

Ordinary People Application Paper: Person-Centered Therapy

Wendy Hou

Alliance University Graduate School of Counseling

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Professor George Ramos

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Ordinary People Application Paper: Adlerian Therapy

Person-centered therapy, began by Carl Rogers in the mid-1900's, revolutionized the direction of counseling theory and practice away from the directive and interpretive approaches of that time toward an emphasis on the client as the main agent for self-change and healing (Corey, 2017). This is based on certain positive and optimistic assumptions of human nature. First, Rogers believed that people are individually unique, basically good, and trustworthy (Tan, 2011). Second, as experts of their own lives, they are capable of self-understanding and self-direction (Corey, 2017). Third, human beings have a natural inclination to actualize an inner potential they possess and through which they can find wholeness and meaning in life (*actualizing tendency*). Fourth, individuals are resourceful with the capacity to make constructive conscious choices to resolve their own problems and to move toward health and growth. In addition, Roger's view of human nature is phenomenological in that people behave, understand the world, and perceive reality according to their subjective frame of mind.

For the innate actualizing tendency to develop someone into a "fully functioning person," two needs are considered: the need for *positive regard* and the need for *self-regard* (Tan, 2011). When people receive unconditional positive regard (deep caring, acceptance, and respect as a person regardless of their behavior) from significant others in their lives, their own unconditional self-regard (acceptance and approval of themselves) will be enhanced, and they would feel safe and supported to move toward self-actualization. However, when positive regard, especially from parents or parental figures, is not met because disapproval is sometimes shown for certain behaviors, *conditions of worth* are set up. Their self-regard will then be based on whether they fulfill these conditions imposed by others and their actualizing tendency would be alienated. As a result, people set up defenses and hide behind facades they have created to deal with others'

expectations while increasingly losing touch with their *true selves* (Corey, 2017). It is this state of incongruence or discrepancy between their experience of reality and their *self-concept* that leads to problems in personal functioning and psychological vulnerability and distress; in other words, this is the psychopathology that brings people in for therapy (Tan, 2011).

From the viewpoint of the person-centered approach, Conrad from the movie “Ordinary People” is an incongruent young man who has lost touch with who he is on the inside and as a result, suffers from feelings of helplessness, confusion, and a lack of self-confidence to make decisions and to direct his own life. He is psychologically distressed by the sense that his experiences and behavior on the outside do not match with his inner true self. Feeling unsafe around family and schoolmates, Conrad wears a mask to act in ways that would be approving in their eyes, such as staying quiet about his feelings and thoughts and specifically not talking about his brother’s death with Mom (Redford, 1980). This state of incongruence, according to the person-centered framework, is the consequence of him growing up in a family that did not give him unconditional positive regard. Conrad’s mother has been emotionally distant from him for as long as he can remember (Father also testifies to this). Feeling judged and imposed by her conditions of worth, he has always tried to live in a way he believes she wants him to live (as opposed to who he really is), but he still falls short of earning her acceptance and approval. In contrast, Conrad sees his mother’s preferential treatment of his older brother who “could do no wrong” in her eyes. Her unconditional positive regard for this other son leaves him feeling even more unloved and unworthy. In addition, his parents are not real and genuine with their own feelings (lack of congruence) and have never tried to listen to or truly understand him and his subjective experiences (lack of empathy). Living in a world without unconditional regard, empathic understanding, and congruence, Conrad has therefore shackled himself in a

“psychological prison” (Conrad, 2017, p.173) and stunted his actualizing tendency, unable to move forward and become what he is capable of becoming.

As a person-centered therapist, I believe “significant positive personality change does not occur except in a relationship” (Rogers, 1967, as cited in Corey, 2017, p.173). Therefore, instead of labeling Conrad with a psychological diagnosis or using specific therapeutic techniques, I will focus on providing Conrad with the kind of client-therapist relationship that will facilitate his self-healing and personal growth. Such a relationship will be characterized by the three therapeutic core conditions (more a way of being) of congruence, unconditional positive regard, and accurate empathic understanding. By being real as a person and genuine toward Conrad, showing him deep caring and acceptance without judgment, and communicating a true understanding of his subjective world through astute listening and reflecting, I hope to give him a safe place to drop his defenses, be real with himself, and delve deeper into what’s going on inside. Along with greater self-awareness, he would also develop a sense of self-worth and gain confidence to behave in ways truer to himself and make choices toward well-being and growth (i.e., quitting the swim team, reconciling with his parents, and pursuing a new and healthy relationship with a girl he likes).

I think the person-centered therapy would resonate with Conrad because it seeks to provide him with what he lacks and craves most- genuine caring, understanding, and acceptance in a relationship context. This client-led, non-directive approach also gives him the opportunity to speak his mind freely and to be really heard and understood, which would be especially helpful in calming him in crisis situations (i.e., when his good friend committed suicide). Furthermore, Roger’s research also showed that his therapeutic model is particularly applicable to young adults struggling with developmental and identity issues like Conrad (Corey, 2017).

References

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Tan, S.Y. (2011). *Counseling and psychotherapy: A Christian perspective*. Baker Academic.