



## **A Brief Synopsis of Unconditional Positive Regard – what is it and how does it help the client and the therapeutic relationship between therapist and client?**

Unconditional positive regard (UPR) is one of the 'core' conditions of person-centred or client-centred therapy, the other two conditions being empathy and congruence. Rogers held the view that it was the existence of these 'core' conditions that created a truly healing, therapeutic relationship. Words that Rogers used to describe UPR included valuing, respect, and prizing of the client by the therapist. How this manifests for the client is a feeling of being safe with the counsellor, not feeling judged, and feeling appreciated (Hough, 1994). Ultimately, irrespective of the difference in values, attitudes and beliefs between client and counsellor, the client feels respected and accepted, and safe to be able to open up and share with the therapist.

The three 'core' conditions are part of a wider framework of what Rogers called the 'six necessary and sufficient conditions' (Rogers, 1957, as cited in Reeves, 2018) outlined below:-

- 1) That two persons are in contact
- 2) That the first person, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable or anxious
- 3) That the second person, whom we shall term the therapist, is congruent in the relationship
- 4) That the therapist is experiencing unconditional positive regard towards the client
- 5) That the therapist is experiencing an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference
- 6) That the client perceives, at least to a minimal degree, conditions 4 and 5, the unconditional positive regard of the therapist for them, and the empathic understanding of the therapist.

It was Rogers' belief that these conditions were enough for constructive personality change, and that the therapist is non-directive, following the emerging experience of the client in the moment, with this being the focus of the work rather than goal-setting by the therapist.

Understanding UPR in the context of these conditions highlights its importance as a core concept within the therapeutic encounter in that the therapist experiences UPR and that this is perceived by the client.

Various contributors since the inception of classic client-centred therapy have debated which, if any, of the 'core' conditions holds more importance when it comes to helping the client within the therapeutic relationship. Bozarth (1998) has argued that of the 'core' conditions, it is UPR which is the 'primary change agent' emphasising that it is the client's experiencing of this UPR that is what is therapeutically effective. Wilkins (2010) similarly states that UPR is a 'major curative factor' in any therapeutic approach, and that the other two conditions, congruence and empathy, provide the context in which it is possible. Sommerbeck (2015) when talking of her work with a client after the 9/11 attacks on the US emphasises the important role of UPR. In Sommerbeck's example with a particular client, the client's views and expressions challenged Sommerbeck's own views greatly, but rather than compromise her empathic understanding of the client, Sommerbeck explored the client's experience, and in doing so, acceptance of the client returned. She could understand the client's view, and sitting with this conflict to her own views and staying with the client enabled the restoration of UPR to levels previously experienced.

Ballantine Dykes et al., (2017) describe UPR as having unconditionality for the client to counteract the conditions of worth (conditional values from others and society) that the client has grown up with. In other words, acceptance of the client and their experience of the world.

Interestingly, and somewhat conversely, Bower claims that UPR simply does not exist and prefers the term 'acceptance regardless of regard' (Bower, 2015, as cited in, Sommerbeck, 2015). He was talking specifically within the context of client fees when making this point, but reflecting on this view in the broader context of UPR theoretically, to my mind, 'acceptance regardless of regard' conveys acceptance irrespective of how one may regard a client.

In her definition and explanation of UPR, Sommerbeck says that 'unconditional acceptance is acceptance of the essential humaneness of the client, not of the behaviour of the client' (Sommerbeck, 2015, p.20). Similarly, Barrett-Lennard says that the limits with UPR is 'on behaviour, not on attitudes and feelings' (Barrett-Lennard, 1998, p.66, as cited in Sommerbeck, 2015, p.20).

In Bozarth's view, Rogers' conclusion is that UPR is the curative factor in psychological dysfunction, assuming that one's true natural tendency to self-actualise has been thwarted. Lietaer holds a similar view stating that "the attitude of unconditionality of the therapist serves as a 'counterbalancing force' in the corrective experience which the client hopefully has during therapy!" (Lietaer, 1984, p.45, as cited in Bozarth, 1998, p.84).

Bozarth iterates that a major assumption in the field of person-centred theory is the individual need for positive regard. He goes further to say that UPR arises "when the client perceives that she is making a consistent positive difference in the experiential field of the therapist" (Bozarth, 2013, p.182).

The receiving of UPR by the client from the therapist, and crucially, the perception of this UPR aids a decrease in conditions of worth and an increase in unconditional positive self-regard. UPR effectively weakens the conditions of worth, and this is perhaps the distinguishing point in person-centred theory to that of other modalities. That an attitude held and communicated has the capacity to neutralise the client's dysfunction accumulated through years of conditionality.

What is clear within person-centred theory is that UPR is an attitudinal quality that is characterised as a valuing and prizing of the client, and that this attitude and the empathic understanding of the client helps reduce conditions of worth and strengthen the client's own self-regard. In practice, holding UPR as an attitude in therapeutic work may be experienced by the client as a warm, accepting, safe and non-judgemental environment. What also seems important in this brief

theoretical look at UPR is that a key component of the effectiveness of UPR is the therapist trusting her client's abilities to actualise and grow. In other words, holding a firm belief in the client's actualising tendency – the capacity to move towards growth. It also seems important to say that UPR during the course of client work will fluctuate, and Rogers himself acknowledged this by saying:-

*“The phrase ‘unconditional positive regard’ may be an unfortunate one, since it sounds like an absolute, an all or nothing dispositional concept. It is probably evident from the description that completely unconditional positive regard would never exist except in theory. From a clinical and experiential point of view I believe the most accurate statement is that the effective therapist experiences unconditional positive regard for the client during many moments of his contact with him, yet from time to time he experiences only a conditional positive regard – and perhaps at times a negative regard, though this is not likely in effective therapy. It is this sense that unconditional positive regard exists as a matter of degree in any relationship” (Rogers, 1957, p.98, as cited in, Sommerbeck, 2015, p.16).*

From this brief synopsis on this ‘core’ condition, what is clear is that for a comprehensive understanding of UPR in the context of person-centred theory, it needs to be understood in conjunction with all of the ‘core’ conditions in order to be fully appreciated theoretically. In theoretical terms, the ‘core’ conditions are qualities that cannot be viewed in isolation and work in partnership with each other, inextricably linked and interrelated.

UPR is characterised as a valuing, respect and prizing of the client that is experienced by the therapist and felt by the client from the therapist, and it is this latter point that is perhaps the most crucially important – that the client somehow, even to a minimal degree, perceives UPR from the therapist.

Theorists such as Bozarth view UPR as the most important condition describing UPR as the ‘primary change agent’. Bower’s contrasting discourse is that UPR simply does not exist, yet acknowledges it in terms of the phrase ‘acceptance regardless of regard’. No matter which condition is argued to be the most important, Rogers’ pervading view was that these conditions were necessary and sufficient for constructive personality change and for a client to move from dysfunction and dis-ease closer to their authentic self. The view that these conditions were necessary and sufficient is, arguably, the most contentious point of person-centred theory. Are the ‘core’ conditions necessary and sufficient? Are they necessary, but not sufficient? Are they not necessarily necessary but always sufficient? These questions form a widely recognised debate definitely worthy of further consideration and reflection for any curious therapist with an interest in person-centred theory. I hold the person-centred approach in high esteem. I also hold a view that the ‘core’ conditions are extremely helpful and go some way in developing a relationship with a client that will likely result in some degree of change and positive growth. At this stage in my counselling journey, I do not feel that they are always sufficient in helping a client, principally because the needs of clients can be so varied. I also appreciate that my view may change over time. In addition, I also appreciate that having this opinion may be viewed as a controversial point within person-centred circles.

Some may argue that all good therapists offer UPR as the underpinning of their therapy regardless of modality, and there is some truth to this argument. Holden cites that no matter the therapist’s school of thought, clients “progress was best correlated with the degree of acceptance” (Holden, 1977, p.31). Having unconditional acceptance of your client, along with the other ‘core’ conditions of empathy and congruence, however these are described, can only assist in forming a helpful relationship with your client based on honesty, respect and acceptance.

What constitutes UPR to one therapist may differ to another therapist, and it may be that those with a firmer grounding in person-centred theory are able to elucidate this point more, but even this suggestion may do a disservice to other therapists from other orientations. No matter your theoretical orientation, I am certain that any good therapist who wants to make a positive difference to the lives of clients will see the value of acceptance and respect for their clients as people worthy of help and support.

Some areas to reflect on:-

- Are the 'core' conditions necessary and sufficient? Where do you stand in relation to Rogers' view?
- What's your understanding of UPR and how do you express and communicate UPR to your client?
- Do you feel that the 'core' conditions are what all good practitioners do anyway, and if so, how do other modalities define and describe UPR?

Undeniably, the person-centred approach and the work of Rogers has made such a difference to the world of psychology and humanistic theory over 50 years ago, and continues to have impact and significance today, and will no doubt continue to do so for many years to come.

#### References:-

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