

# On becoming non-judgmental: some difficulties for an ethics of counselling

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## Abstract

*The growth in the availability of counselling services has been accompanied by growing concern about the conduct of counsellors, which in turn has led to the expressed need for an ethics of counselling. This paper will argue that there is an inherent tension between this need and the central tenets of one variety of counselling, client-centred counselling. The tension is identifiable on the basis of an inquiry into the nature of moral judgment which results in the recognition of the implicit value base in client-centred counselling. It is only when this value base is made explicit that any adequate ethics of counselling becomes a viable possibility.*

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## Introduction

Recent years have seen a marked increase in the availability of counselling services,<sup>1</sup> alongside a growing acceptance of counselling as a legitimate form of therapeutic intervention. The field is remarkably diverse, in terms of both the types of problems which counselling is said to address, and the particular styles or approaches adopted by practitioners. In the midst of this expansion concern has been voiced regarding a range of associated issues such as the professional control of counselling by way of validating training and the creation of professional registers,<sup>2</sup> the validity of the practice of counselling itself,<sup>3</sup> and the need to establish codes of conduct in the hope of ensuring that adequate ethical standards are met in counselling practice.<sup>2</sup> It is the last of these which will be the main issue of concern in this paper. Given the wide diversity of types of counselling a degree of selectivity will prove necessary and I propose to limit discussion to the work of one of the acknowledged founders of counselling, Carl Rogers.<sup>4</sup> In particular I wish to consider those aspects of Rogers's client-centred approach which appear most problematic in relation to ethics, and since judgment lies at the very heart of ethics, his requirement that counsellors be non-judgmental will be the starting point.

Although this discussion will be directed at Rogerian client-centred counselling it could apply to any approach to counselling that incorporates the widely accepted norm that counselling should be non-judgmental.

## Judgment in client-centred counselling

There are two notions at work in describing the role of judgment in client-centred counselling. First - being non-judgmental - is the requirement that the counsellor avoid imposing his/her values on the clients with whom he/she works. The second - unconditional positive regard - prescribes an attitude towards clients in spite of any judgments which may have been made. In brief we can describe this as ignoring the evaluative consequences of clients' behaviour, whilst maintaining a positive view of them as persons. Adopting this attitude is, for Rogers, a necessary part of the counselling process, a process which seeks to facilitate personal development. He describes this process and its outcome as follows:

"I have pointed out that each individual appears to be asking a double question: 'Who am I?' and 'How may I become myself?' I have stated that in a favourable psychological climate a process of becoming takes place; that here the individual drops one after another of the defensive masks with which he has faced life; that he experiences fully the hidden aspects of himself; that he discovers in these experiences the stranger who has been living behind these masks, the stranger who is himself. I have tried to give my picture of the characteristic attributes of the person who emerges; a person who is more open to all of the elements of his organic experience; a person who is developing a trust in his own organism as an instrument of sensitive living; a person who accepts the locus of evaluation as residing within himself; a person who is learning to live his life as a participant in a fluid ongoing process, in which he is continually discovering new aspects of himself in the flow of his experience. These are some of the elements which seem to me to be involved in becoming a person."<sup>5</sup>

Being non-judgmental and displaying unconditional positive regard are integral aspects of the "favourable psychological climate" identified by Rogers. This is not to suggest that only in such circumstances does personal development take place, rather such an atmosphere should be seen as positively facilitating the process. Why then should this pose any ethical difficulties? To see where the problems lie it will be worthwhile to consider the nature of judgment in ethics.

### Judgment in ethics

It is a characteristic feature of ethical judgments, if we take ethics seriously, that they are action guiding. It makes no sense to assert that something is good, or right, without acknowledging that one would pursue it under appropriate circumstances, indeed we may even take this further and encourage others to pursue the same ends. A similar case can be sketched with regard to judgments concerning what is bad, or wrong, where evasion and condemnation are the likely results. In this respect ethical judgments differ significantly from other types of value judgment. My holding Picasso's painting in high esteem may result in me attempting to persuade you to do likewise, however, if I am unsuccessful in this and you continue to assert that Dali is a much better artist then nothing much follows, except perhaps that we avoid discussing the respective merits of Picasso and Dali. The ethical case is rather different, if I were ever disturbed enough to assert that child cruelty is morally permissible then I would hope that you as my counsellor would not only disagree with me, but that you would take quite active measures to prevent me from acting in accordance with such an assertion. Indifference or agreeing to disagree in these circumstances seems entirely inappropriate.

At least some ethical norms are claimed to be universal and to apply to everyone, of which opposition to cruelty to children is an example. Clearly it is not enough simply to give one's verbal assent to such a norm, it has to be evidenced in our actions. This will include not only restrictions on our own behaviour, but restrictions on the behaviour of others who dissent. Classically defences of interventions in the behaviour of others prove problematic and there is not space here to deal with the issue in any adequate sense. Suffice to say, if we recognise the existence of universal norms then we are committed to a broad range of interventionist strategies in the behaviour of others under appropriate circumstances. These will include making judgments about their behaviour.

### Becoming non-judgmental

At this point the ethical problems associated with client-centred counselling begin to emerge. If we accept a strict interpretation of what it is to be non-judgmental, then it requires us to override such universal ethical norms. It is reasonable to ask then to what extent one should do so and even to what extent one could do so. Certainly the imposition of one's values on another does sound hostile and oppressive and seems best avoided; however, the whole enterprise of normative discussion need not be viewed as imposition but rather as persuasion; a minor change such as this makes the whole endeavour much more reasonable. Attempts to persuade another clearly involve the application of one's judgments to the other situation, so, on a strict interpretation of being non-judgmental, even this is ruled out. This strict interpretation can lead to the view that counselling should take place in what Almond<sup>6</sup> describes as a spiritual and emotional vacuum which is morally neutral. The situation is broadly parallel when we consider unconditional positive regard. The acceptance of ethical norms plays a central role in determining what it makes sense to feel in response to the actions of others and subsequent attitudes towards them, but again Rogers appears to be suggesting that we set aside such norms in the process of client-centred counselling. All of which points to a very serious difficulty concerning the very possibility of our ever being non-judgmental or genuinely demonstrating unconditional positive regard.

For Almond, both the practical possibility and desirability of counselling in a morally neutral vacuum are rightly challenged:

"And indeed, for better or worse, and whether acknowledged or unacknowledged, recognised or unrecognised, the relationship between client and counsellor is shaped and conditioned by the counsellor's own conception of the ideal ordering of persons and society. Once this is accepted, it is possible to see that the counsellor does in fact have a need for a 'whole view' of life, including what can be described in a very broad sense as a moral position."<sup>7</sup>

In these terms Rogers does quite clearly have a "whole view" of life, the essence of which is contained in the quotation above.<sup>5</sup> The point is not just that Rogers's "process view" of personhood is itself essentially evaluative, but that as such it carries with it the implicit assumption that to experience life in this manner is better than to experience life from behind defensive masks. Insofar as this is true we can then identify an action-guiding aspect of the "process view

which as we have previously noted is the hallmark of ethical judgments. To pursue client-centred counselling is to accept a system of norms which necessarily incorporates ethical judgments. But to accept this is to reject the strict interpretation of what it is to be non-judgmental.

What is required by client-centred counselling then is not that we refrain from making ethical judgments entirely, but that we make such judgments in accordance with a particular system of norms; in this way the question regarding the possibility of our overriding our propensity to make ethical judgments is settled. We continue to make such judgments, but in accordance with what Gibbard<sup>8</sup> refers to as higher order norms. In terms of the present discussion these are partly represented in Rogers's description of the nature of persons. It follows from this that we refrain from practices which inhibit the development of others, this much is a matter of consistency. At this point however, we would be right to ask that in the interests of clarity general talk of being non-judgmental be abandoned, to be replaced by a terminology which reflects the fact that judgments are to be made in accordance with a particular system of norms. But saying this does not amount to much more than saying we should take care in formulating our judgments of others, sound advice indeed, and advice that may be forgotten in the heat of the moment, but not exactly radical. Yet there still remains the need for argument to establish the merit of adopting the system of norms associated with client-centred counselling. This is particularly apparent when we consider the demonstration of unconditional positive regard as an equally norm-governed activity. Presumably we require some kind of means to ends story; by setting aside our feelings of revulsion towards the child rapist we create a climate within which improvement occurs, thereby removing the possibility of repeat offending for example, but the interesting point here is that such rationales are largely settled by empirical evidence. Be that as it may, we can see that in principle even if it is practically possible to envisage our becoming non-judgmental and demonstrating unconditional positive regard, there remains the question of whether we should, and this comes down to a question of which systems of norms it makes sense to accept.

### **An ethics of counselling**

The main difficulties associated with the Rogerian view arise from aspects of his "process view" of personhood; in particular the idea that the well-functioning individual comes to accept "the locus of evaluation as residing within himself".<sup>5</sup> In

a positive sense this serves to elucidate further the role of judgment in counselling. Part of the process would appear to involve the facilitation and/or encouragement of the client to engage in self-judgment, so again any qualms concerning the possibility of a process entirely devoid of judgment are eased. But there is a serious problem here too: the idea that each of us should become our own locus of evaluation smacks of relativism. If nothing other than the fact that each of us is to be viewed as a locus of evaluation were being asserted then there would be no problem, but seeing each individual - or even only those who have reached a particular stage of personal development - as the locus of evaluation is problematic given the implied relativism of such a position. By relativism I mean the position where each individual is viewed as the creator of his/her own standards of evaluation, and which asserts that it makes no sense to talk in terms of one individual being right and another wrong in such matters, or even to talk of one set of standards being better or worse than any other. Advocating cruelty towards children is, in these terms, on a par with opposing it. If I am genuinely the only legitimate source of my evaluations then the views of others need have no influence over me, and anything goes. Whilst such radical libertarian views attract a surprising degree of support, they are clearly not at the heart of client-centred counselling.

That this is the case can be seen from the discussions and actions concerning the development of codes of conduct for counsellors. Even if these are couched in broad and general terms there is an implicit recognition that some standards of conduct are better than others. And as we have seen the whole process of client-centred counselling is premised on just such a "better" judgment concerning ways of being a person. What this suggests is that there are standards at work which are independent of any particular individual point of view, which is to say that if Rogers is right concerning his view of what it is to be a person, then he is right irrespective of any disagreement on my or anyone else's part. Now we may not wish to impose this view forcibly on anyone else, but surely we would wish to persuade them of its value, otherwise why should anyone wish to become a counsellor? But Rogers cannot have it both ways, either there are standards at work or each individual is the source of his/her own evaluations, and if we accept the latter option then the whole business of counselling becomes irrelevant. Whether I arrive at my values as a result of experiencing a favourable psychological climate, or as a result of my experiences at the hands of sadistic torturers makes no

difference. The same is true of the conception of the "real self", the "self no longer hidden behind defensive masks". There is not space to deal with the full implications of this notion here, but clearly what is required is some standard by which the "real self" may be identified and distinguished from masked selves. The primary issue concerns who is to be the judge in such circumstances, the counsellor, the client, or some other? Placing too much emphasis on the client, seeing clients as both judiciary and legislature, again opens the door to relativism which if endorsed leads to the devaluing of counselling: it becomes a practice which we could tolerate, but which we would have no reason to endorse.

We now have a clearer picture of the problem. There is an essential tension between what we can describe, broadly in accordance with Jopling,<sup>9</sup> as truth-centred and client-centred approaches. The tension develops as a result of a desire to avoid a collapse into relativism - a desire which is necessary if acceptance of the norms which govern counselling is to make sense. The growing awareness of the importance of, and the desire for, the ethical regulation of counselling on the part of clients and counsellors highlights the tension. Advocacy of tolerance, as Almond<sup>6</sup> points out, is a useful defence against religious and political tyranny, but it cannot be equated with moral neutrality: counselling requires a sound ethical base.

### Addressing the difficulties

We are dealing with two, in part, incompatible systems of norms. On the one hand we have norms which endorse viewing the individual as sovereign in the process of evaluation, and on the other norms which admit of a degree of objectivity, perhaps only in terms of views being better or worse<sup>10</sup> than one another rather than absolutely right or wrong. To attempt to accept both systems is to be inconsistent and whilst human beings do appear to have a remarkable capacity for inconsistency, if we wish to take ethics seriously then these inconsistencies have to be eliminated, otherwise we are left with ethical relativism. Insofar as counsellors themselves advocate the adoption of codes of conduct it would appear that relativism is not an option. In attempting to resolve the tension then, the clear contender is to drop the absolute sovereignty of the client. This is not to advocate that counselling resort to the imposition of values by way of force or browbeating, but rather to permit and acknowledge the incorporation of values in the process. With this comes the requirement of a marked revision of the notions of being non-judgmental and demonstrating unconditional positive regard. A strict

interpretation of the first of these is unviable any way. Demonstrating unconditional positive regard appears different: practically we may be able to suppress our norm-governed reactions, though we would require good reasons to do so. Such reasons would themselves be incorporated into higher order norms, perhaps based in some notion of utility - for example, by acting in that manner we achieve favourable results which otherwise would not be forthcoming. Of course settling whether this is in fact the case is an empirical matter, and it is for the advocates of such counselling to present the case.

What is required then is an acknowledgement of the essentially normative character of counselling: an acknowledgement which is often obscured by the rhetoric of counselling, particularly in those client-centred approaches which appear to eschew judgment. Explicit expression of the norms accepted would enable us to make further judgments concerning their viability and appropriateness, all of which would assist us in the evaluation of the practice of counselling itself. There are many advantages to such an explicit expression, including conceptual clarity, intellectual honesty, and the avoidance of inconsistency, but most importantly it is a necessary prerequisite for any adequate ethics of counselling.

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### References and notes

- 1 The British Association for Counselling reported a membership in 1977 of 600 members but by 1995 this had reached a figure of around 13,000. Feltham C. *What is counselling?: the promise and problem of the talking therapies*. London: Sage, 1995: 69.
- 2 See for example: British Association for Counselling. *Annual Report 1994/95*. Warwick: British Association for Counselling, 1995.
- 3 See for example Eysenck HJ. The outcome problem in psychotherapy. In: Dryden W, Feltham C, eds. *Psychotherapy and discontents*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992.
- 4 Rogers C. *On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy*. London: Constable, 1989.
- 5 See reference 4:123-4.
- 6 Almond B. Counselling for tolerance. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 1997;14:19-30.
- 7 See reference 6:19.
- 8 See Gibbard A. *Wise choices, apt feelings; a theory of normative judgment*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. The basic idea here is that whilst we can identify norms which determine particular courses of action in particular circumstances, we can also identify higher order systems of norms which govern the acceptance of particular norms. This allows us to incorporate the notion of consistency into our discussions of which norms to accept. In terms of the present discussion it is my contention that Rogers's process view of personhood is a higher order system of norms which gives rise to the more particular norms of being non-judgmental and demonstrating unconditional positive regard.
- 9 Jopling D. Philosophical counselling, truth and self-interpretation. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 1996;13:297-310.
- 10 A particularly useful account of this notion of objectivity can be found in Putnam H. *Realism with a human face*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992.

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