Person-Centered Training and Supervision
With Beginning Counselors

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Abstract

Although Rogers is a significant influence on current counseling and psychotherapy practice, person-centered therapy is in danger of extinction in the United States. One way to help it grow is by providing quality supervision to students who wish to become person-centered counselors and therapists. This paper introduces a five-factor model of PC training and supervision that is true to Rogers’ theory and consistent with current counseling standards. Factor 1, communicating the core conditions, is grounded in nondirective communication and the self-actualization principle. A direct application of Rogers’ theory of therapy, Factor 1 can be called “counselor-centered supervision.” The remaining four factors communicate trainer/supervisor-centered attitudes. Factor 2, training in the core conditions, introduces exercises for enhancing core-condition learning. Factor 3, evaluation, encompasses instruction in self-evaluation, supervisor feedback, and complying with external requirements for evaluation. Factor 4, supervising theoretical diversity, facilitates congruence in trainees’ self-directed theoretical propensities, and Factor 5, supervision ethics, asserts PC commitments to the American Counseling Association’s (2005) humanistic ethical guidelines and standards of practice.

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I. The Question of Person-Centered Viability

Carl Rogers’ influence on counselor training and supervision has been profound (Seeman, 1997). In 1985, more than 2,000 psychotherapists attending the first Evolution of Psychotherapy Conference in Phoenix, Arizona, recognized Rogers’ enormous contribution to psychotherapy with a two-minute standing ovation. A decade later, Goldfried (1996) opined,

“Rogers’ necessary conditions have now been thoroughly integrated into all major schools of psychotherapy, but most schools don’t accept the core conditions as being sufficient. This is why the person-centered approach is dying. If you think about it, there’s really no greater form of flattery to a theory of psychotherapy than to have become so integrated into the foundation of all psychotherapy that the approach is no longer necessary” (conference notes).

Provocative as Goldfried’s (1996) extinction hypothesis is, it has a couple of obvious flaws. First of all, for all bona fide therapies to agree that the core conditions are necessary is not tantamount to a thorough integration of Rogers’ (1957, 1959) PC approach. Person-centered empathy is a very particular type of understanding, one that is genuine and accepting. Rogers (1957, 1959) did not propose that the core conditions were necessary; he proposed that they were necessary and sufficient. Rogers’ theory regarded the conditions as having other characteristics, including that the client is incongruent, vulnerable, and anxious, and is also in psychological contact with an attentive, empathic therapist whose attitudes are (1) congruence, (2) unconditional positive regard, and (3) empathic understanding of the client’s internal frame of reference (Rogers, 1957, 1959). There is much more to person-centered theory-based practice than Goldfried’s (1996) thorough-integration hypothesis refers to. Secondly, the most endorsed therapeutic orientation is eclectic (Norcross, Hedges, & Castle, 2002), but this is not proof that PC is an insufficient stand-alone. Empirical comparison studies overwhelmingly support the sufficiency of PC vis-à-vis other approaches (cf., Cain & Seeman, 2002).

If the PC approach is endangered, which it does seem to be, perhaps the most palpable and pernicious threat is managed care. The managed care industry encourages professionals to vie for power by
producing quantified, accountable, evidence-based, “best practice.” Cowan (2005) warns,

“There is a very real danger in the current economic climate of mental health care delivery that the field of counseling and psychotherapy could increasingly become a marching ground for an army of therapy ‘technicians.’ To prevent this, those who value the healing power of the therapeutic relationship must be mindful of the larger human context in which it occurs.” (p. 27)

Person-centered research has been mindful of the human context for more than a half-century. It is intensely concerned with an “interhuman dimension of engagement” (Cowan, 2005, p. 35). Recent research on the Rogerian (1980) principles self-actualization and presence (cf., Adomaitis, 2005; Natiello, 2001), show a lively and eclectic PC community whose interests and productivity parallel a wide range of postmodern therapy developments, including the concepts mindfulness and use of self (cf., Tursi & Cochran, 2006). A counselor’s mindfulness and use of self are not yet among those behaviors reimbursed by managed care.

It behooves PC educators to advocate for PC counseling as an approach that has withstood the test of time. The five-factor model of PC training and supervision introduced in this paper is true to Rogers and current with counseling standards. It provides a solid foundation for those trainers and supervisors who are committed to promoting the person-centered approach.

II. Four Client-Centered Training Methods

The main focus of this paper is a presentation of our five-factor model of PC orientation-specific training and supervision. Prior to this presentation, we will discuss and illustrate the particular ways that PC training and supervision applies four training methods that have proven so robust that virtually all theory-specific and eclectic counselor training use them: (1) client-counselor recorded sessions, (2) peer practice and empathy training, (3) experiential and self-development activities, and (4) focus on relationship (Rogers, 1951; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Although employed universally in
counseling education, these methods are not thoroughly integrated in the sense that non-PC and PC educators apply them equally.

II.A. Taped Sessions and Demonstration Interviews.

Rogers’ pioneering use of taped sessions and counseling demonstration interviews demystified the therapy process. Using state-of-the-industry recording technology, Rogers moved psychotherapy research into the realm of empirical science. Strupp (1971, p. 44) has written that “the impetus given research by client-centered therapy is at least equal in importance to Rogers’ theoretical contributions or the effectiveness of his form of psychotherapy.” The value of reviewing one’s own and others’ counseling sessions is universal to all counseling and psychotherapy.

II.B. Peer Counseling Practice and Empathy Training.

As with recorded sessions, Rogers’ (1951) method of peer counseling with real-life issues was also groundbreaking. Today’s trainees routinely practice empathic listening with their peers. Trainee cohorts are largely encouraged to present genuine concerns in order to simulate real-life practice. There is an expectation that both parties will benefit from participating in empathic listening. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (2001) (CACREP Standards III.D.1. - III.D.5.) supports real-life practice by only accrediting educational programs that have practice rooms. Real-life practice with peers, especially practicing empathy, is a core counselor preparation component.

II.C. Experiential Groups and Self-Development Activities.

Rogers (1951) played an important role in establishing precedents for trainee participation in experiential groups and ongoing self-development activities. Experiential and self-development learning have been long-standing requirements of analytic training. However, Rogers helped make interpersonal participation a here-and-now process, a hallmark of well-rounded training programs, and a benchmark for assessing counselor growth.
II.D. The Significance of the Relationship and the Core Conditions.

Finally, Rogers (1957, 1959) focused counselor training and supervision on the significance of the relationship and the core conditions. Comprehensive developmental supervision models collectively agree that humanistic and core-condition values are essential for successful supervision relationships (e.g., Bernard & Goodyear, 1992; Bradley, 1989; Bradley & Ladany, 2001; Hackney & Goodyear, 1984; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987; Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998). Counseling is producing an abundant literature on counselor “use of self” in therapy, an encouraging movement for the future of phenomenological and humanistic counseling.

Taping sessions, peer practice, experiential learning, and relationship significance are methods endorsed by counselor education in toto. But PC educators, trainers, and supervisors apply these methods in specific and unique ways.

III. Five-Factor Model of Person-Centered Training and Supervision

The present five-factor PC training and supervision model especially applies to training and supervising beginning counselors in educational programs. Compared to their more experienced cohort, beginners express more doubts, ask more questions, communicate higher levels of incongruence, prefer more input, expect external evaluation, and present theoretical commitments that are less crystallized and more diverse.

The term “training” refers to relationships that are generally more structured and directive than “supervision,” which primarily consists of counselor-centered, Factor 1 process (see below). The five-factor model includes:

- Factor 1. A focus on communicating the core conditions to a counselor’s direct experience;
- Factor 2. Core-conditions training, including core-condition responses to a counselor’s client;
- Factor 3. Instruction in self-evaluation and self-assessment process;

Factor 4. Respecting and accommodating theoretical diversity among counselors, and

Factor 5. Expressed commitment to American Counseling Association (2005) ethics and/or related values.

III.A. Factor 1: Counselor-Centered Supervision (Nondirective Supervision)

The foremost difference between PC and other theory-based supervision systems is the PC focus on nondirective, Factor 1 communication. Factor 1 extends Rogers’ client-centered theory of therapy to training and supervision. Counselors are their own best experts. The core conditions are sufficient for facilitating counselor growth. Factor 1 supervision, operating through the self-actualization principle, is counselor-centered.

Counselor-centered supervision parallels the goals and methods of client-centered therapy (Raskin, 1992) by focusing on the counselor’s direct experience—using moment-to-moment feedback—rather than on the client (Rice, 1980). The supervisor’s positive regard for counselors results in parallel learning in the counselor’s positive regard for clients (Arbuckle, 1972). With attention upon counselors rather than clients, evaluation and direction are minimized (Rice, 1980). Rogers emphasized Factor 1 supervision process when he wrote,

If the therapist conducting the training holds an orientation which is interventive and interpretive, or one in which guidance and coaching play a prominent part, then he will guide and coach the trainee and interpret to him his own dynamics in the therapeutic relationships. If the therapeutic orientation of the supervisor is facilitative, endeavoring to permit the individual to gain insight into himself and to develop his own modes of meeting life, then the supervisory contacts will be primarily a listening, facilitative understanding. The attempt will be to help the beginning therapist [italics added] to become clearly aware of his own feelings in his therapeutic interviews so he can
more adequately come to be himself in the relationship.
(Rogers, 1957, p. 86)

Supervisors who consider how they would respond to a counselor’s client have strayed too far from Factor 1 client-centered attitudes (Raskin, 1992).

Developmental models of supervision share the PC view that core-condition responses to beginning counselor anxieties produce certain benefits over and above more directive responses (e.g., Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998). Beginners tend to want to do something for clients (Rice, 1980); are impatient, expecting to see change suddenly (Patterson, 1974); and mistrust the counseling process (Rogers, 1951). Counselor-centered (core-condition) responses minimize anxiety and facilitate learning (Rogers, 1951; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). The counselor-centered approach stimulates beginners to assume responsibility, independence, and trust in their work with clients (Boy & Pine, 1999; Patterson, 1964, 1997). A self-directed counselor is better equipped to counsel than one who is directed (Altucher, 1972).

The value of Factor 1 notwithstanding, Patterson (1964) doubts that the core conditions can ever be sufficient in client-centered supervision because of supervisor concerns about trainee performance. Likewise, Raskin (1992) observed that despite efforts otherwise, PC supervisors tend to suggest, evaluate, and direct supervisees toward specific empathic responses aligned with their position. The following four factors illustrate directives used in PC training and supervision.

III. B. Factor 2: Training in the Core Conditions

For Rogers (1951), core conditions training chiefly consisted of listening to tapes, with attention focused on the counselor’s capacity for empathy and reliance upon the capacity of the client. Patterson (1997) explains that client-counselor relationships develop as counselors learn to assess their effectiveness demonstrating the core conditions. Empathy is probably the skill/condition considered most essential for a counselor to develop. Various exercises can be used to train counselor empathy, among them peer dyad practice in empathic listening, empathy logs, group dynamic exercises, live and recorded observation and feedback, and transcript and tape analysis. The most
thoroughly accepted and researched core condition, empathy, has produced a prolific literature (e.g., Bohart & Greenberg, 1997) and is generally credited with contributing about one-third of therapy’s outcome variance (Hamilton, 2000; Miller, Duncan, & Hubble, 1997).

Person-centered empathy is narrowly defined. Consistent with Webster, it is “the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another” (Borders Group, Inc., 2001, p. 638). Person-centered empathy is not listener-centered understanding nor case conceptualization. It is an “as-if” condition facilitated by and intertwined with attitudes of acceptance and genuineness. Person-centered empathy training, therefore, uses exercises that stimulate counselors to access and express honest experience, encourage self-awareness and self-development, and facilitate being more fully present and engaged with clients (Lambers, 2000).

In addition to participating in self- and other-awareness exercises, PC training teaches the core conditions serendipitously as supervisors communicate the core conditions toward counselors’ direct experiences, as in Factor 1 (Truax & Carkhuff, 1967; Truax, 1972; Leddick, 1994). It also models the core conditions by giving sample responses that could be made to clients (Mearns, 1997). When generating alternative responses, PC supervisors are characteristically tentative, open to discussion, and intending to reflect no more nor less than the core conditions. At least two studies have found that beginning counselors appreciate supervisor and peer feedback in the form of modeled responses (Carifio & Hess, 1987; Lehrman-Waterman & Ladany, 2001). In addition, supervisor empathy with a counselor’s clients appears to positively influence counselor-reported supervision outcome (Carifio & Hess, 1987).

III.C. Factor 3: Evaluation

Rogers (Rogers, 1951; Rogers and Freiberg, 1994) underscores that the counselor, not the supervisor, should be the primary locus of evaluation. To achieve this aim, many PC trainers provide beginners with a structure for self-evaluation. Brodley, for instance, has authored a rationale and a method for beginning to learn empathy (Brodley, 1998), and set of guidelines for members new to PC community

Although structure is not anathema to PC training (e.g., Hamilton, 2000; Patterson, 1997), directing counselors to specific types of responses transgresses nondirective attitudes. Trainer-centered evaluations of a counselor’s core-condition capacities are nevertheless long-standing traditions in PC education (Patterson, 1964; 1974; 1997). Person-centered research has historically suspended the as-if condition in evaluation and training. The Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory (see Barrett-Lennard, 1998, pp. 261-291), for example, yields both counselor and trainer-centered assessments of core-condition capacities. Typical ways that PC supervisors deviate from Factor 1 responses in evaluation are modeling client-centered responses, sharing overall impressions of supervisee-client relationships, and rating and analyzing a counselor’s responses.

Having supervised more than 100 theoretically diverse beginning counselors in PC supervision over the past 15 years, the first author has observed that counselor attitudes towards self-evaluation and core-conditions evaluation vary with counselors’ theoretical interests. Generally, humanistic, nondirective, existential, and analytic trainees embrace both self-evaluation and core-condition assessments. In contrast, behavioral, cognitive behavioral, systemic, and solution-focused counselors tend to be nonplussed by self-evaluation and downright frustrated by the PC supervisor’s ongoing core-conditions assessment. The following structured approach to self-evaluation and core-conditions assessment illustrates how the first author has structured self-evaluation and integrated directives for supervision with theoretically diverse counselors:

I instruct counselors to create a self-evaluation measure that reflects the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are important to them as a developing counselor. I accept all sorts of skills that they decide to focus on. Some
want to improve their diagnostic ability; others want to become expert strategists. I do require them to self-evaluate their client-centered capacities, unless they can submit sufficient evidence that they’re not essential (so far, no one has). We discuss what constitutes a valuable assessment measure, and have open dialogue on various aspects of evaluation—including attitudes about being evaluated, including attitudes about self-evaluation. I recommend that their measure allow a range of responses so that changes in skill/ability can be assessed over time. I recommend at least one free response option. I treat counselors as their ultimate authority on the evaluation. Beginning counselors have various needs and interests besides person-centered, and I believe that counselor self-actualization is most honored through genuinely accepting and understanding the uniqueness in each counselor’s self-directed theoretical propensity. (Hamilton, personal communication)

The above approach coheres with findings that successful supervision outcomes are mediated by counselor theory preference and by counselor-supervisor theoretical match (Putney, Worthington, & McCullough, 1992). As described in the following section, PC supervision can respect theoretical diversity through genuine and acceptant understanding of counselor theoretical diversity.

III.D. Factor 4: Supervising Theoretical Diversity

Rogers believed that attitudes toward personal relationships were more important than scientific knowledge and specific coursework, and he saw, too, that the field of counseling was expanding and deepening its theoretical focus (Rogers, 1951). Leddick (1994) uses the term “person-centered orientation-specific supervision” to refer to supervision between the counselor and supervisor who agree on client-centered values. Supervision derived from a theory-based system of psychotherapy is more effective than atheoretical or technically eclectic supervision because a shared philosophy of therapy process and change brings agreement as to the
meaning of therapy (Patterson, 1997). The benefit of theoretical agreement between supervisor and counselor cannot be overstated. As Lambers observed (2000), without a guiding framework, supervision process tends to resort to evaluation.

Supervisors who work with theoretically diverse counselors must reconcile the incongruence generated in encountering differences. Ethical supervisors respect diverse theories (D.1.a. Different Approaches) and terminate supervision when differences cannot be resolved (F.4.d. Termination of the Supervisory Relationship). Person-centered supervisors support theoretical diversity as a natural byproduct of facilitating counselors to conceptualize in ways that grow out of their direct experience (Bradley, 1989). A recent edited volume on person-centered supervision suggests that PC supervisors respect a wide range of eclectic attitudes:

“We suspect that the conditions we’ve argued are necessary for supervision to begin are also sufficient. We think too that a supervisor can embody and offer certain other qualities which, while they may not be strictly necessary to the process of supervision, enhance it significantly.” (Tudor & Worrall, 2004, p. 21)

Theory-specificity, an historically poor predictor of successful counseling (Fiedler, 1950), appears incapable of discriminating success in supervision. In one study of 274 counselor trainees, counselor goal-setting and feedback success were not related to theory but rather to working alliance, supervisor influence on counselor self-efficacy, and overall supervision satisfaction (Lehrman-Waterman & Ladany, 2001). In another study of 135 client reports on 35 beginning counselors (Hamilton, 2000), client outcome correlated positively with counselor core-condition behaviors, however, neither client outcome nor therapist core-condition behaviors correlated with counselor theoretical orientation (psychoanalytic/psychodynamic vs. cognitive/cognitive behavioral vs. eclectic vs. person-centered/humanistic)! Although theory per se is not a reliable predictor of supervision success (nor of how the supervisor will behave), at least one group of researchers found that supervisors perceived to disrespect counselor theoretical preference, irrespective of theoretical orientation, are rated unhelpful (Ladany, Hill, Corbett, & Nutt, 1996).
III.E. Factor 5: Person-Centered Supervision Ethics

Person-centered supervision is compatible with American Counseling Association (ACA) ethical guidelines and standards of practice. We present 10 ACA standards (American Counseling Association, 2005) readily communicated through PC training and supervision practice. Modern ethical standards expressing PC values include:

1. **Not imposing personal values, A.4.b. Personal Values.** A PC supervisor communicates genuine and empathic unconditional positive regard toward supervisees.

2. **Obtaining consent, A.2.a. Informed Consent.** Nondirective listening enables the PC supervisor to establish counselor attitudes about the learning contract. In addition, many PC supervisors provide structured statements about training purposes and methods.

3. **The counselor's participation in planning, A.1.c. Counseling Plans.** The PC emphasis on self-directed growth potential assures that supervisees participate in creating training objectives.

4. **Standards for self-exploration, Introduction; F.7.b. Self-Growth Experiences.** Person-centered trainers live the value of self-exploration by participating in PC training programs (e.g., Person-Centered International at Warm Springs, Association for the Development of the Person-Centered Approach, World Association for Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling, the Center for Interpersonal Growth, Experiencing Diversity). Self-exploration experience is also facilitated by the PC focus on Factor 1, counselor-centered communication.

5. **Recognizing limits to competence, C.2.a. Boundaries of Competence.** The PC supervisor maintains openness to new information. Person-centered theory recognizes that a counselor's progression toward personal-professional congruence will involve increasingly complex symbolization on the part of both supervisee and supervisor (e.g., symbolization and awareness, edge of, see Tudor & Merry, 2002).


7. *Beginning counselors are diverse, and supervisors must be open to differences, taking reasonable steps to accurately understand counselor needs, D.2.a. Consultant Competency*. A common misperception of PC supervisor empathy is that its restriction to reflection of feeling neglects a supervisee’s cognitive and behavioral needs. Contrarily, nondirective communication is not merely reflection of feeling. Despite criticisms that Rogers and PC theorists in general tend not to provide a recipe for empathic responses, PC empathy is an exceedingly powerful way to communicate with the multiplicity of supervisee’s social constructions.

8. *They [supervisors] should prepare to meet counselor diversity with diverse skills and methods, D.2.b. Understanding Consultees*. An empathic response can be just about anything (Bozarth, 1997), including a game of basketball, a tug-of-war, or a strategic intervention.

9. *F.2.a. Supervisor Preparation*. The PC trainer understands (Peters, 1999) and is humbled by (Timulák, 1999) the counselor’s relative powerlessness. Just as Rogers’ (1959) first change condition posits that counseling begins with contact between individuals possessing unequal degrees of congruence, PC supervisors recognize that a supervisee has a less crystallized professional identity.

10. *F.2.b. Multicultural Issues/Diversity in Supervision*. Because of its phenomenological foundation, PC supervision is extraordinarily sensitive to the unique manner in which cultural, ethnic, religious, sexual, theoretical-orientation, and other human complexity factors may express themselves. We agree with Patterson (1997) that the PC supervisor should be genuine in communicating her or his person-centered orientation.
IV. Conclusion.

Person-centered training and supervision continues to play an important role in counselor education. The vast majority of American Psychological Association eclectic counseling psychologists identify PC among their choice theories (Norcross, Hedges, & Castle, 2002). Some conjecture that the nondirective attitudes and phenomenological principles of the PC approach make it inherently vulnerable to managed care. It behooves PC educators to advocate for PC theory-specific practices. The person-centered approach has withstood the test of time (Koocher, 2006) and has contributed to and produced a wide range of successful research and practice findings, including applications in supervision (e.g., Lambers, 2000). To a most certain extent, the viability of PC counseling falls on the shoulders of counselor education, training, and supervision, perhaps especially with beginning counselors.

References


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