**An Exploration of My Experience and Understanding of What Hinders and What Encourages My Unconditional Positive Regard, Empathy and Congruence**

The *empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence* are the three concepts *(*often called necessary and sufficient core conditions*),* which were Rogers’ most important and radical contribution to the understanding of helping relationships (Thorne, 2003, p. 10).

Empathy is the ability to see another person’s world through their eyes, ‘to walk in their shoes.’ It involves deep listening to another person in all aspects: emotions, thoughts, body movements.

(Sally and Sally, 2001, p. 54)

According to Rogers (cited in Thorne, 2003, p. 38) empathy is a powerful healing agent and it is one of the most effective aspects of therapy. The therapist should understand as much as possible the client’s subjective perceptual world in order to facilitate the subtle changes in their self-concept for positive development. Rogers often suggested that from core conditions empathy is the most trainable.

I think I am a quite empathic person, yet, sometimes I am unable to be empathic with some people. Maybe because sometimes I have a totally different perspective on their problems. Perhaps I have never had a similar experience, or that kind of experience has never affected me or it has affected me in a different way. While in some occasions, if I had a similar experience, I am getting too emotional and sometimes identification happens − I identify myself with something in the other that resonates with me − which is not the same as the empathy. Also, I have noticed that some people do not like when I say that "I know how you feel". For a while, I did not know why is this happening. But now I presume that it is probably because we are all different and we have different experiences, so I cannot have exactly the same experience and feeling that other people have. I think that I need to work more on my feelings, to recognise what is empathy and what is something else. I need to maintain a certain level of awareness to recognise my feelings and deal with them in a right way in order to facilitate core conditions in each situation as much as possible. However, we cannot have a constant level of empathy. Our feelings are ongoing and our core conditions are fluctuating constantly (during the therapy); sometimes we have more from one and sometimes more from another. Also, core conditions are inseparable.

Just as empathy perfectly integrates with congruence, unconditional positive regard also takes its place as inseparable from the other two – inseparable, that is, except by writers who divide books into chapters!

(Mearns and Thorne, 2000)

Thorne (2003, p. 37) suggested that term 'unconditional positive regard’ is an elaboration of Rogers’ concept of acceptance, which is uncontaminated from judgements or evaluations of the thoughts, feelings or behaviour. According to Carl Rogers (1961, p. 283), the unconditional positive regard (UPR) means that the therapist is warm and caring to the client with no personal gratification. This attitude creates an atmosphere that simply demonstrates care without the conditions of worth attached to it.

Thorne (2003, pp. 31-32) suggested that our capacity to feel positive about ourselves depends on the quality and consistency of the positive regard shown to us by others. Where this is missing we are the victims of what Rogers described as *conditions* *of worth*. We think, feel and behave in ways that others have told us are worthy of love and respect. This introjections of "alien" values in the internalisation of conditions of worth and the sense of the personal worthlessness makes the person totally divorced from his or her organismic roots and the valuing process with which he or she was in contact before the consciousness of self emerged. Thorne added that where such a discrepancy exists between the self as perceived and the actual experience of the total organism there is an incongruence between the self and experience. This incongruence leads to a psychological vulnerability, which will often make the person anxious and confused whenever an experience is perceived or in some way anticipated as being incongruent with the structure of the self and the current self-concept. The outcome of a psychological vulnerability of this kind is a defensive response to experiences that in some way threaten the person’s concept of self. This defensive behaviour can take a number of forms, but according to Rogers, the responses of distortion or denial are perhaps the most common.

Similarly to Thorne, Sanders (2011, p. 35) also highlighted that every time when we are offered conditional love, we build up a set of ideas about ourselves based not on our own experiences, but on the values of ideas of others. When this "imported" self-structure is in conflict with the natural ability to experience the world it causes incongruence. The more discrepancy is there, the more the self-structure is rigid and trying to support this element within it that are causing the problem in the first place. A healthy self-structure needs to be flexible, since the life unfolds in unexpected ways and respond creatively. Sanders also noted that societies and families are not too good providing unconditional love.

### Due to my experiences regarding the conditions of worth that other people placed on me, I feel the importance of the unconditional positive regard because I was often missed acceptance from my parents. As I child, I could not consciously recognise some of my psychological processes, but now when I look back, I often have insight into some of my previous and current issues, some of which have a root in my childhood. My father and my mother were too young when I was born. They were very poor at that time and they had problems with their parents. My grandparents had their own ideas how my parents should live their life and they mutually did not accept each other's − and probably themselves. I was an only child. My father was very strict with me. He had high expectations from me. I was never allowed to talk only if I was asked. I was conditioned to play quietly and to do always what I was told, otherwise, I was told off. Occasionally I had some freedom when my father was not around or when I visited my grandparents. I always tried to please my father, but I feel I always failed. I strived to meet his expectations, but I was denying my own feelings in order to please others and to get some approval. Even nowadays, I have occasional nightmares that my father and me are working on some DIY project at home and although I try my best I always fail something and my father is shouting at me that I am useless and I will never succeed in my life (which is not true). As Thorne (2011) and Sanders (2003) mentioned earlier my father's judgement and the conditions of worth affected my self-concept. I had problems with my self-esteem and I was anxious due to the congruence between my organismic experience and between my self-concept. However, I had other life experiences, where I experienced UPR (for example, the experience of learning and working in a person in a person-cantered environment) helped me to accept myself and to increase my self-esteem. I had several people, especially teachers and some friends, who have shown UPR toward me. They did not judge me, they accepted me and they treated me as a worthy person, even if they did not approve my behaviour (Sanders, 2011, p. 97). Also, they encouraged me in things what I wanted to achieve. It has helped my self-esteem, and to my surprise, I was capable of doing things that I did not believe I can do due to the lack of self-esteem.

### My experiences helped me to be more acceptable. I have realised that other peoples approach and behaviour (towards me) is their decision and I do not need to judge them or to respond negatively towards them. I do not need to be rude with them even if they are offensive to me. One of my favourite quote from Tao Te Ching is the following: "He is kind to the kind, he is also kind to the unkind. This is the true virtue of kindness". I like very much this quote and every time when I am thinking about it, I am really touched by it and I have very strong and positive emotions. But unfortunately, sometimes when I feel stressed or offended by other people, I lack the awareness to respond accordingly.

### According to Sanders (2011, p. 96) the congruence or genuineness involves the helper being open to his or her own feelings without facade or acting like an "expert". This does not mean that the helper constantly lets her feelings gush out in an uncontrolled way. It means that the helper should not avoid or deny her feelings, she should be aware of them and after a careful consideration, feelings could be expressed. Sanders also noted that we do not bring our "expertise", but all our humanness (including feelings, thoughts and attitudes) into the activity of helping. So if live this behind, we will not be effective helpers. In addition, I found interesting Sanders' (2011, pp. 87-88) statement that core condition are not skills that are used in a mechanical ways, but they are principles that are part of our lives and core values of our lives; a way of being. Therefore, Anderson (2006, p. 43) noted that the personal and professional way of being cannot be separated.

### I think behaving naturally and genuinely as we behave in our everyday life can facilitate the role of helping, especially if the core conditions are integrated into our lives. Also, we should not be afraid to express our feelings, since there are appropriate ways to express them. Nevertheless, I have often problems with my genuineness. I often do not express my feelings if I think that it does not please the other person. In addition, I grew up in a family where men never expressed their feelings. I thought that was a normal and expected way to live. I was always hiding (denying or distorting) my emotions, however, inside, I have been always a very sensitive and emotional person. This can be interpreted as an incongruence from Carl Rogers's perspective. Yet, in the last few years I went through significant changes due to different experiences in my life. Now, I am more able to communicate my feelings and to be genuine with others, however, I still have problems if I face expectations.

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