Client-centred counselling – An interdisciplinary examination

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Summary

In this paper I want to explore some of the preconceptions that underpin what is frequently called ‘client-centred counselling’. My aim has been to discuss its theoretical foundations by referring to one of the most widely used current positions, i.e. the client-centred theory of Carl R. Rogers. Taking Rogers’ theoretical position as a starting point I criticise this for certain inconsistencies and omissions. Then proceeding to his conception of interpretation I claim this also to be lacking. In attempting to reconstruct a more viable position the phenomenological foundation of his theory is examined. This, in turn, is shown to be problematical and an attempt is made to rectify it. I then return to the theory of interpretation to replace the one criticised earlier in Rogers’ work.

Introduction

One of the aims of this journal is to promote original articles on counselling dealing with new concepts. This essay is an attempt to promote new concepts in counselling theory by confronting one of the popular present-day counselling positions.

In the English-speaking world divisions have arisen between various human sciences which in some of the Continental thinking traditions would be less marked. Counselling, in the English-speaking world, because of its interdisciplinary nature (i.e. often drawing simultaneously on psychology and sociology) has suffered less than some of its components. But as long as its theoretical basis is drawn from psychology and sociology, and as long as these remain relatively autonomous disciplines, then counselling will suffer also by implication. Ideas spread slowly, if at all, through autonomous disciplines. One of the prominent areas where ideas having counselling relevance may be found is in philosophy. Yet there is little contact between philosophy and counselling. This is unfortunate not only because certain philosophical tradi-
tions contain ideas directly relevant to counselling theory, but also because some of the concepts discussed by philosophers are the very ones counsellors use in counselling situations. I aim therefore to adjust the isolationism of counselling by examining one particular counselling theory, namely, the client-centred theory of Carl R. Rogers. Rogers himself has acknowledged the need for counselling theories to have sound philosophical foundations. So, his theory is, from a methodological point of view, a good place to begin.

Although I have avoided as much technical philosophical jargon as possible it is inevitable that some must remain, if only because philosophers are frequently forced to employ jargon or change the meaning of an existent word to express a new or novel concept. I hope that the limited jargon remaining will discourage no-one.

My task will be approached from two directions – (i) by examining Rogers’ conceptual model of personality and counselling from within; (ii) by taking up one stand of thought in his theoretical perspective (that of the phenomenological perspective) and examining its usefulness as a foundation for counselling theory and practice.

Alternative approaches to counselling will be raised in the light of providing solutions to problems raised on Rogers’ approach.

II

A brief summary of his views will provide a foundation for our critique when working within his own terms. (Our comments here will be limited to Rogers, 1951, Chapter 11.) (It is not possible to provide a straight phenomenological critique of Rogers’ work as his version of phenomenology is ideosyncratic to say the least. We must, if we are to take it seriously, look at his theory of personality and behaviour in its own terms.)

By isolating the individual subject of thought and action he is working with a dualist conception of individuality, and, although much is said of experience, little is said of behaviour as such. Behaviour is relegated to the priority of experience. This leaves two areas of concern – (i) his theory of personality or experience; (ii) the connection between experience and behaviour.

(i) His theory of personality or experience can be sub-divided into three sections – (a) the nature of experience, (b) the development of this experience, and, (c) how this experience may be modified.

(a) His theory of experience centres on the individual in conscious, emotive and perceptual modes of being; together with behaviour these constitute the organism. As this conception of experience will be criticised for its omissions rather than its inconsistencies we need not provide a wider summary than this.