An Analysis of Carl Rogers’ work with Gloria:

An article review

by

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MSC-502: Counseling Theories and Techniques

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“An Analysis of How Carl Rogers Enacted Client-centered Conversation with Gloria” carefully studies the recently re-analyzed and amended transcript from the classic training film “Three Approaches to Psychotherapy” for evidence that Rogers’ conversational devices utilized during this famous exchange are ripe with enactments of the core conditions of his person-centered therapy: empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness. Rogers posited that these three conditions are both necessary and sufficient in inducing therapeutic change (Wickman & Campbell, 2003). In writing this article, Wickman and Campbell (2003) sought to provide a more enlightened viewpoint from which counselors, teachers, and students can consider Rogers’ embodiment of his person-centered theory while conversing with Gloria. This article uses analysis and interpretation of the improved 1999 transcript to ascertain the degree to which each of seven conversational devices exemplifies one or more of Rogers’ three critical stipulations. The seven conversational devices are as follows: nonexpert language, meta-statements, affiliative negative assessments, first-person quotes, invitations for repair, withholding direct responses to requests for advice, and problem reformulation.

Wickman and Campbell (2003) discuss Rogers’ use of nonexpert phrases as, “I sure wish I could give you the answer”, “I’d be glad to know whatever…”, and “I’m not sure” (p. 180). These types of phrases exemplify Rogers’ “not-knowing” (Wickman & Campbell, 2003, p. 180) position, which communicated his genuineness to Gloria by making it evident to her that she, and not Rogers, was the expert in the arena of Gloria’s life. The authors additionally indicate that by Rogers respecting Gloria’s capacity to be an expert on her own life, he also communicated unconditional positive regard to Gloria.

Rogers utilized meta-statements in his therapeutic encounter with Gloria as a conversational tool for demonstrating his person-centered approach condition of genuineness.
Meta-statements are comments made about the verbal exchange even as it is occurring, thereby putting the spoken content into a “one-step removed’ frame” (Wickman & Campbell, 2003, p. 180). Meta-statements include phrases such as: “I guess I’d like to say…” and “…I might ask, “What is it you wish I would say to you?”” (Wickman & Campbell, 2003, p. 180). According to the authors, meta-statements as used in everyday conversation serve the purpose of making potentially awkward or risky conversation more easily presented. Rogers used meta-statements frequently, and this technique appears to have reinforced the genuineness he sought to portray as a truly “nonexpert” helper. Wickman and Campbell (2003) indicate that genuineness was also portrayed inherently through Rogers’ use of “I” messages since these messages model “ownership of self” (p. 180).

As opposed to the evaluative statements common in everyday conversation, Wickman and Campbell (2003) assert that the only type of evaluative statement Rogers employed throughout his time with Gloria involved affiliative negative assessments of the difficulty of the process which Gloria was experiencing. Affiliative negative statements include statements such as “life is risky” and words such as “damn”, “tough”, and “hell” (Wickman & Campbell, 2003, p. 180). It is suggested by the authors that Rogers made use of these affiliative negative statements to show his capacity to comprehend Gloria’s dilemma, thereby exhibiting empathy.

Another conversational device employed by Rogers to communicate his core condition of empathy concerns his use of first-person quotes which “externalized Gloria’s hypothetical internal dialogue” (Wickman & Campbell, 2003, p. 180). The authors postulate that by using this device, Rogers managed to speak from the “I” point of view about Gloria’s unsaid thoughts, all the while expressing his language as though it belonged to Gloria. For instance, Rogers offered, “you sort of feel, “I want them to have just as nice a picture of me as they have of their dad’”
Wickman and Campbell (2003) contend that this act of explicitly communicating Gloria’s standpoint while using “I” messages demonstrated the above mentioned empathy. Furthermore, the authors hypothesize that the collaborative quoting which occurred by the end of the session reinforced the accuracy and efficacy of empathic internal dialogue quotes. Collaborative quoting involves Rogers’ introduction of a quote that Gloria might have used to express her thoughts, followed by Gloria completing the quote with her own words.

Wickman and Campbell (2003) assert that Rogers’ invitations for repair presented opportunities for Rogers to clarify and hone his grasp of Gloria’s predicament. Invitations such as “is that right?” and “is that what you’re saying?” served to embody Rogers’ genuineness by revealing his interest in the therapeutic relationship, verifying that what he was saying was congruent with what Gloria was hearing and understanding. Invitations for repair also suggested genuineness by reaffirming Rogers’ role as a “nonexpert” and by presenting Rogers as a genuine person whose outer appearance of self reflected his inner thoughts. Besides genuineness, these invitations for Gloria to amend Rogers’ offerings and interpretations increased Rogers’ ability to demonstrate his core condition of empathy. The authors aver that Gloria generally concurred when Rogers offered empathy via the words he used in his invitations for repair.

The authors note that in everyday conversation, one’s instinctive response to requests for advice is the dispensing of advice. However, Rogers practiced the conversational device of withholding direct responses to requests for advice, thereby manifesting unconditional positive regard for Gloria in his deference to her as a person who was capable of arriving at her own decisions. An example of Rogers’ use of this conversational device can be seen in this statement: “I—I also feel that this is the kind of very private thing that I couldn’t possibly answer for you”
Though Rogers withheld from dispensing advice, he managed to convey his comprehension of Gloria’s situation by employing nonexpert language, empathic meta-statements, invitations for repair, and negative valuations of the difficulty of the process. The support given by Rogers as he withheld the giving of directly requested advice appeared to compel Gloria to delve into her presenting problem on a deeper level.

The final conversational device analyzed in this article is problem reformulation. Wickman & Campbell (2003, citing Davis, 1984) explain that problem reformulation involves taking the initial descriptions of a problem presented by a client and organizing these descriptions into a form which can be managed within the constraints of talk therapy. Rogers made use of problem reformulation in his conversations with Gloria when he made statements such as: “Sounds like you’re feeling a contradiction in yourself too?” and “So it’s quite clear it isn’t only her problem or the relationship with her it’s in you as well” (Wickman & Campbell, 2003, p. 182). When Gloria brought to Rogers unclear, poorly defined topics for discussion, Rogers was able to demonstrate empathy by drawing out of the presented material the essence of what Gloria was conveying. In this way, Rogers reformulated the ambiguity in what Gloria said into a more clearly-defined and surmountable problem. In allowing Gloria to both initiate the problem and manage its resolution, Rogers also exhibited another of his core conditions, unconditional positive regard, since doing so respected Gloria’s role as owner and controller of her own life.

Wickman & Campbell (2003) illustrate in this article the connection between Rogers’ theory and his practice by analyzing the film’s transcript for easy-to-miss conversational devices which conveyed Rogers’ core conditions of empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard. The authors indicate the critical point that none of Rogers’ three core tenets stood alone
during this session with Gloria and should not be considered in isolation. The use of conversational devices which concurrently embodied Rogers’ three core conditions enabled Rogers to help Gloria in defining her problem by encouraging her to open up with more details and on a deeper level “until [her problem situation] became no longer problematic” (Wickman & Campbell, 2003, p. 182).

Wickman & Campbell (2003) encourage taking a constructionist approach while studying the film “Three Approaches to Psychotherapy” so that “learners participate collaboratively in making sense of what is presented” (p. 183) instead of merely being “passive recipients of information” (p. 183). The authors contend that there is much more occurring during the session with Gloria than previous writings reveal. Rogers criticized the manner in which counselor education programs and textbooks misrepresented the nature of his theory, and studying the subtle interconnectedness of Rogers’ three core conditions as evidenced in the therapy transcript helps the reader to gain a better grasp of what Rogerian therapy is all about.

It was amazing to me the way in which Rogers was able to draw out the essence of Gloria’s problem as a human being in the very short time he met with her. Gloria presented her problem as worrying about the harmful ramifications to her daughter of either telling her daughter about Gloria’s post-divorce sexual relationships or withholding the truth from her daughter. Within the parameters of the half-hour session with Rogers, Gloria’s problem evolved from this surface concern to deeper issues involving Gloria’s self-acceptance and feelings of wholeness. To be able to say of someone that they “‘helped me to recognize my potential—my value as a human being’” (Wickman & Campbell, 2003, citing Dolliver, Williams, & Gold, 1980), as Gloria said of Rogers, is remarkable. I can understand more now why we are focusing on “being in the moment” and trying to empathize with our partner in counseling lab. I am
learning that some of my goals as a future helping professional should include being present as Rogers clearly was with Gloria, listening for the client’s themes, and, perhaps most importantly, respecting the client’s position and worth as the owner and controller of their own life. It was especially helpful for me to learn while studying Rogers’ conversational devices that, in general, it is important to refrain from offering advice, even when directly asked for advice. I also appreciated the way in which Rogers continually acknowledged Gloria’s ownership of her life by playing the “nonexpert”, abstaining time and again from presenting himself as the expert that he truly was. Knowing that Rogers, whom I have read is one of the most influential figures in the history of counseling theory and practice, was able to accomplish his task of moving his clients toward “a greater degree of independence and integration” (Corey, 2009, p. 170) by employing tools that seem on the surface to be so simple and common-sense is utterly incredible. Though I am pretty sure that I will never be a Carl Rogers, it was inspiring to experience his “Rogerian” style by, in a way, reading between the lines of the therapy transcript. I was interested to read what the authors say about the way in which Rogers had “automated the [core] conditions into his natural communication style” (Wickman & Campbell, 2003, p. 183). I would love to be able to get to a point at which I automatically convey in my communications empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard.

REFERENCES

