PERSON-CENTRED COUNSELLING

IN ACTION

Third Edition

Dave Mearns and
Brian Thorne

SAGE Publications
Los Angeles • London • New Delhi • Singapore
It is now almost 20 years since the first edition of ‘Person-Centred Counselling in Action’ appeared. During that period there has been a remarkable burgeoning of the practice of counselling and psychotherapy and a comparable development within the particular domain of person-centred counselling. In 1988, apart from the writings of Carl Rogers himself, there was little literature available to assist the aspiring person-centred counsellor and the first edition of this book brought both substance and discipline to an orientation which was in danger of becoming anarchic. Indeed, it was not uncommon at that time for practitioners to appropriate the label ‘person-centred’ for themselves without any firm grasp of either the theory or the practice of what is, in fact, one of the most demanding approaches to therapy to emerge in the twentieth century. Ironically, the inappropriate and ill-informed use of the term person-centred is still to be found in government literature especially in the context of NHS provision where the emphasis on putting the patient at the centre of treatment is buttressed by terminology which has nothing whatsoever to do with the theory and practice of person-centred counselling as we understand it. It is, indeed, difficult to avoid the mischievous thought that if the NHS were really undergirded by a genuine person-centred philosophy we would be living in a very different culture to the target-driven, efficiency-obsessed, surveillance monitored environment prevailing in so many professional fields at the present time.

This third edition appears against the background of the profound changes that have occurred in the person-centred world during the last two decades. The approach is now well established in Britain and is embraced by thousands of practitioners. Several high-quality training courses exist and person-centred practitioners, scholars and researchers are to be found in prestigious universities – most notably in the Universities of Strathclyde and East Anglia – where the current authors have been responsible for the development of Centres that have achieved
international recognition. The approach has also been well served in the professional literature and there are several person-centred authors whose books are widely read and appreciated (e.g. Merry, 1995, 1999; Keys, 2003; Tolan, 2003; Wilkins, 2003; Sanders, 2006; Tudor and Worrall, 2006). Two flourishing professional associations exist, the British Association for the Person-Centred Approach (BAPCA) and its sister organisation, the Association for Person-Centred Therapy (Scotland). The approach is now also admirably served by PCCS Books Limited of Ross-on-Wye who, under the inspirational leadership of Pete Sanders and Maggie Taylor-Sanders, are almost entirely devoted to the publication of person-centred books and have become the primary publisher of person-centred material not only in Britain but in the world. At the same time, Sage (UK) have continued to play a central role in the publication of books (like this one) which have proved to be trail-blazers in the person-centred tradition. More recently the World Association for Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling has been established and its journal ‘Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies’ currently has two thousand subscribers worldwide.

The rapid spread and consolidation of the approach in Britain and other parts of the world has also ensured its vitality. New schools of thought have emerged which, while remaining faithful to the core elements of the approach, have embraced different emphases and opened up fresh therapeutic possibilities. The current authors welcome such developments while remaining alert to deviations that threaten to abandon key elements of the approach. They have also been assiduous in continually reviewing the theoretical basis of person-centred work to see where it needs extending or elaborating. In this respect Dave Mearns has been especially active and his work on configurations and ego-syntonic process has proved to be particularly illuminating and of considerable clinical importance. Both of us have embraced the concept of relational depth as an unusually helpful notion in evaluating counsellor competence and therapeutic efficacy. For Dave Mearns it has proved a valuable concept in addressing the challenge of existential despair while for Brian Thorne it has provided a context for exploring the quality of presence and the movement into spiritual experience. From the outset of our 32 year friendship and collaboration, the fact that Dave is a humanistic atheist and Brian an Anglican Christian of the liberal catholic persuasion has proved to be an unexpected strength and has endowed our work with a creative energy which seems to appeal to a wide readership. It perhaps also reflects the fact that person-centred practitioners tend to be fairly
evenly divided between those who declare themselves agnostic or atheist and those who hold a religious or spiritual belief system which postulates some kind of higher power or universal meaning.

Against this background we have been at pains in this revised text to produce a book which both in context and style will commend itself to practitioners whose level of experience may vary significantly. Those who are new to the approach and may be embarking on the first stage of training will find in its pages a clear exposition of key aspects of theory and practice. They will also gain first-hand knowledge of the challenging and sometimes dramatic day-to-day experience of being a person-centred counsellor. We believe, however, that well-established practitioners and even seasoned scholars of the approach will find much here to interest and stimulate them.

In an earlier book, *Person-Centred Therapy Today* (Sage, 2000), we attempted to explore new frontiers in both theory and practice and an introduction to that work has been incorporated into the present volume. We are proud, however, to belong to a tradition that remains constantly open to new insights and possibilities and there are moments in this new edition when we take tentative steps into, as yet, little explored terrain. Readers of the first two editions have been generous in their praise of a book that they found both clear and compelling, accessible and yet conducive to profound reflection. They also commented frequently on the pleasure of being accompanied by two authors so evidently different in temperament and yet united in values and purpose. The first two solutions have sold 130,000 copies. Perhaps we are misane to produce this radical revision in the third edition, adding 20,000 words and tripling the references. Yet we believe that this new edition will have lost none of the clarity and accessibility of its predecessors and that its content will be sufficiently compelling to retain the loyalty of old readers while welcoming new enquirers. Of one thing we are sure: we have not grown bored with each other’s company and have not lost the ability to startle each other by our differing but complementary perceptions of the fascinating arena of a therapeutic approach which we believe has much to offer a desperate world. Above all it can contribute to the restoration of confidence in the capacity of human beings to move, against all the odds, towards a more constructive future.

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

On 8 July 1997 in Lisbon the World Association for Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling was founded and three years later in Chicago its Statutes were agreed by consensus at a General Assembly. These events would probably have astonished Dr Carl Rogers, the pioneering originator of person-centred counselling, and might even have horrified him for he had an almost instinctive dislike of associations and organisations. For Rogers they tended to lead to a form of entrenched professionalism where all too easily the needs and insights of clients could be obscured by forms of expertise which served to bolster the self-importance, prestige and power of therapists. For person-centred practitioners throughout the world, however, the formation of the World Association marked an important milestone in the evolution of an approach to counselling and psychotherapy which had its origins in the work of Rogers and his colleagues in the 1930s and 1940s. It offered the possibility of a firmer identity and a more powerful voice at a time when, as now, the prevailing Zeitgeist was less than favourable to many of the principles which have from the outset underpinned the theory and practice of person-centred counselling.

The central truth for Rogers 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 to the client in such a way that he or she 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 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. Both of us are committed members of the World Association and it seems wholly appropriate that we should adhere to the description which features in the Association's title.

Our decision to employ the term 'person-centred' does not rest, however, simply on a desirable alignment with the World Association's terminology. There are at least three other powerful reasons. 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 which 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 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
misguidedly anarchic practice, which had no solid foundation in genuine
person-centred theory. In a second edition some ten years later 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 and a number of academic 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 remarkably
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 (2000b) has described as ‘tribes’ of the person-centred nation. For us, person-centred counselling serves as an appropriate umbrella term for all 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. For our own part, while situating ourselves, by temperament and experience, at the ‘classical’ end of the continuum we have been keen to develop and refine many of Rogers’ original theoretical constructs and this work is incorporated in what follows. Person-centred counselling, as we view it, is neither set in theoretical tablets of stone nor confined to one particular and exclusive form in practice.

Where the book is intentionally limited is in its primary focus on practice informed – as this is – by what we trust is a clear exposition of theory. It makes no pretence to offer a detailed exploration of research studies or to engage in research analysis. As a result much of the painstaking work of American researchers of past generations goes unacknowledged as does the more recent work of eminent European researchers. Readers who wish to remedy this deficiency are invited to consult Goff Barrett-Lennard’s monumental history of the approach (Sage, 1998), which gives, inter alia, a comprehensive account of the approach’s embeddedness in research. PCCS Books (a publishing house dedicated to the person-centred approach and founded in the early 1990s) has also published a collection of papers from the Chicago international conference of 2000 including accounts of recent research studies to that point (Watson, Goldman and Warner, 2002). Since 2002 the international journal Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies, currently in its sixth volume, represents the major vehicle for reporting new developments in the approach.

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 where the person-centred approach is flourishing. There are two issues, however, which are perhaps peculiar to Britain and need elucidation for readers in other countries. Firstly, there are several references to the work which 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 parts of America and continental Europe. Secondly, it should be understood that as far as the person-centred approach is concerned the activities of counselling and psychotherapy are usually 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 much more generally 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 seeks 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 some 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 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. 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. The book concludes with the two 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.