NEAR ENEMIES IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

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ABSTRACT. The core conditions stated by Carl Rogers as necessary and sufficient for constructive personality change are vulnerable to misuse even by therapists whose original purpose is of studied and pure intent. Kornfield's elucidation of the Buddhist concept of The Near Enemies is used as a perspective to understand the core conditions. Greater self-awareness of the experience of empathy and unconditional positive regard allows an opportunity for therapists to be personally congruent with the purpose of the core conditions. Attachment, pity and indifference are discussed as traps to intended outcomes in psychotherapy.

Psychotherapy is intended to have a positive effect on clients, but is susceptible to deviations in its intended outcome due to attitudes held by the therapist. The attitudes, known as the core conditions (Rogers, 1957), have been well-defined and proven effective in research on therapy outcomes (Patterson and Hidore, 1997). The core conditions are unconditional positive regard, empathic understanding, and genuineness on the part of the therapist. Deviations in outcome occur when the therapist, although attempting to provide the core conditions, miscreates those conditions. This may occur through a lack of awareness on a subtle level of what each core condition represents. The attitudes may manifest in conditions which only seem similar to Roger's core conditions. Individual psychotherapy (therapy) is here defined as a one-on-one healing relationship based on a communicative interaction occurring to facilitate personality change for the benefit of the client.

The core conditions of unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding are subject to "traps." Traps are ways of being which seem like the original condition, but are different in very significant ways. The most relevant difference between traps and core conditions is in the differing outcomes they create.

Kornfield (1993) elucidates what the Buddhist tradition calls The Near Enemies. These near enemies provide some insight into potential traps for the core conditions. Traps are discussed here in reference to the core conditions as an invitation to reconsider subtle nuances of the conditions and how they may evolve from attitudes and beliefs of the therapist.

According to Kornfield (1993), "The near enemies are qualities that arise in the mind and masquerade as genuine spiritual realization, when in fact they are only an imitation, serving to separate us from true feeling rather than connecting us to it" (p. 190). The core conditions of unconditional positive regard and empathy reflect the Buddhist divine states of
loving-kindness, compassion, and equanimity. Unconditional positive regard and empathy have near enemies which masquerade as the condition, but are only an imitation.

Unconditional positive regard is an absolute love for and valuing of the essential being of the client. This love is not necessarily an acceptance of all of the client's actions. It is a love for the existence of the client as a human being. It is unconditional, without demands or expectations that it will be given in return for something, or that the client has to earn this love. It is at its essence loving-kindness. According to Kornfield, the near enemy of loving-kindness is attachment.

Attachment is a near enemy of love because it seems similar, but creates fear instead of love, and control instead of freedom. Attachment embodies a sense of "I need you," which may generate fear of separation, a need to control, and ultimately forms a sense of dependency. A triangle of fear-control-dependency can begin to recycle and perpetuate itself. Therapists must be aware of this near enemy so as to allow the client and themselves to be free of such attachment. The temptation is great to create dependency, both on the part of the client for the therapist and the therapist for the client. When such dependency seems justified, the relationship has clearly moved from love to attachment.

Unconditional positive regard is also characterized by an attitude of nonjudgment, which is a balanced state without criticism and praise. This is similar to the Buddhist concept of equanimity. The near enemy of equanimity is indifference. Indifference is separation, a walling out of compassion based on fear of the personal consequences of connection. There are two points to be made here. One is the value of equanimity itself as an attitude. The other is the harm of indifference if it is confused with equanimity in practice.

One who practices with equanimity neither criticizes nor praises. The therapist simply maintains a nonjudgmental attitude and continues her way of being without taking control from the client. Anything less than equanimity creates an authority outside of the client for right and wrong. Most adults are capable of discerning right from wrong for themselves when that power is not usurped or relinquished. Children, within appropriate developmental levels, are also capable of discerning right from wrong for themselves. Therapists establish themselves as authorities by rewarding "good" behavior and ignoring or punishing "bad" behavior (or attitudes or thoughts). The therapist who imposes a role as the authority of right and wrong nurtures a sense of self-doubt and confusion in clients. Self-doubt is encouraged in the client when a therapist reveals a lack of confidence by making decisions for the client, and confusion arises in reference to the client's sense of self-responsibility. Indifference is the near enemy of equanimity. When a therapist justifies establishing himself as an authority, equanimity shifts to indifference. This shift occurs because the act of taking control is indifferent to the cost of this loss to the client.

The therapist who judges for the client is setting up a reliance on external authority and sacrificing the development of internal authority. By defining, for example, right and wrong behavior, the therapist denies this responsibility to the client. In addition, the client loses the experience and confidence of having established right and wrong for herself.
When a therapist behaves toward a client with equanimity, the absence of reward or punishment is based on a loving understanding of human nature and on an understanding of the importance of establishing these values and decision making skills for oneself. Equanimity nurtures awareness and growth by encouraging the development of internal authority and self-responsibility. Self-responsibility must not be confused with self-centeredness (see Patterson & Hidore, 1997, pp. 58-62).

It is critical that therapists whose purpose is to facilitate self-actualization of the client become and remain aware of the ways they usurp responsibility from clients in common situations. This is particularly important when the therapist is a member of a "dominant" group, and the client is a member of a "subordinate" one (Miller, 1976; see also Snyder, 1992). This usurping of personal responsibility may be based on fear, a desire for power, and/or an indifference to the personal outcome for the client. It is all too easy for an unaware therapist of a dominant group to rationalize taking control as being in the best interest of the subordinate client.

There are circumstances where a therapist may be legally bound to take control of a client who is not responsible for his behavior. These situations are spelled out in professional codes of ethics.

The core condition of empathy is "an accurate... understanding of the client's world as seen from the inside" (Rogers, 1961, p. 284). In therapy with clients who struggle with life, empathy may be a compassionate understanding of the client's perspective. Compassion is defined as "spiritual consciousness of the personal tragedy of another or others and selfless tenderness directed toward it" (Gove, 1967, p. 462). The near enemy of compassion is pity. Pity is a sadness and regret for the suffering of another. This can lead a therapist to rescue someone from personal life experience. Experience is the process of life from which we learn about ourselves. We may never know the meaning others are creating in their experience. Although human beings can learn vicariously, personal development is an active and experiential learning process.

Compassion and pity create different outcomes. Compassion motivates understanding. Pity motivates rescue. Psychological rescue denies a person the opportunity to experience their life as they have created it. Kornfield points out that compassion is a resonance with the suffering of others coupled with a knowing that we all experience sorrows. When a therapist's work becomes the force which encourages clients to avoid their experience, compassion has moved to pity. With pity, the healing therapeutic process may subtly shift to a fear-control-dependency process.

The third core condition is genuineness. It is sometimes referred to as congruence and in this paradigm may be a foundation for empathy and unconditional positive regard. Rogers (1986) makes a point about genuineness and congruence when he writes, "It [therapy] is a basic philosophy rather than simply a technique or a method. When this philosophy is lived, it helps the person expand the development of his or her own capacities. When it is lived, it also stimulates constructive change in others" (p. 138).
The core conditions are experiences of the therapist. When a therapist has taken time to reflect on deeper motivations and moves toward self-awareness, that therapist is more likely to choose attitudes and behaviors which are in alignment with her purpose. Self-awareness increases the opportunity for a therapist to create a congruence between surface behavior and deep motivations. This may bring to awareness the near enemies relevant to empathy and unconditional positive regard.

CONCLUSION

Although the Buddhist tradition speaks of The Near Enemies, this author suggests therapists consider these The Near Awarenesses. Instead of struggling with parts of ourselves as enemies, we can become aware of them and make choices about how we use them. These choices are made in the context of one’s purpose as a therapist.

When love becomes attachment, compassion becomes pity, or equanimity becomes indifference, therapists do not serve the good of their clients or themselves. Traps may lead to dependency, self-doubt, fear and confusion. Instead of creating a relationship, the near enemies create separation—between the client and therapist, within the client, and within the therapist (see Kornfield, 1993). Although conscious motives may be pure, therapists must ask themselves deeply searching questions to continue to maintain their purpose as healers.

It is as important to the therapist as it is to the client that the therapist be aware of the intent and outcomes of the therapeutic process.

REFERENCES


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