

# **“I Didn’t Know You Felt That Way”: The Practice of Client-Centered Couple and Family Therapy**

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## **Abstract**

*Our client-centered counseling practice with couples and families is described. The nondirective attitude is our bedrock value. Our empathic understanding follows each person's expressed thoughts and feelings. With more people in the room, the situation is ripe for misunderstandings. Wanting to allow for correction from anyone present, we clarify our understanding of individual experiences and tend to share out loud the way we are following and understanding. In individual counseling, misunderstandings do not occur as often and this degree of explicit transparency seems less called for. Whether with an individual or with a couple or family, we are responsive to questions and requests.*

In this paper we describe our way of implementing client-centered attitudes in couple and family counseling. We rely upon Carl Rogers' (1951, 1957, 1959, 1961) attitudinal conditions of unconditional positive regard, empathic understanding and congruence, as sufficient for good counseling. The core value that pervades all of our work is the nondirective attitude (Brodley, 2011c; Moon, 2005; Raskin, 2005; Rogers, 1951). For couple and family counseling, we have found that sharing aloud our understandings and our intentions, is central to the understanding of others present, and to reducing the power of the counselor. What follows are thoughts we have articulated while discussing the questions that arise in day-to-day practice with families. Going forward, we will use the terms *family* and *families* as including both couples and families.

This description of how we work flows from six observations. <sup>1</sup>

- I. We work with a nondirective attitude.
- II. We implement the same theory (Rogers, 1951, 1959, 1961) for any number of people present.
- III. Each family member is a *separate individual*.
- IV. We try to be responsive to questions.
- V. We seek to understand experiences within moment-to-moment interactions.
- VI. We tend to say out loud our intentions as we speak.

The above six points overlap with how we work in individual counseling. We hope that the following discussion will illuminate the sturdiness of client-centered practice in family counseling.

### **I. A Nondirective Attitude**

We work with a nondirective attitude, an indelible commitment to a non-authoritarian way of being. Our main intention is to understand and accept the self-expressions of family members. Apart from that, we have no goals other than those brought to us by family participants. Their goals may stay the same, or shift over time. We are not invested in keeping the family intact or moving it in any particular direction. We never fully know what is or is not best for any individual within the family. We have no conception as to what “the betterment of the family” would entail. We make no assumptions about a person's reasons for seeking help. We do not diagnose or assess and we do not set guidelines as to who should attend or participate.

Our only intention is to work in a client-centered fashion, following and understanding each person. In accordance with our nondirective attitude, we are responsive to individuals’ questions and requests (see also, Brodley, 2011c).

### **II. The Same Therapy for any Number of Persons**

We practice the same client-centered counseling regardless of the number of people present in a meeting. In family counseling, as in individual counseling, our main intention is to understand individual thoughts and feelings about whatever is under discussion.

Functionally, what we do on any given occasion is to enter into a conversation with whoever arrives as a family group. We work to empathically understand the experiences of each person present, as we would to a person in individual counseling. However, while we are listening to and responding to one person, we are aware that others in the group will likely have their own, possibly very different viewpoints. These will get listened to and understood in turn.

Counselor: Jim, you are saying that you want us to talk about what happened last night.  
(*To Mary*) Mary, is that okay with you?

Listening and responding is a shared endeavor. It may be carried out by the counselor, or between any two family members without interference from the counselor – unless her understanding is faltering.

### **III. Each Family Member is a Separate Individual**

We do not subscribe to any belief that groups a person within a class. Nor do we subscribe to any external point of view about what "family" is, what it should be, or what should be done to change this family. We favor seeking to understand individual’s values and perceptions. We are not assuming that “family values” are or should be shared by everyone present.

### **IV. We try to be responsive to questions**

At times, one way or another, family members indicate that they would like to hear more of the counselor’s perspective. When asked for our opinion, we usually give it (see also Brodley, 2011c). We speak not as an expert, but as an attentive participant. We are willing to brainstorm with family members, and to share our thoughts and reactions. At times, this may leave us feeling as though we have become a temporary working member of the group.

When we speak, we tend to do so with awareness that we might be misunderstood. Our thoughts and suggestions are always offered with a tentativeness that allows for correction from anyone present.

## V. Understanding Experiences Within Moment-to-Moment Interactions

Our intention in working with families is to understand. The only structure we bring to a session is following the expressed thoughts and feelings of each person present. In the course of following a conversation, we do not just switch back and forth between people as though we are listening to each person in a vacuum. Our responses often encapsulate a person's experience in the context of more than one exchange. In the interest of everyone present having the opportunity to follow what is being said, we may request time for others to respond. For example, we might say:

Counselor: Robin, even though Brook has just said that he will go along with your idea, your sense is that he is still being dismissive of your thinking? I'm wondering if it would be okay for me to check with Brook and see if he does indeed feel that way?

In the example above, checking her understanding, the counselor is making a series of following connections.

Counselor: Robin, as Brook is describing that day I see you are shaking your head "no." Is it okay with you if Brook finishes his point before you explain?

Or

Counselor: Brook, as you are speaking I see that Robin is shaking her head, "No." Do you prefer to finish what you are saying before I ask her why she doesn't like what you are saying?

Also, in the above three examples, the counselor is asking permission at points where she wants to check with the other person.

We tend to flesh out the complexity of the moment for each person as we understand it. This allows anyone present to follow and express disagreement with anything that has been said.

Below, in the midst of a family session, a mother and daughter are speaking directly to each other. At this point, the rest of the family is simply listening.

Counselor: Alice, you are saying this so loudly, really screaming your sense of *helplessness*. Right? You want her to stop and also you want her to feel terrible for how she is talking to you. Is this what you are saying?

Alice: Yes, because I just won’t listen to this anymore! The feeling of wanting to scream, to smack some sense into her, it’s just so strong.

Counselor: (*Turning to Mia*) Mia, I, I’m...

Mia: (*Sobbing*) I can’t believe you have so little self-control. You think it is ok to humiliate me.

Counselor: The way your mother yells at you, to you it feels deliberate, a deliberate attempt to humiliate you.

Although, it is not our intention to teach better communication, we find that it can be a side effect of this process. Each person having the opportunity to speak tends to put them in touch with their own thoughts and feelings and contributes to their being able to relax and let go enough to hear someone else. When a person is given the time and space to say what they actually think and feel about something, they can grow in self-acceptance and compassion both for themselves and for others. Our efforts to follow, understand and be clear can have the effect of an increased valuing of present feelings and an awareness that others have their own perspectives. Often in a session, a family member will suddenly say: “I didn’t know you felt that way”.

## **VI. We tend to say out loud our intentions as we speak.**

There are two reasons why we tend to say out loud our intentions as we speak. These reasons relate to our primary value, which is the nondirective attitude, and our primary intention, which is to understand.

At our best, in line with our primary value, we are not judgmental of anyone in the family and we are interested in and respectful of each person's thoughts and feelings. We believe that our nondirective attitude becomes apparent in the way we work.

Our primary intention to understand requires that we be able to follow and attend to individuals. Checking back and forth between people, and occasionally asking people to wait so that we can ask a question for clarification enables us to follow and register what is going on between family members.

Within the complexity of a family session, speaking our intentions signals to family members how our understanding is proceeding. This allows for anyone present to correct any misunderstanding. We hope that working with the attitudes of client-centered therapy, with an additional weight given to explaining what we are doing, allows a sense of agency and freedom to develop within the people present.

With multiple people in the room, someone can easily feel disregarded or misunderstood. Sharing our intentions as we follow alleviates misunderstandings. It also relieves us of concern that we have lost or misunderstand someone's point, and allows us to be present as we proceed.

We speak with an awareness that there are different perceptions among those in the room (Brodley, 2011d; Moon, 2005; Rogers, 1961, p. 341). When responding to one person, we tend to be clear that we are relating *our* understanding of *that person's perception*. The perception captured in the counselor's response is the *counselor's understanding* of one person's experience and *not an objective truth*. For example, the counselor might say:

Counselor: *(Speaking to a father)* Joe, even though your daughter has said that she doesn’t agree with you, and your wife, we might guess, has her own view too, you are saying that your family is accusing you for no reason at all. *(The counselor’s response recognizes that each person present is likely to have their own perspective on what the father has said.)*

Or,

Counselor: Pete, I am realizing that even though you were aware of Tom’s sense of urgency, you felt put out by his tone? Given that, you felt dismissed.

The above are two examples of an out loud sorting and acknowledgement of what’s being expressed. This gives people a chance to correct any misunderstandings and can help us all to process the information.

We frequently check to learn how one person feels in reaction to what another has said. Through the many moments of interaction, they have a chance to clarify their own perceptions. They seem to become more aware that other family members have their own perspective. It appears to us that feelings of compassion for self and others tend to grow within the environment we try to provide.

### **Conclusion**

We have described what we are generally thinking and doing in our work with couples and families. Our intention is to understand and accept the experience of each person present. Because there are more people in the room, we protect our ability to follow by checking our understanding when we feel unclear. Although not our direct intention, this checking tends to slow down the conversation. Also, speaking our intentions out loud tends to minimize misunderstandings.

Family therapy can feel intense, chaotic, daunting and joyful. Session time can seem to fly. At times, when practicing client-centered

family counseling, it appears that an interest and willingness to listen and understand with less judgment grows exponentially within the room. When a session is over, as the family leaves, regardless of whether someone is smiling or weeping, we can't know what they will feel in ensuing hours, days and years. Ultimately, we never know what our work has or has not brought forth.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Readers interested in reading more on the subject of client-centered couple and family therapy will find annotated reviews of that literature within McPherrin (2005) and Motomasa (2004). Articles published subsequently to those include Brodley 2011a and 2011b, Gaylin, 2008, and O’Leary, 2015.