, since I could feel that I had no reason, no cause for refusing to share myself with my professor. I moved through my litany of what I might be experiencing, ruling out certain patterns that had at times been dominant in me. I knew that refusal to share with the professor was not about feeling unworthy, and not about feeling I would be found insufficient (Rogers, 1977). As I drove along, struggling to release my awareness into a more conscious level, a memory surfaced.

My Learning Moments

When I was seven years old, I burst through a bedroom door from a closet and startled a man I knew very well who was in the act of sexually abusing a young child. A close-knit group had all gathered for dinner at a family home and the children were scampering about the house, playing games. I had run through a closet in the hallway that connected to the rear of the bedroom closet. I was laughing and looking for my little friend. Suddenly all that changed when the man grabbed my arm, threatening my life and that of my parents if I ever were to tell anyone what I had seen.

He was very convincing. I repressed the memory for over 30 years. The force of his threat haunted me quietly and insistently. My family, though unaware of the details, has described this in simple terms: Marsha changed when she was seven. I moved from

being an active, adventurous child to a quiet reader and thinker who climbed trees only to get away from people. As I moved into adulthood, I carried vestiges of this man's threat in my way of being with others. I was hesitant, calm, and reserved in personal interchanges. I had learned how to live with my fear.

As I continued my driving journey, the sun streaming through the windshield met this re-emerging memory with a deeper clarity. I refuse to share myself because I am afraid of being hurt if I intrude on someone. I hold back because I am afraid of bursting uninvited into the other's space.

I refuse. I hold back. I express myself in words quite clearly but the emotional content—the direct link with my tender, vital center—this I reserve. I am afraid of being injured. I am afraid the other will kill the vitality and the flow of life that I feel constantly surging and swelling within me. I love who I am. I want to protect myself from the other. If I intrude on someone else's space, I may be struck down. If I burst in uninvited, I may be violently rejected, not for whom I am, but because knowing the intimate person of the other may be a danger to the other, and to me.

As I write these words, I experience catharsis. As the words leave the tip of my pencil and land on the paper, I know the duplicity of my fear. I had reason once to be afraid. I have reason now to trust. I can trust the strength and fullness of myself. I can trust the genuineness and unconditional personal regard of my person-centered professor. I can release myself to a person-centered way of being, trusting and prizing my own genuineness, trusting and prizing my professor. A family friend had once cast a long shadow of danger over the chance intimacies of life. Now my professor bids an unconditional welcome into her office, her time, her being.

Carl Rogers (1980) once wrote that at times when he was “closest to [his] inner intuitive self” (p. 129) just his presence seemed healing (cited in Lago & MacMillan, 1999). I understand that now. The shared prizing and trusting I experienced with my professor during this independent study has led to a greater human depth of encountering. I touched an old fear that had bound me; then I realized that the fear is a distraction. The fear is a vestige of an encounter that happened only once and need have no residual power over me. I choose to let go of the protective pattern of refusing to share myself with another.

Application to the Independent Study of the PCA

My purpose in pursuing an independent study was to explore the PCA as a possible theoretical and practical base for me as a counselor. A key element of my graduate education has been the department's emphasis on my person as the primary means of any counseling I might engage in. The work with my professor, encapsulated here in my reflections on one episode, facilitated my greater self-knowledge and genuineness in human interactions. I benefited from probing my way of being and the choices I have about my personal presence in relationships.

I experienced the power of the PCA as I moved toward a deeper understanding of my personal responses to others. I had been living largely unaware of the still active fetters linked to my memory of abuse. I did not fully know the power I possessed to be able step away from those fetters. My commitment to staying with myself through the resonance of the word “refusal” reflects what Rogers (1977) has described as the “power

of the powerless" (p. 186). My professor's person-centeredness was facilitative in my exercising my power to choose. She met my incongruence with unconditional positive regard. She reflected my feelings and conveyed a welcoming, caring understanding of me as a person. I recognized this and gained encouragement and strength from her confidence and trust in me, as I am. Rogers' (1959) necessary and sufficient conditions were present, living, and operative. I now experience within myself a way of being that feels more trusting of the other, more eager to move toward the other, more secure in engaging the other.

My greater clarity regarding my way of being with others may have direct significance on my practice as a counselor. I understand that I have spent decades living in fear of intruding on another's space. The fear inhibited my full expression of feelings even with those I prize and trust, such as my professor. Quite possibly, this fear could have inhibited my freedom in responding empathically to a client. Empathy may be seen as moving respectfully into the space of the other. My fear of intruding, were I to remain unaware of it, might possibly impinge on my congruence and inhibit the fullness of my empathic reflecting.

I do recognize the protective pattern of hesitancy that delineates my fear. There is a "companionableness" to my long accepted pattern of restrained interactive behavior. It has served me well. And it has served me poorly. Understanding the influences on my ways of interacting allows me greater choice (Rogers, 1977). Feeling myself unconditionally cared for and trusted regardless of my choice encourages me (Rogers, 1980). I chose now, both personally and professionally, to welcome a way of being that places my trust in the goodness of the other and of me. I embrace the PCA as a way of being that is congruent with my inner being and with my professional desires.

References

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