

Person-Centred Counselling in Action

4th Edition

Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne
with John McLeod

SAGE Counselling in Action

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Person-Centred Counselling in Action

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Praise for the Book

‘An important book ... a most sophisticated text. Mearns and Thorne have written a book for all counsellors and psychotherapists. The reader will be left both grateful and hungry for more.’ – *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*

‘The discussion of empathy, acceptance and congruence is central and should be required reading for all trainees working to understand the richness of these core concepts ... outstanding.’ – *Counselling and Psychotherapy*, The Journal of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

‘The first systematic, comprehensive text about this approach since Carl Rogers’ own *Client-Centred Therapy* ... outstanding.’ – *Counselling*, The Journal of the British Association for Counselling

‘Without doubt the clearest description of the person-centred approach to counselling that I have read, apart from Carl Rogers’ own writings. I felt that I had got to know both Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne through their offering the reader their own congruence and I found this aspect of the book at times quite moving.’ – *Social Work Today*

‘Gives real insight into person-centred counselling ... This is a gentle book; an absolute delight to read (I couldn’t put it down) as it held me in the realm of my own feelings. I would like to thank both authors for sharing so much of their intimate selves. I recommend this book to trainee counsellors, trained counsellors, clients and those involved in the helping professions. It is a book that has influenced me and that I would not want to be without.’ – *BPS Counselling Psychology Review*

‘Excellent “all rounder” for practitioners to learn and build upon counselling skills with young offenders.’ – lecturer, Guidance, Youth and Youth Justice, Nottingham Trent University

‘An excellent text. Student friendly and covering all main issues.’ – lecturer, Psychology Swansea Institute of HE

‘Stimulates a re-exploration of the doctor–patient relationship.’ – *British Medical Journal*

‘I felt understood by this book!’ – Ann Weiser, PCA Letter Network

‘This book could very sensibly be placed on the reading lists of all counselling trainers and trainees ... this is the most informative and useful book I have read in a long time and I have no doubt that if Carl Rogers were still alive today, he would not only agree but also acknowledge experiencing some envy.’ – *Changes*

‘The skilful conveying of tenderness and building of trust are well explained and described with lots of case study examples.’ – *Guidance Matters*

‘Excellent book – a useful and practical way to underpin current emphasis on humanism in nursing.’ – lecturer, West London NHS Mental Health Trust

‘Continues to be an excellent, easy introduction but with depth. Deserves to be a best-seller!’ – lecturer, Preston College

‘The book conveys the profound respect for the person, for his/her autonomy and uniqueness, which is inherent in the Rogerian approach.’ – *British Journal of Medical Psychology*

‘A marvellous book; highly recommended. Someone has finally written an easily accessible book about the theory and practice – mostly practice – of the kind of therapy that makes the most sense to many focusers. Hurrah!’ – *The Focusing Connection*

‘Truly allows the reader to enter the world of the person-centered counselor.’ – *Contemporary Psychology*

‘*Person Centred Counselling in Action*, written by Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne was originally published in 1988 about a year after the death of Carl Rogers. It has helped to maintain and stimulate interest in this approach and has become a best-seller in the Counselling in Action series.’ – *The Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy*

‘Thank you for revising the bible! I am a tutor on a so-called “integrative counselling course” and I thoroughly endorse the idea that Carl Rogers would have welcomed this honesty and new interpretation of his model. Your SAGE book is indeed a bible and I have repeatedly recommended it to the students.’ – lecturer, *YouTube*

‘For students and those new to person-centred counselling, there is a clear exposition of person-centred theory. For experienced practitioners, there are new and challenging theoretical developments within the person-centred approach. If new to counselling, this is a “must have”. If wondering whether to invest in this edition when there is already a copy of the earlier one on the shelf, the challenge of the new theoretical material is persuasive, but if that is not enough, then the updated practice guidance, the practical questions and answers, and the comprehensive references must make this new edition another bestseller.’ – *Therapy Today*

‘This is an excellent book giving the reader an in-depth look at Carl Rogers’ core conditions. I would recommend it to anyone studying person-centred counselling.’ – Miss Colette Twomey, Psychology and Social Studies, Cork College of Commerce

‘A must for students who are training in person-centred counselling.’ – Mrs Mary Sherrill, Health & Social Care, Tresham Institute

‘Useful supplemental reading material for counselling skills course.’ – Ms Alexandra Cross, Psychology, London Metropolitan University

‘A welcome new edition of this classic book. Invaluable for the trainee or student new to the field, it also provides a refreshing update for those of us with more clinical experience. Anyone thinking they have an earlier edition and therefore don’t need to get this one is probably wrong! – it’s been updated very well and contains new material.’ – Ms Jane Keeton, Psychology, Wolverhampton University

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Preface to the Fourth Edition

Exactly twenty-five years ago we began writing the first edition of *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* under the series editorship of Windy Dryden. It was a good combination of writers and editor. Brian already had considerable experience as a writer and Dave had none, while Windy had the ingenuity and firmness to harness both. Since then there have been two further editions before this one, around a dozen foreign language translations and worldwide sales of about one hundred and fifty thousand copies. It is a key text not only on person-centred counselling courses but on those based upon other therapeutic approaches where it is seen as the best representative of its tradition.

As well as the Sage 'In Action' series, over the last twenty years we have implicitly produced a Sage 'person-centred' series with books such as *Developing Person-Centred Counselling* (Mearns, 2003), *Person-Centred Counselling Training* (Mearns, 1997), *Person-Centred Therapy Today* (Mearns and Thorne, 2000) and *Working at Relational Depth in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (Mearns and Cooper, 2005). While the present book is a general one designed for first level training, the others are second level in that they develop many of the issues raised here. In a sense *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* is the hub of the wheel with spokes pointing to the other books in the series. Throughout this edition there are numerous references to page numbers in the other books in the series where points are further developed.

In all the editions of *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* there have been changes of content both to refresh the material and also to include the most recent developments in practice and theory, but it is two core features which have remained constant that define its success. First, reviews, both formal and informal, have pointed to the ways it brings the reader close to the *humanity* of the counselling endeavour. The clients and the counsellors represented in its pages encounter each other in deeply personal ways that can provoke powerful feelings in the reader as well as themselves. Second, the book describes a principled way of working. At a time when some might want to manualise counselling in order to require conformity to prescribed ways of behaving, *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* bases its approach upon *principles*. If the practitioner is firmly grounded in person-centred principles then her practice may flow from those in ways that can vary fluidly from one counselling relationship to another. Thus she can mesh meaningfully, congruently and uniquely with every client in a fashion that is never an option when the activity is grounded in specified behaviours rather than principles. This second core feature of the book also explains why it is a popular primary text on courses that help participants to develop counselling skills for work other than counselling. In

these other contexts the skills work more effectively if they are grounded in principles rather than behaviourally defined techniques. If a manager seeks to empathise with a difficult-to-understand employee the effort is more likely to be well received if it is seen as coming from a genuine interest in the employee. Otherwise, the same behaviour of the manager is likely to be judged as manipulative and rightly so.

As well as introducing new content to refresh and update the book, in this edition we have added a considerable attention to research. The original '*Counselling in Action*' series purposely sought to concentrate upon practice and the theory that grounded it more than on empirical research. The aim of the series was to create texts that would actively and practically support counselling training in the various mainstream approaches, rather than merely provide a commentary upon them. In the present edition we have invited our friend and colleague for nearly forty years, Professor John McLeod, to add a discussion of research as an entirely new tenth chapter. Positioning it thus we have avoided disturbing the fundamental 'action-oriented' process of the book and the series.

Thus 'Mearns and Thorne' becomes 'Mearns and Thorne with McLeod' in this fourth edition. When, throughout the book, reference is made to 'we the authors', that means the two principal authors, Mearns and Thorne. This takes us to our last point in this Preface to the fourth edition. This edition will mark the end of the involvement of Brian Thorne and Dave Mearns as lead authors of *Person-Centred Counselling in Action*. The book may continue into further iterations but it will no longer be 'Mearns and Thorne'. We shall have finally withdrawn from the counselling scene. For information on our new personal challenges, see the Appendix to this edition.

We hope that readers will enjoy the experience of being with this book as much as we have.

Dave Mearns, Emeritus Professor, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow
Brian Thorne, Emeritus Professor, University of East Anglia, Norwich

Acknowledgements

In this final edition of *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* that will involve us as principal authors we want to acknowledge the people who have read it in all its editions and foreign language translations to date. Over twenty-five years we have enjoyed the feedback from budding counsellors and experienced practitioners alike. We hope that further readers will be similarly encouraged and stimulated.

Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne

Introduction

- Dave: So what was different this time?
- Sally and her counsellor had completed their counselling contract a year previously. At the suggestion of the counsellor they were having this follow-up meeting to talk about the client's experience of the process (Chapter 9 and Mearns and Dryden, 1989). The counsellor (Dave Mearns) occasionally invited these review sessions principally for his own learning but he had previously found that former clients got as much out of them as he did. There was payment for the meeting, but it was the client who was paid for her time. Like the earlier counselling sessions, the meeting was audio-taped. Sally had just mentioned that this had been her third counselling experience and that it had been quite different from the others.*
- Sally: The way I understand it is that I always had a public self and a private self. My private self would watch my public self 'perform' but it always stayed hidden. Even in counselling it stayed hidden – I would watch my public self being 'genuine' with my counsellor.
- Dave: Like, she really was being genuine, but your private self wasn't in there.
- Sally: Yes, she just sat back and didn't get involved...but it would look like I was fully involved. As long as my private self stayed out, I couldn't get hurt.
- Dave: And this time?
- Sally: This time I really did get involved.
- Dave: Why?
- Sally: I think it was because I believed you.
- [pause]
- Dave: Can you say more?
- Sally: In the first couple of sessions I was doing my usual thing – seeming to be involved but actually holding back. Everything I would say or do had first to go through the 'censor' to make sure there were no vulnerable edges exposed. You poor thing – I bet you never guessed.
- Dave: You are right – I had no idea. You seemed to me to be perfectly genuine.
- Sally: Yes, I'm good at looking genuine. I'm a good actress.
- Dave: So what made a difference after the second session? You said that you 'believed' me.
- Sally: I looked at you at one point early in the third session and realised that you would be able to take anything I had to give – you wouldn't need to 'judge' me. You wouldn't need to call me 'crazy' and refer me to the hospital like happened before to me. You wouldn't be frightened of me – no matter what I gave you of me. So I just opened my mouth and gave you whatever was behind it.

- Dave:* I remember commenting on the fact that you often gave two or more answers to the same question.
- Sally:* Yes, we had some fun with that. Sometimes I would say something and you would look at me and I would realise that it was crap and give you the real answer. Of course, it got easier and easier because every time I gave you uncensored stuff the sky did not fall down and that made it easier for the next time. That's how we got to the-things-I-had-never-spoken-about-before.
- Dave:* Was it something I did in that third session that made the difference or was it something that you did?
- Sally:* That's a really good question. At the time I put it down to you – how completely you were able to be with me. But as time has gone on I have given myself more credit for taking the risk. You see I had actually been getting a bit stronger myself – though I didn't realise it at the time. So it was a combination of you being strong and me being stronger.
- Dave:* That's well put – I might use it in a book some day!

It has taken many years, but Sally has now made it into a book. Here she provides us with an illustration of how the process of change is understood in the person-centred approach. It is not a matter of the therapist being expert in the client's condition, but of the client being able to express themselves fully in the relationship with the therapist. Sally found herself giving expression to dimensions of herself that were previously hidden and openly exploring experiences hitherto kept private. Such open explorations allow her to test the assumptions she had previously made about herself and others. This process gives her a firmer evidential base upon which to face her social world, further developing her *self agency* (Bohart and Tallman, 1999) and allowing her to express the whole person that she is. This kind of change continues not only during the counselling process but also after counselling has ended because the client has not just found a 'quick fix' but an enduring developmental change. For this reason person-centred counselling favours outcome research that looks not at immediate 'symptom reduction' but at long-term developmental change.

So, the person-centred approach places the client at the centre. The central truth for Carl Rogers, the originator of the approach, was that the client knows best. It is the client who knows what hurts and where the pain lies and it is the client who, in the final analysis, will discover the way forward. The task of the counsellor is to be the kind of companion who can relate in such a way that the client can access their own wisdom and recover self-direction. The various names under which the approach has been identified over the years bear witness to the primary principles. Rogers began by calling his way of working *non-directive* counselling, thereby emphasising the importance of the counsellor as a non-coercive companion rather than a guide or an expert on another's life. Because critics interpreted non-directivity as a kind of mechanical passivity on the counsellor's part, Rogers subsequently described his approach as *client-centred* and in this way placed greater emphasis on the centrality of the client's phenomenological world and on the need for the counsellor to stay accurately attuned to the client's experience and perception of reality. Many practitioners throughout the world continue to call themselves 'client-centred'.

They argue that when Rogers himself first used the later expression *person-centred* he was concerned with an attitudinal approach to activities outside the counselling room, such as group work, educational processes and cross-cultural understanding. They maintain that the expression 'person-centred approach' should continue to be reserved for these non-counselling contexts. While respecting this point of view we have opted for the expression *person-centred counselling* and employ it throughout this book. There are at least three reasons for preferring this term. In the first place, it is not true that Rogers himself always confined the expression 'person-centred approach' to non-counselling activities. There are clear instances where he used the terms client-centred and person-centred interchangeably and he was altogether happy to be associated with training courses which aimed to train 'person-centred' counsellors and psychotherapists. More importantly, however, a second reason lies in our belief that the description 'person-centred' more accurately conveys the dual emphasis on the client's phenomenological world and on the state of being of the counsellor. Our therapeutic activity is essentially the development of a relationship between two persons; the inner worlds of both client and counsellor are of equal importance in the forging of a relationship that will best serve the needs and interests of the client. The concept of relational depth has great significance in the pursuit of therapeutic efficacy and the counsellor's ability to meet the client at depth is dependent on her own willingness to enter fearlessly into the encounter. Person-centred counselling is essentially a relationship between two persons, both of whom are committed to moving towards a greater fullness of being.

The third reason for opting for the term 'person-centred counselling' concerns the development of Rogers' work since his death in 1987. When we were working on the first edition of this book (Mearns and Thorne, 1988) Rogers was still alive and there were only limited opportunities in the UK for training in any depth in this approach. The result was a situation, which we lamented with considerable feeling, whereby many practitioners with inadequate or even minimal understanding were prepared to label themselves 'person-centred', bringing the approach into disrepute by their superficial, muddled or misguided anarchy practice, which had no solid foundation in genuine person-centred theory. In a second edition some eleven years later (Mearns and Thorne, 1999) we reported that, although elements of the 1980s situation remained which still fuelled our exasperation, there were now a number of specialised training courses in place with an established track record. In brief, it was increasingly possible to identify a growing cohort of practitioners who had received an in-depth training in the approach. At the same time there had been a burgeoning of literature on the approach, the establishment of professional associations including the *World Association for Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling* and a number of academic, including professorial, appointments in British universities. It was now much more difficult to sport the label 'person-centred' spuriously or to claim ignorance of the 'real' thing in the face of the growing development of the approach through training institutes and scholarly activity.

In more recent years the situation both here and in other countries has taken another turn which, while rendering the field more complex, has, if anything, strengthened the case for retaining the term 'person-centred'. As is perhaps inevitable after the death

of a leading figure, those who have been most influenced by his or her work began to follow their own paths, developing aspects of the original work while abandoning others. In Rogers' case this was an almost predictable outcome for he had himself always insisted on the provisionality of theory and had remained open to fresh experience and new research findings throughout his life. The title of the World Association is again revealing. Incorporation of the word 'experiential' indicates that the Association invites under its umbrella those practitioners who have been profoundly influenced by the work of Eugene Gendlin and his focusing-oriented psychotherapy, as well as those who emphasise the client's process of experiencing and see the counsellor as a skilled facilitator of process, while preserving a stance of non-directivity as far as content is concerned. Such offshoots from the main branch of what might be termed classical client-centred counselling are evidence, we would suggest, of a healthy state of affairs. They demonstrate an approach which is not moribund and where practitioners are open to new practical and theoretical developments in the light of experience. At the same time an attempt has been made by such writers as Lietaer (2002), Schmid (2003) and Sanders (2000) to elucidate the irreducible principles or criteria of person-centred work so that it is possible to identify those developments that remain true to the core concepts against those that have deviated so far from the approach's origins as to be no longer what Margaret Warner (2000a) has described as 'tribes' of the person-centred nation. For us, person-centred counselling serves as an appropriate umbrella term for those 'tribes' that subscribe to the primary or irreducible principles of the approach; it is our hope that what follows will be valuable to practitioners or practitioners in training whether they conceptualise themselves as 'classical' client-centred counsellors or prefer to identify with one or other of the more recently evolved person-centred tribes. Person-centred counselling, as we view it, is neither set in theoretical tablets of stone nor confined to one narrow and exclusive form in practice.

While the book is primarily focused on person-centred counselling practice, in this fourth edition we have taken the deliberate step of adding an emphasis on research awareness. The book was designed as part of the SAGE *'In Action'* series where the aim of the various authors was to keep the reader's attention on what actually happened in counselling within their approach. While that was a sensible and extremely successful strategy, we might still have achieved it while simultaneously encouraging our readers to be research aware. It is interesting to reflect back to the thinking that prevailed about research in the 1980s and 1990s – a formative time in the development of the profession of counselling in the UK. At different times in that period both Brian Thorne and Dave Mearns were involved in Chairing the '*Courses Recognition Group*' of the British Association for Counselling (BAC), later renamed the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). In determining the core dimensions of what constituted adequate professional training, we were concerned that most university courses at that time emphasised academic learning about counselling theories and research, with comparatively little attention to skills and practice. They were courses *about* counselling rather than a training in counselling. To counter that tendency we defined the core areas of a 'Recognised' training to omit research. In the short term this served to achieve the emphasis on practice and skills that was wanted, but in the longer term we may

have done the profession a considerable disservice. In recent years counsellors, as well as those who prefer the label 'psychotherapists', have found themselves challenged for resourcing by others who are much more familiar with research, not to mention the politics of research (see www.davemearns.com/page10.html). It is ironic that we made this misjudgement even within the person-centred approach which was characterised by Rogers in his early years being the pioneer of empirical investigation within the profession. Fortunately, the wider person-centred approach in recent times has been blessed with numerous skilled researchers. Also the international journal, *Person-Centred and Experiential Psychotherapies*, has provided a forum for the discussion of theory and research since 2002. In this fourth edition we will correct the imbalance of the earlier editions by including a larger research dimension, including a dedicated chapter. In doing this our aim is not to equip the reader with the skills and knowledge to undertake major research projects but rather to help them to become interested in the advantages of becoming research aware.

As with past editions we hope that *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* is written in such a way that it will prove useful to practitioners and trainees in Europe, America and other parts of the world. There are two issues, however, which are perhaps peculiar to Britain and need elucidation for readers in other countries. First, there are several references to the work that a counsellor does with her *supervisor*. This emphasis on supervision reflects the British setting where continued accreditation as a counsellor with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy requires life-long supervision, a condition which, as far as we know, is not obligatory in most other parts of the world. Second, it should be understood that as far as the person-centred approach is concerned the activities of counselling and psychotherapy are considered indistinguishable because the *processes* involved between practitioner and client remain the same irrespective of the name given to the activity. For American readers the situation is rendered even more confusing because in Britain the word counselling tends to be used in contexts which in America might well warrant the term *psychotherapy*. In this book we have stayed consistent with the spirit of the series by referring to what we do as 'counselling' and by confining ourselves to relatively short-term therapeutic relationships. None of the cases we present progressed beyond a year.

In Britain we now have, to our minds, the regrettable situation where female counsellors and trainees considerably outnumber male practitioners. Partly for this reason, but mainly to simplify the text, we refer to counsellors as female and clients as male, except where the context clearly demands otherwise. This convention on our part should in no way detract from our absolute belief in the uniqueness of persons and no literary artifice which inadvertently appears to demean individuals because of their gender or for any other reason is intended.

The book, as in its previous editions, attempts to invite the reader into the living experience of person-centred counselling. It seeks to engage practitioners and would-be practitioners at an emotional as well as an intellectual level. Above all, it tries to convey the excitement – sometimes allied to anxiety and risk – of relating to another human being in depth. We hope, too, that the book will be read by would-be clients and more particularly by those who may have had the unfortunate experience of encountering

helping professionals who, either by temperament or through training, have been reluctant to meet them as persons. The opening three chapters present a contemporary overview of the major theoretical constructs of the approach and of the demands placed upon the counsellor in terms of her own awareness and disciplined attitude to the self. Chapter 2, on the new psychology theory underpinning person-centred working, was introduced for the first time in the third edition (Mearns and Thorne, 2007). This theory is particularly important for a modern understanding of the approach and for future theory building and research. However, we found that the clarity of its presentation in the third edition could be improved and we have done that here. Thereafter, the reader is plunged into the moment-to-moment challenges of the person-centred counsellor at work with all the dilemmas these inevitably present. Attitudes and skills are closely explored, especially where these foster in the counsellor the ability and the temerity to enter into relational depth with persons who may previously have been gravely wounded within the context of relationships that proved treacherous or abusive. A substantial part of the book is devoted to the experience of one particular therapeutic relationship and this is greatly enlivened by the client's willingness to be fully participant in the process of reflecting on her therapeutic journey. Thereafter John McLeod, certainly one of the foremost people in the field, offers a chapter on research that is intended to inform the reader about its history in the approach and the research issues and processes that are currently prevalent. The book concludes with the co-authors having an enjoyable time responding to questions often thrown at them by trainees, new practitioners, seasoned practitioners and curious or hostile counsellors from other orientations. We welcome the opportunity to face these queries, which can so often occur at the end of an exhausting lecture or workshop when we are longing for a gin and tonic.

Our hope is that readers will be encouraged to reflect on their own therapeutic journeys – whether as counsellor or client – and that they may catch something of the excitement that we invariably experience as we attempt to put into words the beauty and mystery of the person-to-person encounter that we call counselling. We know, of course, that the attempt must fail because only poetry at its most richly expressive can truly capture such beauty and penetrate the heart of the mystery.



1

Basic Theory of the Person-Centred Approach

- The Self-Concept
- Conditions of Worth
- The Organismic Valuing Process
- The Locus of Evaluation
- Creating the Conditions for Growth

The Self-Concept

Distrust of experts runs deep among person-centred practitioners. The person-centred counsellor must learn to wear her expertise as an invisible garment in order to be an effective counsellor. Experts are expected to dispense their expertise, to recommend what should be done, to offer authoritative guidance or even to issue orders. Clearly there are some areas of human experience where such expertise is essential and appropriate. Unfortunately, all too many of those who seek the help of counsellors have spent much of their lives surrounded by people who, with devastating inappropriateness, have appointed themselves experts in the conduct of other people's lives. As a result such clients are in despair at their inability to fulfil the expectations of others, whether parents, teachers, colleagues or so-called friends, and have no sense of self-respect or personal worth. And yet, despite the damage they have already suffered at the hands of those who have tried to direct their lives for them, such people will often come to a counsellor searching for yet another expert to tell them what to do. Person-centred counsellors, while accepting and understanding this desperate need for external authority, will do all they can to avoid falling into the trap of fulfilling such a role. To do so would be to deny a central assumption of the approach, namely that the client can be trusted to find his own way forward if only the counsellor can be the kind of companion who is capable of encouraging a relationship where the client can begin, however tentatively, to feel safe and to experience the first intimations of self-acceptance. The odds against this happening are sometimes formidable because the

view the client has of himself is low and the judgemental ‘experts’ in his life, both past and present, have been so powerfully destructive. The gradual revelation of a client’s *self-concept*, that is, the person’s conceptual construction of himself (however poorly expressed), can be harrowing in the extreme for the listener. It is with this revelation that the full extent of an individual’s self-rejection becomes apparent and this may prove a stern challenge to the counsellor’s faith, both in the client and in her own capacity to become a reliable companion in the therapeutic process.

The brief extract in Box 1.1 captures the sad and almost inexorable development of a self-concept which then undermines everything that a person does or tries to be. There is a sense of worthlessness and of being doomed to rejection and disapproval. Once such a self-concept has been internalised the person tends to reinforce it, for it is a fundamental tenet of the person-centred viewpoint that our behaviour is to a large extent an acting-out of how we actually feel about ourselves and the world we inhabit. In essence what we do is often a reflection of how we evaluate ourselves; if we have come to the conclusion that we are inept, worthless and unacceptable it is more than likely that we shall behave in a way that demonstrates the validity of such an assessment. The chances, therefore, of winning esteem or approval become more remote as time goes on.

Box 1.1 The Evolution of the Poor Self-Concept

- Client:* I don’t remember my parents ever praising me for anything. They always had something critical to say. My mother was always on about my untidiness, my lack of thought about everything. My father was always calling me stupid. When I got six ‘A’ passes in my GCSEs he said it was typical that I had done well in the wrong subjects.
- Counsellor:* It seems you could never do anything right in their eyes no matter how hard you tried or how successful you were.
- Client:* My friends were just as bad. They kept on at me about my appearance and told me that I was a pimply swot. I just wanted to creep around without being seen by anyone.
- Counsellor:* You felt so awful about yourself that you would like to have been invisible.
- Client:* It’s not all in the past. It’s just the same now. My husband never approves of anything I do and now my daughter says she’s ashamed to bring her friends home in case I upset them. It seems I’m no use to anyone. It would be better if I just disappeared.

Conditions of Worth

Fortunately the disapproval and rejection that many people experience is not such as to be totally annihilating. They retain some shreds of self-esteem although these may feel so fragile that the fear of final condemnation is never far away. It is as though they

are living according to a kind of legal contract, and that they only have to put one foot wrong for the whole weight of the law to descend upon them. They struggle, therefore, to keep their heads above water by trying to do and to be those things which they know will elicit approval while scrupulously avoiding or suppressing those thoughts, feelings and activities that they sense will bring adverse judgement. Their sense of worth, both in their own eyes and in those of others who have been important to them, is conditional upon winning approval and avoiding disapproval, and this means that their range of behaviour is severely restricted for they can only behave in ways which are sure to be acceptable to others. They are the victims of the *conditions of worth* which others have imposed upon them, but so great is their need for positive approval that they accept this straitjacket rather than risk rejection by trespassing against the conditions set for their acceptability.

Sometimes, though, the situation is such that they can no longer play this contractual game and then their worst fears may be realised as they experience the disapproval and growing rejection by the other person (see Box 1.2).

Box 1.2 Conditions of Worth

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| <i>Client:</i> | Everything was all right at first. I knew that he admired my bright conversation and the way I dressed. He liked the way I made love to him, too. I used to make a point of chatting when he came in and of making sure that I was well turned out even after a busy day at the office. |
| <i>Counsellor:</i> | You knew how to win his approval and you were happy to fulfil the necessary conditions. |
| <i>Client:</i> | Yes, but that all changed when I got pregnant. I wanted to talk about the baby but he wasn't interested it seemed. He obviously didn't like what was happening to my figure and I used to feel so tired that I hadn't the energy for the sort of love-making he wanted. He got more and more moody and I felt more and more depressed. |
| <i>Counsellor:</i> | You were no longer acceptable to him or to yourself. |

The Organismic Valuing Process

Carl Rogers believed that there was one motivational force that determined the development of the human being. He called this the *actualising tendency*. It was the actualising tendency which, despite every kind of opposition or hindrance, would ensure that an individual continued to strive to grow towards the best possible fulfilment of their potential. Those who were fortunate enough to have a loving and supportive environment during their early years would receive the necessary reinforcement to guarantee the nourishment of the actualising tendency. They would also be affirmed in their ability to trust their own thoughts and feelings and to make decisions in accordance with their own perceptions and desires. Their *organismic valuing process*, to use Rogers' terminology,

would be in good order and would enable them to move through life with a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment.

Those not fortunate enough to have such supportive relationships but who, on the contrary, suffered from the imposition of many punitive *conditions of worth*, would soon discover that they had an overwhelming *need for positive regard*. So great is this need in all of us that its satisfaction can take precedence over the promptings of the actualising tendency and as a consequence create gross confusion for the organismic valuing process (see Box 1.3). This conflict between the desperate need for approval and the wisdom of the individual's organismic valuing process lies at the root of much disturbance and often leads to an inner bewilderment that undermines confidence and makes effective decision-making impossible.

Box 1.3 Early Confusion of the Organismic Valuing Process

- Child:* [Falls over and cuts his knee: runs crying to his father for comfort or assurance.]
- Father:* What a silly thing to do. Stop crying and do not be such a baby. It's hardly bleeding.
- Child:* [Thinks: it's stupid to fall over; it's wrong to cry; I shouldn't want daddy's support but I need it. But I wanted to cry; I wanted daddy's cuddle: I wasn't stupid. I don't know what to do. Who can I trust? I need daddy's love but I want to cry.]

The loss of trust in the organismic valuing process and the loss of contact with the actualising tendency which informs it can result in the creation of a self-concept that is forced to suppress or deny altogether the promptings that emanate from the deepest parts of the person's response to experience. A person who is told repeatedly, for example, that it is wrong and destructive to be depressed may arrive at a point where he says of himself, 'I am a person who never feels depressed', or, just as disastrously, 'I am a person who deserves to be punished because I am always feeling miserable.' In the first case the intimations of depression have been repressed from consciousness whereas in the second they are a cause for self-condemnation and guilt. In both cases the resulting self-concept is far removed from any sense of trust in the reliability of the organismic valuing process as a guide to assessing direct and untrammelled experience. One of the most rewarding moments in a counselling process comes when the client discovers or re-discovers the dependability of his organismic valuing process however temporary or partial this may be (see Box 1.4). Such a moment can do much to strengthen the counsellor's faith in the client's ability to find his own way forward. It also points to the resilience of the actualising tendency, sometimes against all odds, to survive despite all the obstacles to its healthy functioning. At the deepest level, it would seem, the yearning to become more than we currently are is never completely extinguished.

Box 1.4 The Organismic Valuing Process is Restored

Client: I feel very sad: it's an overwhelming feeling.
Counsellor: As if you have no option but to give yourself to the sadness.
Client: That sounds very frightening – as if I shall lose control. But I never lose control. [*Suddenly bursts into tears.*]
Counsellor: Your tears speak for you.
Client: But big boys don't cry.
Counsellor: Are you saying that you are ashamed of your tears?
Client: [*Long pause.*] No ... for the first time for years I feel in touch with myself ... It feels OK to be crying.

It would be incomplete to leave the discussion of the organismic valuing process at this point. Human beings, because they are essentially relational creatures, are deeply affected not only by the responses of significant others to them during the course of their lives but also by the societal and cultural norms of the milieu in which they find themselves. The organismic valuing process is inevitably affected by these norms and is indeed permeated by them in such a way that the individual is sometimes prevented from behaving in ways that could be foolhardy or even self-destructive. What we have come to term *social mediation* is an important factor for the counsellor as she encounters a client who is struggling to determine a course of action in light of the promptings of the organismic valuing process. A response to those promptings – which seem to be demanding growth at all costs – may need the moderating influence of social mediation to forestall disaster. The actualising tendency and organismic valuing process sometimes require the compassionate brake of social mediation to ensure that the client listens to a voice which whispers that, in this instance and at this time, no-growth is the more prudent option. This is not to deny, of course, that very often the norms of society or of the prevailing culture impede the functioning of the organismic valuing process rather than informing or enhancing it. It is not always easy by any means to distinguish between social mediation as the compassionate brake and social conditioning as the vehicle of pervasive conditions of worth which stifle creativity, undermine confidence and condemn persons to half a life. A more detailed exploration of this and some of the other complex issues arising from recent developments in person-centred theory as they affect the actualising process is to be found in the next chapter.

The Locus of Evaluation

The person who has been unlucky enough to be surrounded by those who are sharply critical and judgemental will have been forced to resort to all manner of strategies in order to achieve a modicum of approval and positive regard. In most cases this will have

entailed a progressive alienation from the organismic valuing process and the creation of a self-concept divorced from the person's innate resources and developed wisdom. The self-concept is likely to be poor but in some cases the person establishes a picture of himself that enables him to retain a degree of self-respect through a total blocking off from all significant sensory or 'visceral' experience. In all such cases, however, the organismic valuing process has ceased in any significant way to be a source of knowledge or guidance for the individual. He is likely to have great difficulty in making decisions or in knowing what he thinks or feels. There will probably be a reliance on external authorities for guidance or a desperate attempt to please everyone that may result in unpredictable, inconsistent and incongruent behaviour.

Psychologically healthy persons are men and women who have been fortunate enough to be surrounded by others whose acceptance and approval have enabled them to develop self-concepts that allow them for at least some of the time to be in touch with their deepest feelings and experiences. They are not cut off from the ground of their being and they are well placed to move towards becoming what Rogers has described as 'fully functioning' persons (Rogers, 1963a). Such people are open to experience without feeling threatened and are consequently able to listen to themselves and to others. They are highly aware of their feelings and the feelings of others and they have the capacity to live in the present moment. Most importantly, they display a trust and confidence in their organismic valuing process that is manifestly lacking in those who have continually had to battle with the adverse judgement of others. Such trusting is most evident in the process of decision-making and in the awareness and articulation of present thoughts and feelings. Instead of searching for guidance from outside or experiencing an internal confusion or blankness, the fully functioning person holds their source of wisdom deep within and accessible. Rogers has described this self-referent as the internal *locus of evaluation* and, for the counsellor, one of the most significant moments in therapy is the point at which a client recognises this reference point within himself perhaps for the first time (see Box 1.5).

Box 1.5 The Internal Locus of Evaluation

- Client:* I suppose I went into the job to please my father. It seemed to make sense, too, in terms of having some sort of career structure.
- Counsellor:* It was important to please your father and to feel OK in conventional career terms.
- Client:* Yes – and I have a feeling I married Jean because I knew my parents liked her. I certainly wasn't in love with her.
- Counsellor:* You married her to please them, really.
- Client:* And last night I knew that I can't go on. I hate the job and my marriage is a farce. I've got to find out what I want, what makes sense to me, before I waste the whole of my life trying to please other people. And I think I'm beginning to get some glimmering of what I must do. It's very frightening to hear your own voice for the first time.