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Person-centred Approach to using Counselling Skills in Social Work Practice

Key Concepts

- Self-actualisation
- Self-concept and Self-structure
- Unconditional Positive Regard
- Working Alliance
- Congruence
- Empathy

Key Theorists and Practitioners

- Maslow
- Rogers

Introduction

The person-centred approach is an influential model that strongly informs our use of counselling skills. This chapter aims to achieve two objectives. Firstly, it will provide a brief overview of the person-centred approach, which will be outlined and applied to social work practice. As with other chapters, this is not all-inclusive and further reading is strongly recommended. Secondly, some of the skills associated with this approach will be examined in detail within a social work context. Contained within this is an exploration of the three fundamental therapeutic attributes for effective communication with vulnerable people in need, building on listening skills: congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1957).

The Humanistic School

The Humanistic School (Nelson-Jones, 2000) is named as a result of its value base, advocating that human beings have individual potential that needs to be achieved in order to experience satisfaction with life. This is referred to as actualisation (Rogers, 1977). It is reached by 'experiencing ... feelings' in order to bring a form of 'harmony'

between thoughts, actions and underlying tendencies, and then generate autonomous thoughts and actions. The Humanistic School firmly believes that all of us have tendencies that are unique and all of us have capacity for understanding the self. Thinking and acting out of harmony with these tendencies results in distress, dissatisfaction and a lack of fulfilment in life. Self-reflection aided by therapeutic support assists to bring our lives back into harmony with these tendencies (Rogers, 1977).

Carl Rogers (1942, 1980) is the dominant theorist in this perspective. A historical account of his life as such is given by Nelson-Jones (2000), who provides the context in which his ideas evolved. Rogers seems to have acknowledged areas of disharmony in his own life and appears to have been striving to fulfil self-actualisation and find more internal-external harmony. As social workers we are interested in political influences and we need to view Rogers' beliefs about human potential in a political context if we are to objectively evaluate the usefulness of this approach. His commitment to the emancipation of people from the dominant voice of society and from their parents sets a foundation for the notion of individual potential and for the challenging of authority in various forms (Rogers, 1980).

As with other approaches that follow in subsequent chapters, a person-centred approach has theoretical underpinnings that are based on beliefs that have been tested in practice over time. Critical social work practice requires that we keep a firm hold on the origin of theoretical concepts and do not fall into fixed, repetitive practice, where we accept theoretical models on face value as 'absolute truth'. There are, however, benefits to including elements of this model into social work practice.

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Approach

Rogers (1961) was wholly concerned with people's internal processes that led to environmental stimuli being experienced by them as a unique and entirely subjective form of reality. Individual emotional and behavioural reactions to experience and the unique meaning of those reactions cannot therefore be globally categorised or predicted, even in the context of culture. Tolan (2003) includes scope for the influence of culture in the development of personality within this approach but the meaning given to experience remains an individual phenomenon. In this respect, labelling emotional and behavioural problems as disorders that lead to broadly defined and prescribed 'treatments', pharmacological or psychological, would not easily fit with this approach.

Self-actualisation

Rogers' most significant and distinguishing theoretical concept is that of actualisation (1977). Drawn from other theorists of his time, including Maslow (1962, 1970), Rogers identifies that human motivation functions to assist us to reach our individual potential. In so doing, we strive to achieve internal harmony between what we feel and what we experience. By a process of internally evaluating experience we

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individually evolve by change and adaptation through the means of self-regulation. This includes congruent awareness and expression of feelings evoked by experience: we recognise, then express, what we feel about an experience. Self-regulation allows choosing satisfying experiences over dissatisfying ones. The actualisation process is thus a motivational system from which our individual evolution and development occurs. Competing against this, however, is the conscious self (Rogers, 1959; Maslow, 1962), where blockages to the actualising process occur.

The actualisation process in Humanistic theory applies over the life span. The self-actualisation drive is not a static concept but one that is continually in progress through the triad of experience, perceiving feelings linked to experience, and expressing or acting upon feelings in congruence with the experience. Reaching human potential does not have a ceiling of age and is unique to each individual. The actualisation process becomes blocked and internal disharmony results when incongruence between feelings and experience, expression or action occurs. In such a situation, inner conflict is generated and emotional and behavioural problems can develop.

Immediately the potentially conflicting elements – individual tendencies and social structures – become apparent. For example, it is a legal requirement for children and young people to participate in education. The educational structure that exists in our society inevitably results in some young people's tendencies, i.e. their talents, strengths, activities through which they can thrive, do not easily fit with the system. Therefore, disharmony for such young people becomes evident through their behaviour and emotionality. Quiet withdrawal and acceptance, possible low mood or 'acting out' through challenging behaviour can all occur.

The education system is one example of where young people are required to fit with a system that does not meet the needs of all of the children and young people in society. This obviously highlights a conflict for social work. We are required to work within socio-political and legal boundaries. Awareness of the lack of fit between some individuals' needs and the social structure does at least offer social workers the opportunity for insight into difficulties that are not intrinsic to the person. This offers us an alternative perspective to one suggesting a person is either mentally ill or has a disorder that leads to 'dysfunction' within a specific environment. Raising awareness can also lead to creative exploration of solutions within those social structures, even if it does not result in changing the structures themselves.

Gregor presented as extremely quiet when meeting individually with Ajay, his social worker. He was known within his peer group, however, as a bold and charismatic leader who would often be the instigator of offending behaviours, especially car offences. Gregor was a 16-year-old young man, the middle child from a family of three brothers and a single mother, who was an exhausted woman who had been asking for help with Gregor for several years. Gregor had a long history of truanting from school, this having been a pattern of behaviour since primary school. He had gradually become involved in car theft and was recognised amongst his peers for his deftness and his daring for fast

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driving. He had long been involved with the Children's Hearing system in Scotland and was subject to a Supervision Requirement under Section 70 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. Gregor's offending behaviour had peaked and declined over the years, mostly in response to threats from Children's Panel members that if his behaviour was to continue he would be accommodated by the Local Authority due to moral danger and being beyond parental control. Gregor was frightened by the thought of being accommodated and these threats regulated the extent of his offending behaviour periodically. This was enough to legally maintain him at home but did not assist in any way to understand the reasons for his behaviour, nor alter the course his life was taking. Gregor had had difficulties maintaining his focus on academic work when at school, especially with subjects that required reading, which he found challenging. He had greater interest in technical studies but as these classes were limited, his interest was not enough to encourage him to remain in school, and when he did, he became angry and very aggressive, as he did at other times.

In several ways, Gregor had not been reaching his 'organismic' potential, either in the past or presently. His talents in technical subjects had little opportunity for substantial development, as this was only a small part of the school curriculum. He had acknowledged his feelings about his difficulties with the more literary subjects at school but avoiding these through truanting led to the Children's Hearing system becoming involved and exacerbated the fraught relationship between he and his mother. He often expressed boredom regarding the community in which they lived. Gregor did experience internal conflict, which was evident through his aggressive behaviour. The self-actualising drive was being inhibited by a combination of lack of opportunity for skill development attuned to his needs and lack of social opportunities due to living in a deprived area of a small, rural town. Inner conflict between lack of opportunities for development alongside social disapproval regarding offending behaviours that did provide him with both status, a form of social development and gratification created emotional disharmony that was expressed through aggression.

Gregor's self-actualising drive was in action in that he continued behaviours that matched his needs through self-regulation. However, inner conflict was also being experienced. His mother, his social worker and the legal system were attempting to limit his offending behaviours in conjunction with a lack of alternative opportunities for Gregor to seek the same level of gratification and skill development in socially acceptable activities.

Social Work Application

Gregor had become known to social work services initially through poor school attendance and later through offending behaviour. Although other approaches can be helpful to work with these types of problems such as cognitive behavioural therapy

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and family therapy, as social workers we can try to make sense of that which can motivate different behaviours through the theoretical components of a person-centred model. We can accept that social structures often do not fit with individuals' needs and we can therefore avoid pathologising responses such as aggression or avoidance of difficult settings as a problem entirely located within the individual. Although this approach is primarily about an individual and whether internal conflict exists, we must hold to the notion that internal conflict is usually a result of an individual adapting to an environment that does not fully meet their needs. The drive to reach our potential is strong and, as with Gregor, the motivation to meet unmet need usually eventually becomes apparent though the drive for self-actualisation. We can seek to recognise where self-actualisation might be motivating an individual into activities that are not socially acceptable in the same way we can learn to recognise when this drive is being blocked.

As a fundamental principle of communicating with others, we must first learn to accept the individual nature of human development and be willing to notice that people have needs that do not always fit with social structures. While some general rules might apply to social development, such as all children requiring certainty and predictability coupled with opportunities for exploration of the world, we cannot actively accept and listen to another person's position if we do not accept the value of individual uniqueness. This is intrinsic to social work practice.

Gail was a young woman who had struggled with feelings of hopelessness and general low mood for many years. She was a bright, intelligent young woman who had been finding it hard to make progress in her chosen career and to have her voice heard. Her participation in social activities had gradually declined, where she used to keep herself fit by regular gym attendance and had been very involved socially with other young people. She no longer pursued intimate relationships, denying her need for this. Her determination to be successful in life led her to dismiss feelings of sadness and loss since she had 'the accident' several years previously. She believed such feelings to be 'weak' and 'unproductive'. Gail used a wheelchair since she had damaged her spine in adolescence.

Gail was not congruently connecting her experiences with her feelings. Feelings of anger, frustration and sadness were pushed aside and she refused to accept these as relevant. She was not reaching her 'organismic' potential socially, intellectually or sexually and, as a result, the drive for self-actualisation left her with feelings of inner conflict and distress that she found hard to name.

Again as with Gregor, Gail was not reaching her potential and this led to disharmony in her life. The social work task in applying the theoretical concepts of the person-centred approach would be to accept firstly that in some way her potential was not

being met. Her feelings had not been congruently linked with her experiences. For communication to be effective, as social workers we can recognise incongruence in the way in which people speak and act. Before moving on to use this approach in a therapeutic way, we need to develop and improve our observational skills in this respect. Thompson (2003) offers a clear outline of how we can do this in his chapters on verbal and non-verbal communication.

Skills Component

- Understand the actualisation process and the need for congruence between feelings and experience to create internal harmony
- Recognise and hold to the value that individuals are unique and have unique needs
- Become aware that social structures do not always meet the needs of every individual
- Accept that the lack of fit between social structures and individuals does not translate healthy emotional responses into pathology
- Improve skills in verbal and non-verbal communication to tune into observing incongruent responses indicating the source of distress

Self-concept and Self-structure

An important element within the theoretical framework of a person-centred approach is the development of self-concept as distinct from the self: the self, or 'true' self, is where underlying tendencies are generated as part of being a living organism that has experiences over time.

Self-concept begins during infancy as we begin to have experiences that are given meaning – whether we are fed and comforted, for example. We could compare this with attachment theory (see Chapter 4). We take experiences, attribute meaning to them through our feelings and use this as feedback to form a picture of how we see ourselves and the value that we have to others (Rogers, 1951). Tolan (2003) broadens this, using the term 'self-structure' as a wider framework for the development of beliefs and values that an individual will hold of him- or herself, of individual experiences and of the world in general. This links to some extent with George Kelly's (1955) 'personal constructs' that formed the basis of what became schema in cognitive behavioural therapy (see Chapter 3). The self-structure develops over time and is separate to actual experience, or receiving information about the world through the five senses; experience in itself and without the application of meaning, is thus neutral. Tolan refers to the self-structure as a 'framework of familiarity', which helps us make sense of our lives. Implicit is the self-concept as part of the self-structure. She focuses on experience and the development of the self-structure rather than innate tendencies, in her interpretation of the approach. However, implicit in the self-structure

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is the idea that tendencies develop as part of the organisation of the self-structure through a life-long evolutionary process. The self-structure is thus an individually unique organisation that allows the self to function and perceive the world.

Sometimes awareness of the impact of experience is not directly available to us if we have had to adapt it to survive or function adequately in a difficult environment. This could range from subtly difficult, i.e. a child experiences a parent offering a secure home environment but dismisses the validity of their feelings, or obviously traumatic, i.e. in the domain of abuse. Tolan (2003) suggests that experience is 'symbolised' in awareness. Levels of awareness can improve gradually as we re-experience events through discussion and recall, i.e. as part of a therapeutic relationship. She describes this as 'loosening' the self-structure to accommodate denied or distorted feelings linked to previous experience by reflection. As situations, and thus repeated experience, change over time, the need for denial or distortion of feelings related to experience often becomes less, which then enables space for this 'loosening' to occur.

For example, feelings of fear generated from repeated physical abuse by a parent could lead a child to be extremely anxious and unable to tolerate the presence of that parent if their feelings were being actively acknowledged at the time. Most often a child is aware of his or her dependency on the parent to provide basic care needs so this fear would be counter-productive. Functional to day-to-day living is either denial or distortion of feelings of fear, where the child could make sense of the experience through self-blame, freeing the parent to continue to offer some form of care. The child then re-attributes blame to themselves. The child's self-concept starts to incorporate negative beliefs about self-worth, which would likely result in the child becoming either withdrawn, acting out or displaying other emotional problems.

The self-structure, which includes the child's beliefs about the world, could come to include a general distrust of adults. At the time of the abusive experiences, this creates a wariness of other adults that serves to protect that child from further harm. This part of the self-structure is functional to the child's survival in his or her home environment and is therefore rigidly held. However, once the child grows and leaves the household and providing he or she then lives in a safe situation, denial or distortion of that fear is no longer a necessary function of day-to-day living. Therefore, where rigidity in the self-structure in childhood, for functional reasons, was useful, it can hinder emotional growth and development in later life. Therapeutic work, however, can lead to the opportunity for a loosening of that structure. It can thus provide a window for denied feelings to be reconnected with previous experience and so loosen the level of emotional rigidity.

The fundamental difference here is that the person's environment has changed. Implicit is that a child with a functional, rigidly held self-structure will not be able to loosen their self-structure in a therapeutic setting if the experiences and the environment in which difficult experiences occurred have not changed. This would apply similarly to an adult in an environment that generates negative feelings, such as domestic violence. Unless that person is actively seeking change and help and is therefore already experiencing a loosening of their self-structure, the imposition of therapeutic intervention will not necessarily facilitate a change in thinking or beliefs.

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Hence we should not be overly hasty in encouraging or coercing individuals into therapeutic work.

Seeking objective truth that is separate from meaning ascribed to experience by individuals is not the concern of the person-centred approach (Rogers, 1980). Again obvious limitations are striking for social workers, such as our commitment to counter racism and other forms of oppression. These are recognised in the social work field as structural problems that have an impact on every individual. Reducing structural racism and other forms of oppression to an individual experience denies wider societal beliefs of superiority for those in privileged positions, including white, able-bodied, heterosexual people and people in economically secure positions. While we might accept that each individual will have a unique experience of prejudice and discrimination, we cannot deny that more universal experiences of oppression do not exist.

Gregor's view of the world was that of adults, most significantly in authority positions, being only motivated to criticise him and keep him in line. He believed that the Children's Hearing system was punitive and that his behaviour, although highly gratifying to him, should not be the concern of others who were only intrusive in order to be controlling of him. He could see no clear opportunities that he desired for either self-development within his local community or for achieving the levels of status and excitement he found when involved in car theft. Car theft did seem repetitive at times and his need for developing more skills on a broader level was stagnating. He was aware of the danger to himself and others and fully aware of the illegal nature of his activities. As he continued to be involved in offending behaviour he developed a self-concept of 'badness' as a 'criminal', with little regard for others and therefore 'very selfish', despite being very protective of his peers. He believed only those like him would respect him and the influence of his peer group remained very strong. He saw the world as a hostile and unforgiving place where each person must fight for his or her own survival by aggressive means. Gregor had little awareness of any of his talents or positive attributes other than through car theft. Both his self-concept and his self-structure (being inclusive of this and of the world in general) were shaped around these strong beliefs. Ajay, his social worker, had recognised the incongruence between Gregor's feelings and experiences and had started to actively listen to him during their meetings in a non-directive way, since many other directive approaches had had little impact on his behaviour.

Social Work Application

From a person-centred position, a social worker would be seeking to assist Gregor to connect his feelings with his experiences in a non-directive way. This does pose problems in that the legal system, such as the requirements of the

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Children's Hearing system to keep both Gregor and the public safe, might be frustrated with a less directive approach. However, this aside, the essence of Gregor's difficulties in achieving change was the lack of gratification in other areas of his life that was not linked to crime. He had not received an education that offered him hope of a future where he could channel his skills and improve them. He felt marginalised from society due to his social status, living in a deprived area with few amenities outside of education. His mother was in receipt of benefits and did not have the available resources to allow Gregor to travel to become involved in activities. His environment had not offered Gregor opportunities for gratification through skill development, which had become a need and a tendency as part of his self-structure. As Gregor's feelings were not symbolised in awareness, the actualising drive was only partly in progress as he was seeking gratification through offending, albeit that this was limiting for him, but he was unable to self-regulate his behaviour to direct his energies into other channels where a greater level of gratification could occur.

There are times when in social work practice, a less directive stance through an approach such as this is more helpful. Gregor would have the opportunity to make sense of his frustrations by reflecting back on missed education and the feelings that had generated for him. Being 16 and no longer required to attend school, he had a changed environment which could allow a loosening of his self-structure enough to reconnect feelings and experiences. Adult education, which tends to be broader in vocational terms, was more of an option and so the limited opportunities of childhood could change in adulthood. Most importantly, though, Gregor was starting to feel limited by the constant repetition of scenarios through car theft and was therefore experiencing a greater degree of inner conflict. Through a non-directive person-centred approach, Gregor could re-evaluate elements of his self-concept and self-structure that were both negative and limiting his personal progress. The communication skills required for effective non-directive listening are outlined below in the section on Application of the person-centred approach. However, key skills exist at this stage for recognition of where inner conflict might exist and where timing as to when to use this approach is crucial.

Gail had always been a determined individual whose self-structure included a self-deterministic view of the world. She would focus her time and attention to achieve whatever she set her mind to. She had not encountered social barriers to achievement and success until the accident had occurred. She saw herself as a strong independent individual who had no need to rely on anyone. Following the spinal injury, she continued to view herself in the same way to the point that she refused any practical help and developed coping skills through the use of her arms to manage day-to-day life. She also refused to acknowledge the accident had an emotional impact. Only as time passed and

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she encountered social barriers relating to physical disabilities did feelings of inner conflict emerge. Her self-structure of beliefs that she could achieve anything she set her mind to had been seriously challenged. Most of all, she noticed that often people would ignore her in the wheelchair and speak about her to a companion standing next to her. Rather than accept feelings of anger that were evoked, she denied them. Eventually her mood became so low that she left her job, started to neglect her personal care and was referred by the family general practitioner (GP) for help. A social worker taking a non-directive approach to listening provided her with the opportunity to reconnect her denied feelings with her experiences. This had become possible as she had a changed social environment and the denial was no longer functional to her needing to tolerate working.

Skills Component

- Recognise that the self-concept and self-structure shape the way in which experiences are given meaning to individuals
- Heighten awareness of negative self-concepts and possible areas of incongruence suggesting denied or distorted feelings
- If the timing for a non-directive approach does not fit with the circumstances of a referral, selective use of the principles within the approach might be more appropriate to incorporate within a different model, i.e. crisis intervention
- Judging whether the timing best suits the situation involves consideration of whether the environment leading to experience has changed sufficiently for an individual to reflect upon this, 'loosening' the self-structure
- Balance the demands of the legal system with the needs of the individual to judge whether this is the most helpful approach

Positive Regard from Others

Self-concept is influenced by our sense of worth, learned and developed from feedback from others over time (Rogers, 1959). Elements of this fit closely with cognitive behavioural theory as outlined in Chapter 3. Positive regard from others is an important concept that can motivate action. For example, a young person might receive recognition by peers and adults for sporting skills and this positive regard will become an integral need for feelings of self-worth as part of an individual's self-concept. McMillan (2004) draws on Rogers' (1959) description of a 'regard matrix' that develops as we filter these experiences. Experiencing positive regard from others is necessary to feel 'good enough' among others. It thus intertwines with self-concept to influence behaviour.

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Many vulnerable people who become known to social work services have either experienced little positive regard from others or received conditional positive regard based upon some form of attribute or behaviour. Rogers (1959) suggests that we are motivated by the need for positive regard. Feelings can easily be denied or distorted as we attempt to meet this need, leading to behaviours to continue that do not necessarily fit with the experience of the true self. This might include being very quiet when angry for fear of being rejected, or distorting feelings of anger after being highly criticised into inadequacy and self-blame.

When we repeat behaviours for acceptance from others to continue feelings of worth, we can find ourselves acting incongruently with our tendencies intrinsic to our true selves. Self-actualisation becomes blocked if we continue to recreate conditions that result in specific forms of positive regard from others. For example, compliant behaviour in school could be motivated by fear of recriminations if a teacher became angry. Further, spontaneity and creativity could become blocked and development might be hindered. Likewise, a young person repeatedly involved in offending behaviour could be strongly influenced and motivated by the need for peer acceptance, following negative or conditional regard from family. The positive regard from the peer group has the more powerful voice to the individual and positive regard from them is sought after more than that of the family.

Denial or distorted beliefs about strengths or positive attributes in other areas of that young person's life that might be neglected, would limit individual growth. Continuation of this form of offending behaviour, even when the peer group has changed, fits with denial of other positive aspects of the self. This denial minimises any conflict between perception and experience, i.e. problems fitting in with majority society, public disapproval. Denial also allows previous patterns of need-fulfilment to continue.

Receiving positive regard from others, be it real or perceived, is the central motivating factor for behaviour that is linked to the self-concept (McMillan, 2004). Further, the level of congruence between feelings attached to behaviour and self-regulatory reflection and action, will determine the level of individual harmony and satisfaction in life.

When repeatedly behaving in ways that are not motivated by the need to generate positive regard from others, we are acting upon tendencies from the 'true' self, from which satisfaction is derived. For example, a young person who chooses to join a specific club, e.g. hockey, rather than run with the local 'gang' in his or her local community, might be acting in congruence with his or her individual tendencies: in this case to develop sporting skills. He or she might experience a level of social isolation within their own community but this does not motivate behaviour that would generate positive regard from the local group. We could refer to attachment theory here (see Chapter 4), which would suggest, in humanistic terms, that the young person receives adequate positive regard, or a secure enough base, from his or her social experience to resist the need to seek it in other areas of life.

In most instances, acting in harmony with our tendencies is viewed as positive, i.e. that young person might avoid becoming embroiled in offending behaviour, which is common within that particular 'gang'. There are some types of behaviour, however,

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that can harm others and are both socially and legally unacceptable, even when it could be argued that an individual is following his or her organismic tendencies. An example might be the sexual abuse of a child, i.e. is a behaviour that is unilaterally harmful to another and thus cannot be condoned in any circumstance, even if an individual's tendencies lead him or her towards such behaviours. Self-actualising therefore requires limits based on restricting that which might harm others. As social workers working within a legal and social policy framework, we cannot view the drive towards self-actualising without boundaries and cannot work to facilitate the congruence of one person's tendencies with their actions when it would be harmful to another.

Gregor received status and admiration from his peer group for his daring feats and for his charismatic leadership. This positive regard was completely conditional, however, upon certain forms of behaviour, and thus his continued involvement in car crime maintained his position and leadership within the group. Gregor received little positive regard at home. He was seen as an 'embarrassing disappointment' to his mother, who believed he had 'something wrong with him' which led him into the behavioural patterns that had become so entrenched. Gregor's mother was highly critical and negative of him to the point where she struggled to recognise any positive attributes at all. His older brother was mainly dismissive of him and his younger brother, the only one without any history of behavioural problems, feared him. Gregor valued the acceptance and admiration of his peers above all others and denied any need to be accepted within his family. Thus his motivation to continue with offending remained high. His mother's view of any future acceptance of him by her was dependent on his behaviour changing. This was too high a goal for Gregor to achieve at that point to attain her approval of him as a worthwhile individual. He stopped trying.

Ajay recognised that Gregor had not received any form of acceptance as a person in his own right, regardless of the behaviours he presented. Ajay, through drawing on a person-centred approach, demonstrated that he accepted Gregor as an individual and that his behaviours did not lead to him to be either critical or rejecting of him.

Social Work Application

In social work, our interest in positive unconditional regard is twofold: we can model this form of acceptance in the work we do within the remit of communication skills; and we can recognise where those with whom we work have received positive regard where it has only been conditional.

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During Gail's early years and through her adolescence, she had received praise and recognition from her family and from teachers for her academic and sporting abilities. She was what would typically be known as a 'high achiever'. Her parents had high expectations of her – she would go to university, have a successful career, achieve financial independence. The times when Gail was struggling with her focus and had wanted to receive comfort and nurturing were met with dismissal of her feelings. Gail shaped her self-structure around this feedback and found herself shaping her behaviour around ways in which she would receive positive regard. This was functional until she lost the use of her legs.

Her experiences of using a wheelchair and of people's reactions to her no longer provided her with positive regard through her achievements and abilities. Some of the barriers that she faced included people using patronising language and tone when speaking to her; and ignoring her and treating her as if she could no longer think in the same ways as she did previously (her job being one that involved a lot of thinking). One of the greatest impacts of her disability was the loss of positive regard that had motivated her for so long.

Both Gregor and Gail had one experience in common. They had both experienced *conditional* positive regard from parents and peers. Understanding the theoretical component to this is an element of the person-centred approach that is most useful, even when the approach is not being incorporated into practice in full. How to use language and feedback to place ourselves in an unconditionally accepting position is offered below. However, if we can find ourselves integrating this principle into our thinking with people, then immediately we can free-up an avenue of acceptance that might allow people to share with us their own thoughts, feelings and opinions.

Skills Component

- Recognise where service users seem to have received conditional positive regard and how this can motivate behaviour
- Project a **genuine** message that we accept the service user as a worthwhile human being regardless of behaviour (see exceptions later in this chapter)
- Be consistently accepting of the service user through reliable availability, time-keeping and using meetings to keep our focus on listening to him or her
- Accept the service user's **motivations** for behaviour as needed and functional to them at the time the behaviour patterns developed (e.g. car theft)
- Do not challenge these motivations as being flawed or wrong. This only gives the message of rejection. This is different to stating the legal position or the stance in which our role places us, which might not be condoning of the behaviour

The Person-centred Approach in Action

To apply the above concepts into practice requires firstly an understanding of the theoretical elements to the approach and secondly a level of awareness of the impact of our own experiences. To assist service users to resolve inner conflict by congruently matching feelings with experience, we need a level of congruence of our own. Practice becomes dangerous and potentially harmful to vulnerable people when we loosely apply concepts to situations without an understanding of their meaning and of our impact on the process as individual practitioners.

As engagement with service users (Compton & Galaway, 1999) is a core and arguably a social worker's most important task, the person-centred approach's emphasis on this is offered as the starting point to using this model in practice.

The Working Alliance

In practice, the person-centred approach relies on a working alliance between service user and worker (Rogers, 1962). This is largely the crux of the approach in practice. The medium to facilitating change is engagement with people, and this is also crucial in a person-centred approach, termed the working alliance. This is not a passive stance taken by practitioners, but a highly active one that requires ongoing thought and attention given to our own position, emotional reactions and behaviour. Too often we are caught up in the belief that engagement is an area that requires brief attention at the beginning of contact with someone, and then, once formed, it remains sufficient for some form of intervention to occur. Thinking of the engagement process in terms of forming a working alliance allows us to think beyond our first contact and embark on a process of constantly reviewing our own position within the working relationship.

First Steps to Engagement

Tolan (2003) suggests that all relationships have a set of rules that govern how relationships progress. The working relationship is no different: it has a power imbalance, the social worker having a knowledge base upon which problems are understood and intervention often, although not always, being of a statutory nature. With this in mind, a service user is reliant on the worker to set boundaries around what is and is not acceptable behaviour within the working relationship, such as how much a worker discloses about him- or herself, the context in which the worker and service user plan to meet, i.e. how often and where. Other rules which need to be given thought prior to meeting with an individual is frequency of contact, worker capacity to be available and reliable, and the purpose of contact.

All too often someone experiencing a problem is allocated to us and we make contact, without giving prior thought to these matters. We find ourselves in a turbulent ocean of problems desperately trying to find direction. This is neither time-efficient, confidence-inspiring nor helpful to a vulnerable person in distress. The primary concern before meeting an individual or a family is then to be extremely clear of our role

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and our capacity for meeting with that person and whether the frequency is sustainable, given other demands.

A contract between service user and worker provides a foundation for agreement from which both parties can make explicit such matters as boundaries to the relationship and practical arrangements, such as frequency of contact, how to manage cancellations and the opportunities and limitations of the service. This is requisite, using a person-centred approach, during the initial meeting but does not need to be within the first few minutes. Judgement is required in timing to allow a service user to feel at ease as much as possible and to be acknowledged as an important person in the process. Thus beginnings are not purely about meeting people and gathering information. They have an essential role in building elements of safety and some certainty about what will happen and why for service users.

Ajay was introduced to Gregor after his previous worker had left. A variety of approaches had been tried previously to achieve change in the direction Gregor's offending was taking but success had been limited in the long term. Ajay decided to use a person-centred approach in communicating with him and spent several individual sessions trying to form the basis of a working alliance that was borne out of clear boundaries, listening intently to what Gregor did and did not say, being clear with him around the social work role and legal framework, and exploration of the limits of confidentiality.

Social Work Application

The focus of the first sessions with Gregor was to form a working relationship with him. As many attempts to bring about changes in his behaviour had tried and failed over the years, Ajay did find himself under pressure from his department and from the legal system to bring about change quickly. However, Ajay decided to use the first few meetings solely focusing on developing the relationship, which would serve as a foundation for facilitating future sessions that could explore Gregor's previous experiences, his feelings attributed to them and resultant behaviours that continue to concern the legal system.

We might question how we know whether we have formed an adequate engagement with a service user. As individuals are unique, there are no uniform responses that allow this judgement to be made. However, spending time with service users exploring their understanding of our involvement with them, their feelings about it and what motivates them to meet with us is a starting point. This does not mean we fire off these questions, make a note of the responses and move on to the 'real work'. Exploring these matters might take several meetings. Taking time here is effective as it begins to build elements of trust and of mutual understanding that can make the difference between effective and non-effective intervention.

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Skills Component

- Prioritise engaging with service users by spending time developing a working alliance
- Use the first few sessions to ensure a service user is clear about our role and where boundaries lie, including confidentiality
- Resist pressure to rush the engagement process to the detriment of the working alliance and therefore of the success of any intervention

Congruent Practice

If one of the aims of using a person-centred approach is to assist people to reduce inner conflict that causes emotional problems affecting behaviour, then congruent practice is a means to assist people to this end (Rogers, 1962). Essential in this process is enabling people to sift through the imposition of others' ideas and opinions of them and of the world until they are able to find their own 'true' reality through matching their experiences with their feelings. If a person has spent many years believing in a distorted self-concept of their strengths and abilities, to begin to match feelings and experience involves learning a new skill. This is modelled by the practitioner by offering congruent feedback within discussions regarding the practitioner's own experience and feelings relating to the discussion or event occurring at the time. A person can learn to recognise their own feelings linked to both past experiences and present experiences as they are felt in the present. This skill is termed 'reflexivity' (Schön, 1991).

Caution is required here for congruent practice to be both timely and useful for a vulnerable person. Indiscriminately offering our own feelings could easily be perceived by a vulnerable person as judgemental, patronising or rejecting. To model linking feelings to experiences requires a high level of skill and practice and an equally high level of self-awareness of what we are feeling, to what it appears to be linked and the possible impact of sharing our feelings with a service user. Reflexivity in action requires all of these elements to be processed by us as practitioners *while discussion takes place* so that a *measured* response can be given. We need to be continually monitoring our own responses to events that occur within the service user-worker relationship and then use our judgement to assist us to know when sharing our own thoughts and feelings would be helpful to a service user and when it would not.

It is always possible that we might catch ourselves having thoughts or feelings that are not based on values that are in keeping with social work. Any such judgemental or prejudicial feelings should not be denied or distorted by us, leading to incongruence in our own feelings and experience. We need to accept their occurrence and challenge the basis of our prejudice during our own time for reflection. Supervision should be a forum in which these matters can be freely discussed and resolved.

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During the conversation and as these responses occur, these need to privately become symbolised in our awareness, acknowledged by us and then filtered through our own internal monitoring to ensure that they do not inadvertently impact negatively upon the service user. We can then choose not to share any judgemental responses that are likely to be unhelpful. As a general rule, if we are not sure whether to share our feelings, then to err on the side of caution is likely to be least detrimental.

Self-awareness is the first and foremost step to the way in which the person-centred approach uses the self as practitioner. In an emotionally accepting environment, we help a service user 'loosen' their self-structure enough through reflective, congruent feedback to re-evaluate their own experiences. It therefore follows that as social workers we need to have a highly developed level of self-awareness to assist us to successfully use elements of this model and become congruent practitioners. It might be that many of us require an opportunity to reflect upon our own life experiences in a therapeutic environment before we are ready for this.

After several meetings with her social worker, Gail started to describe her low mood and the impact this had on her motivation to find another job and to socialise. She explained in detail how people had started to treat her differently after the accident and how she no longer saw herself as an important person. During the meeting, her social worker, Barbara, found herself feeling angry that an intelligent woman such as Gail should find herself so marginalised. Barbara reasoned that Gail possibly could be angry, contributing to her low mood, but was denying that feeling and blaming herself as inadequate instead. In an attempt to assist Gail to connect her experiences with her own feelings, Barbara decided to share her feelings of anger with Gail about this social injustice.

Barbara was making a statement from her own frame of reference with a view to assisting Gail to 'loosen' her self-structure enough to accommodate her feelings. This was not a spontaneous statement, but one that was reasoned through Barbara's perception of Gail's self-structure and self-concept. Barbara's feelings of anger were genuine and so were congruent with her statement, made in a calm and matter-of-fact manner.

Had she shown high affect, either by raising her voice or using hand gestures to express her feelings, this could have been interpreted by Gail as either aggressive or as imposing her views. Making reasoned and well-timed statements in this way simply models to others that feelings can be connected with feelings and then verbalised.

Social Work Application

There are many situations that as social workers we find ourselves in, evoking emotional reactions within us. Often we are meeting the most vulnerable

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people within society and their experiences can touch us, often very deeply. Emotional reactions to difficult events are not wrong. We too are human organisms and hearing about trauma and where people have been abused and excluded from mainstream society is extremely emotive. Our awareness of our feelings is fundamental to our work, whether using this model or others outlined in later chapters. Time spent in supervision or with trusted peers to share our emotional responses to the encounters we face can facilitate our experience of social work practice to be symbolised into awareness. Taking time to do this goes some way to prepare us for working with service users and to guard against untimely and reactionary emotional responses that are more about our own needs than those of service users. In busy environments, time for reflective supervision is an oft-neglected task. However, to use a person-centred approach effectively, it is arguably the most important element of the work, without which we are likely to revert to our own actualisation drive-demanding precedence.

Skills Component

- Recognise our own emotional responses to situations with service users
- Take time to share these responses with peers and supervisors
- Cautiously share our feelings from time to time with service users regarding specific matters, only after reasoning whether this is likely to be in their interests
- Do this in a gentle manner without high affect

Empathy

To be an empathic practitioner we must learn to see the world as another person sees it. This does not mean we can ever fully feel another's feelings or wholly experience an event or situation that another person has experienced. Rather, it is a means of communication where we attempt to perceive the world from another person's frame of reference and communicate to that person what we have perceived (Rogers, 1957). A person's frame of reference includes their experience, values, feelings and perception. It is more than the spoken word, but that which is communicated alongside non-verbal communication such as body language, tone of voice, facial expression and overall demeanour. Our attempts to see the world from another's frame of reference is not with a view to analysing or interpreting experiences but to enable someone to experience being as fully heard as possible. Non-verbal communication skills are explored in greater depth in Thompson (2003).

There are several important stages to becoming an empathic practitioner (Tolan, 2003). We need to learn to be able to summarise statements made to us and reflect them

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back in our own words. Added to this is the skill of listening for feelings, which are rarely explicitly given. This does call for a degree of interpretation of what we see and hear of another's communication to us. Effectively it is a hybrid between an informed guess and a question that is then communicated back to the service user. We then need to resist giving in to any desire to interrupt by giving advice or offering a solution. By doing so takes us back to our own frame of reference and not that of the service user.

As we learn to stay with a service user's frame of reference, we can develop the capacity not just to hear single statements made but to capture the essence of what is being communicated in total. This includes thoughts, feelings or beliefs that have not been voiced. We can then offer what we *think* we have heard but has not been voiced, such as, 'you sound as though you feel totally helpless', in a way that is both uncertain and open for confirmation or clarification from the service user. The service user takes the lead in the direction of the conversation. We, as social workers, both try to stay with the conversation and at the same time gain an understanding of the service user's world at that moment in time. We must be open to the service user correcting our reflections of that which has been perceived. For example, in response to the above statement, the service user might reply, 'no, not totally hopeless but just not sure where to turn next'. There is no requirement for the practitioner to always 'get it right' when offering reflective statements but perceived feelings that are not expressed by the service user would continue to be vocalised by the practitioner, such as, 'you seem very frustrated by that'. If the service user refutes these feelings: 'No! Getting frustrated wouldn't change anything so there is no point', the practitioner might question whether experiencing such a feeling is difficult for the service user. For example, 'So it is hard to accept your feelings of frustration?'

There are many occasions where a social worker's role and task necessitates a more directive stance. We might have our own objectives for a meeting with a service user, which are dictated by either statutory concerns or policy objectives. An example might be a social worker meeting with a service user to undertake a specific type of assessment, such as in respect of child protection or at the request of a Court or Children's Hearing. In such a situation, our role requires that we use some structure to discussions in order to meet our statutory objectives. However, we can incorporate empathic listening into a non-directive part of a discussion. This can assist a service user to feel heard in what is often an extremely powerless position in which to be.

Skill development in being empathic is a slow process that requires reflection on practice over time (Schön, 1991). We do not become empathic practitioners by reading about a concept and testing it only. It is a highly developed skill that becomes fine-tuned as we use it and then evaluate our progress through honest critique. We require also a willingness to examine the quality of our feedback as a valuable source of learning.

Gregor and Ajay were meeting on a regular basis. Gregor had made a level of engagement with Ajay, in that he continued to attend sessions, although he would share very little. He had been tempted to revert to using a different approach to

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the person-centred model but resisted, having known that Gregor had completed all the worksheets he knew about, which were filed in Gregor's case notes. Ajay was reticent to try approaches that had already had limited success.

Ajay attempted to use the sessions instead to try to stay with Gregor's frame of reference and together gain some insight into Gregor's motivation for offending. Gregor had clearly expressed he did not want a career within the adult criminal justice system but could not explain why he carried on with car theft. Gregor stated that he had hated school and that he was bored in the evenings where, in his local community, there was 'nothing to do'. Ajay listened intently, tuning in to two major indicators of where Gregor had not been meeting his potential. He explored with Gregor what it was about school that he hated, using open questions, pausing to allow him to reflect and tolerating what often felt to Ajay long and painful silences. Over the weeks, Gregor started to connect his long-standing anger and frustration with school. He had denied these feelings, believing instead that he had no talents and that his intelligence was very low in learning. The only exception was with his peers when stealing cars. Gradually, Gregor started to remember times when he did do something well, small incidents that dated back to primary school. During these conversations, Gregor was starting to 'loosen' his self-structure enough to include these experiences as part of his view of himself. As he recognised that he had other strengths, he started to show some interest in developing himself in ways other than offending behaviour.

Ajay could have imposed his own views on where he thought Gregor's strengths were. Other workers had often been very positive and given him lots of praise. However, this had not been incorporated into Gregor's self-structure as it had not been from his own frame of reference. Ajay's ability to resist doing this and to stay within Gregor's frame of reference allowed Gregor to alter his own self-concept to a more balanced one that included his positive attributes.

Social Work Application

We are often charged with the task of offering a timely service and to bring about change quickly. If these expectations are not explicitly given by our agencies, then caseload matters often lead us to impose this upon ourselves. We can miss a vital opportunity that using this approach offers if we rush in to a situation and impose our own timescales and our own agenda for change. Often we do have a specific role and task to undertake but this need not result in our moving completely away from another's frame of reference. In all circumstances we are meeting with people who have feelings and vulnerabilities. For social workers, the art of the profession is being able to hold on to this notion, while making clear our remit and reason for involvement.

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It is often a fine balance that rarely can be slotted into one form of 'counselling'. However, we could argue that attempting empathic listening is possible within any social work situation.

Skills Component

- Draw on listening skills, including attentive listening, tolerating silences, staying with the conversation and being aware of verbal and non-verbal communication
- Stay with the service user's frame of reference by checking out what they seem to be thinking or feeling about a matter
- Reflect back what might be the meaning of seemingly denied or distorted feelings that do not seem to fit with a person's overall presentation
- Resist offering praise that is sourced from our own frame of reference

Unconditional Positive Regard

Learning to have unconditional positive regard for the people with whom we work is also a skill that we need to consistently develop (Rogers, 1961, 1986). This necessary condition in a person-centred approach requires that practitioners accept a person and their feelings in the present without conditions imposed. Implicit is that we need to accept that people have their own reasons for their behaviour, albeit not always consciously known.

We have learned by looking at congruent practice that as practitioners we must not deny our feelings or distort them as they occur through the worker–service user relationship. We need to be able to catch ourselves having thoughts and feelings that are generated through therapeutic conversations and moderate whether we share them or not. When thoughts and/or feelings fall into a category of being judgemental, without awareness on our part, this can inadvertently translate into our behaviour through reactions and responses and we can lose the capacity for unconditional positive regard. Any judgemental thoughts, which are borne out of prejudicial opinions held within our own self-structure, need to be noticed as they occur. They can then be metaphorically put aside so that they do not directly impact upon feelings of acceptance for the service user in the therapeutic encounter. Other forms of judgemental responses can include attributing individuals with labels that seem to fit behaviour patterns such as 'defensive', 'hostile' or 'manipulative'. This use of labels, globally ascribed, blocks us from being able to hear and acknowledge the minutiae of communication as it occurs in conversations and from staying with the service user's frame of reference.

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To clarify a commonly held myth, unconditional positive regard does not mean we should be seeking opportunities to offer praise to a service user. From a person-centred perspective, this moves us into responding from our own frame of reference rather than from that of the service user. If we are seeking to assist the service user to connect with his or her feelings regarding experience we need to be cautious not to impose our own. This way a service user can move away from feelings and opinions relating to experience which belong to other people and have become part of that person's self-structure. The self-structure can then loosen enough to allow their own feelings regarding an experience to move into symbolic awareness – not ours. In time a person can develop confidence in their own feelings and perceptions of experience. Such an individual will no longer need to deny or distort their feelings to fit with others, or accept another person's interpretation of an event as being more meaningful than their own.

If we can consistently use moderated, congruent practice alongside empathy we are taking steps towards accepting a person with unconditional positive regard. We learn to resist making statements from our own frame of reference: for example, stating 'your hair looks lovely' when a person complains it has been cut too short, or 'you handled that really well' when a person is angry that the outcome of a complaint was not what they had hoped for. Instead we can create an environment whereby a person can become more aware of their own thoughts and where a practitioner will accept them with these thoughts unconditionally. Rather than try to console the person with some form of praise, which inadvertently undermines the person-centred therapeutic process, we refrain and listen to the whole context of what is being communicated. For the person dissatisfied with a hair cut, we accept their dissatisfaction and communicate to them that we acknowledge it, such as 'your image is very important to you?' and 'you seem disappointed and frustrated with the outcome of your complaint?' Using this response, we accept the person regardless of their feelings and acknowledge their feelings as being important. This validates them as worthwhile individuals in the process.

We must offer a consistent emotional environment of **genuine** warmth and acceptance for our acceptance to be congruent. In busy work environments we often thrust ourselves into meeting people with little if any preparation, either on a practical level or an emotional one. Without some form of mental and emotional preparation, we are more likely to make reactionary responses rather than moderated ones through a reflexive process. Reactionary responses can often be prejudicial or judgemental, as they arrive directly from our own self-structure. We therefore need to allow time for preparation if we are going to make full use of this approach. We need to be mentally and emotionally prepared for the therapeutic encounter.

Boundaries to unconditional positive regard exist, including where a service user is physically or verbally aggressive to a practitioner. We have a responsibility to keep ourselves safe. With statutory responsibilities, we can expand this boundary to include forms of behaviours that are harmful to others and of which the legal system defines as prohibited in our society: for example, child abuse and other offending behaviours.

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Ajay did not approve of Gregor's lifestyle. He believed that his highly dangerous behaviour put both himself and members of his community at risk. However, Ajay recognised that Gregor's motivation for these behaviours was not out of malice or 'badness' but was a way of seeking approval from his peers. Ajay recognised Gregor's positive attributes, although resisted verbalising them to him so as not to impose his own frame of reference onto Gregor. By recognising these attributes, Ajay was able to offer Gregor genuine warmth and friendliness, rather than cold criticism and rejection that could have been a feature of his communication if he focused only upon Gregor's activities. While Ajay did not condone Gregor's offending behaviour, he did not reject him because of it either. He found a way to give unconditional positive regard that was sustainable throughout their contact.

Social Work Application

Engagement with service users requires us to show some level of positive regard, otherwise a working relationship could not be formed. There are very clear restrictions for social workers being able to offer unconditional positive regard when directed at accepting behaviours. In a social work context, to usefully incorporate a person-centred approach into our practice, either as a form of communication with service users or as a mode of intervention, we need to be absolutely clear about the nature of our role and task. If we have a clear mental framework of what we can accept in a non-judgemental manner and what we cannot, through therapeutic discussions, we are more likely to achieve a workable balance between congruence, empathy, unconditional positive regard and directive engagement.

We can accept the person unconditionally, however, if we are unable to accept the behaviours of a person. This would mean to separate out behaviour from the core self, accepting that the motivations people have for their behaviour are, in this model, borne out of the self-concept and the self-structure. We can accept that as a human being in his or her own right, a service user will have feelings linked to experience that impact on the day-to-day functioning of life. For example, we might cut short a session where a service user becomes verbally abusive to us, but allow them the dignity of choosing not to behave in such a manner before we do. A statement such as 'You are clearly very angry with what I have just said. It is okay for you to be angry but it is not okay for you to swear at me. We can carry on if you choose to stop swearing at me or we can finish now and meet again at our regular time next week. Which would you like to do?' We accept the person and the feelings but not the behaviour. Within the boundaries set as above, we can continue to show unconditional positive regard only if we genuinely feel it. If we do not, then our verbal and non-verbal responses will be perceived by the service user as insincere and engagement will be sabotaged. In this respect, if we as individuals hold

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prejudice towards others, such as racist feelings, homophobia or ageist beliefs, then our non-verbal reactions will plainly indicate that we are not sincere in our acceptance of another person regarding race, sexuality or age, among other matters.

Skills Component

- Be extremely clear in our own thinking about which behaviours preclude unconditional positive regard being shown
- Explore our own feelings of prejudice as part of our self-structure that could interfere with unconditional positive regard for others
- Accept a service user's thoughts and feelings even if we do not agree with them to enable them to develop congruence with their own feelings and experiences
- Accepting feelings and then exploring them from the service user's frame of reference can move us between unconditional positive regard and empathic listening

Endings

The person-centred approach requires that ending involvement is given significant emphasis if the work undertaken is to be consolidated (Tolan, 2003). Abrupt endings, in which the service user has no part in decision-making, leave room for the event to be interpreted as a rejection or abandonment. Continuing to offer unconditional positive regard requires involving the service user in a process of working towards an ending in a planned, staged manner.

As Gregor moved away from offending behaviour and out of the legal system, Ajay recognised that Gregor's progress indicated that an ending would need to be negotiated. He had mentioned to Gregor at their first meeting that their contact would be time-limited and re-visited this from time to time. He and Gregor negotiated when to start reducing the frequency of sessions until the final meeting. Gregor attended all but the last session, which Ajay surmised was Gregor's way of retaining some element of control and limiting the experience of sadness at saying goodbye.

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Social Work Application

We do not always have the luxury of ending in a staged way. Often service users disengage from services, workers move on to other posts and workloads can often result in harsh decisions regarding who can receive a service. However, as far as is possible, endings should be planned and allow service users to retain some degree of control. This is not to advocate that endings should be postponed to avoid the often painful emotions felt during goodbyes. This only dilutes the focus of the work and increases the risk of service user dependency on the service. Trevithick (2000) discusses this further in a social work context.

Skills Component

- Think about endings with service users during each stage of the work, including at the beginning
- Assist the service user to recognise from the beginning that involvement is not without ending, albeit that how and when might not be clear at this stage
- Include the service user in decision-making as far as possible regarding endings

Limitations of the Person-centred Approach

As outlined above, the person-centred approach does have limitations for social workers. Our role is often with a clear agenda, such as with child protection matters or problems relating to criminal justice, where the impact of one person's behaviour could be harmful to another. If we are clear about our role and remit, elements of this approach are possible to include within our work. However, we need to be assured that if we are embarking on using a person-centred approach as a form of intervention, then our role and responsibilities do not interfere with the non-directive flow of the work. As with other models for using counselling skills later in this book, we need to be selective about what we do and how we do it.

Oppression and the forms it might take are only implicitly threaded through this approach. To take a feminist stance in the work that we do requires a more directive approach than the person-centred model would advocate. We would be challenging gender oppression and raising awareness as an integral part of our practice. This does not easily fit with this approach, which suggests that people need to come to their own conclusions about the meaning of their own individual experiences. To take an

anti-racist stance as part of this approach poses similar difficulties. As there are exceptions to what we would accept unconditionally, described above as violence and abuse, it could be that we can take the same stand on racism, gender oppression and other forms of discrimination. This highlights the need for us to be very clear about the stance we take at the beginning of any meeting with a service user.

Summary of Key Person-centred Concepts

- The **Humanistic School** provides the value-base for this approach, in that humans are unique and need to meet individual potential for satisfaction with life to occur
- Moving towards self-satisfaction is driven by **Self-actualisation**
- An individual's view of the world and of the self is contained within the **Self-structure** and **Self-concept** and can be distorted by the lack of **Unconditional Positive Regard** during early development
- In practice, the **Working Alliance** is central to the change process
- **Congruence** is required to allow genuine engagement within the working relationship
- The practitioner shows **Empathy** towards a service user, which allows the **Self-concept and Self-structure** to be challenged
- **Endings** and their management is fundamental to this approach

Conclusion

There are many core principles in this approach that are valuable to social workers for communicating with others. An overview of some of the most relevant aspects is included within this chapter. A clear theoretical understanding coupled with clear reasoning for using some or all of the concepts within a person-centred approach can allow effective incorporation of the model into our use of counselling skills in social work practice, if at times in a selective manner. However, the directive stance often required for social work practitioners can conflict with a person-centred counselling model. At its best, we can incorporate key elements of this model to engage with individuals, families and groups to assist them through change.

Further Reading

- **Tolan (2003)** offers a detailed exploration of the skills upon which this chapter is based. In addition, Tolan's book examines the nature of psychological contact with people.

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- **Seden (2005)** uses a process model to consider the stages of social work practice from engagement to intervention with counselling skills in mind.
- **Palmer and McMahon (1997)** give a social context to counselling in various settings, although does not directly include social work. However, later chapters draw upon the person-centred approach as a useful model for themes of problems, including race, bereavement, abuse, disability and health-related problems.
- **McMillan (2004)** provides a theoretical exploration of the principles of person-centred counselling.