I trace the rainbow through the rain: How does person-centred counselling speak to me as a gay Christian?

A heuristic exploration and literature review
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Introduction

• “I’m a Jew. I’m small. I’m a homosexual. And I live in Sheffield. I’m fucked.”
  Posner in *The History Boys* (Bennett, 2004)
Contents of paper

- Rogers’ theory of the person
- Rogers’ core conditions
- Literature on spirituality and counselling & psychotherapy
Theory of the person
Rogers’ background and faith
Religious conditions of worth
• Sanderson (2015, p32): “although guilt prompts feelings of remorse or regret, it does not necessarily affect the core identity or self as it does in shame”
• But it is often treated as guilt: as a gay Christian, the solution was to seek repentance and forgiveness, to “pray the gay away” (Barton, 2012)
• Recent affirming voices bring new understanding of the bible. “God and the gay Christian” (Vines, 2014)

Shame and “the love that dare not speak its name” (Douglas, 1894)
• Companion to those in pain, model of Jesus (Thorne, 1998)
• Compassion (Vivino & Thompson, 2011)
• “Attunement”/“Transcendent warmth” (Yusef, 2011)
• Sense of God within (Lines, 2006)

Core conditions (1) – empathic understanding
Core conditions (2) - UPR

• Rogers’ UPR (1980) = St Paul *agape* love (1 Corinthians)
• Jesus – ground breaking and radical love (Harrison, 2017) - parable of the prodigal son (Luke15:11-32) and healing ministry, touching the leper (Matthew 8:1-4)
• primacy of love (Thorne, 1998)
• “cherishing”, accepting, non-judgmental (Mearns and Thorne, 2013)
• my retreat experience of “tenderness” (Thorne, 1991)
• “being held is something my clients have often referred to, and I know unequivocally that this holding was, for many of them, spiritually experienced.” (Bridges, 2017)
• “authentic pride” (Sanderson, 2015)
• strength in vulnerability, power in gentleness
• “we give voice to our hurts not to be victims or martyrs, but to find freedom from the resentment, anger, shame or self-loathing that can fester and build inside us when we do not touch our pain and learn to forgive” Tutu and Tutu (2014, p96)
• “Jesus went to his death hated and condemned by the religious leaders of his day” (Thorne, 1998)
• Jesus’ congruence, “I am he” - at arrest (John 18:5) and trial (Mark 14:62)

Core conditions (3) - congruence
• Existentialism – atheist (Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus) or Christian (Kierkegaard)?
• PCA as secular religion (Vitz, 1977, Kirschenbaum, 1991)
• “when I was ill, I certainly learned very quickly to keep my spiritual side of myself separate from the rest of myself whenever I met with any of the ‘professionals’.” (client in Jenkins, 2006, p80, cited by West, 2011, p1)
• Client’s fears that his might not be “the right kind of spirituality” and his experiences might be “analysed and explained away even by such a therapist” (Jenkins, 2011, p31)

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Christian spirituality and person-centred counselling
• Spiritual competencies for culturally diverse clients (Christodoulidi, 2011)
• Spiritual practices for personal and professional development (Rowan, 1993, 2005; West, 2011)
• Creative arts; “the unique power of music to speak not only to mankind’s shadows but also to our very essence, our souls, and our spirit” Heath (2017, p147, quoting Storr, 1992)
• Silence; Quaker worship (West, 2017)

Where words fail: spiritual practices
Spiritual compass exercise (Thompson, Pattison and Thompson, 2008)
“when I am clear about my faith and comfortable with it – whatever it looks like – then that is good. I know what I think. I know what I believe and I know what I do not believe. I know what my values are, or I know that I don’t know. Then, when I am like that, I can listen to clients.” (Wyatt, 2002)
• Nouwen’s journey as a gay Christian towards the “spiritual freedom” he saw in the imprisoned Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who had “discovered within [himself] a place where no one had power over [him], where [he was] wholly free”.

• By old age Nouwen was able to reflect a congruence and UPR for himself as well as others (p78): “laying our hearts totally open to God leads to a love of ourselves that enables us to give wholehearted love to our fellow human beings.”
• “hold[ing] the absent client”: calling the client to mind each day and then holding them “in a metaphorical embrace of acceptance and understanding for a minute or two” (Thorne, 1998)
• Tentative, deferential approach (Gubi, 2011)

Let us pray
• therapy is rooted in a pastoral care background, yet is seen as secular McLeod (2001)
• Harrison’s role as chaplain and therapist, a “liminal dwelling place” (2017, p 55)
• “being and becoming”, “the coming together of immanence and transcendence” (Harrison, 2017, p 64)
• “trusting in the tension of now and tomorrow” (Smith, 2017)
“liminal place of pilgrimage that is the island of Iona ... like a piece of ‘tissue paper’ between earth and heaven.” George Macleod (quoted by Ferguson, 2001, in Harrison, 2017)
Does it work? The mystery of prayer. The mystery of person-centred counselling

• “The healing that occurs at the heart of effective therapy remains something of a mystery.” (West, 2011, p 131)
• correlation between religious practice and good mental health, Lines (2006, p140, citing Richards and Bergin (1997) and Swinton (2001))
• “counsellors believe that people have the capacity to change if they really want to” – perception that failure to experience therapeutic change is the client’s fault
• Perception that failure to see answer to healing prayer is individual’s fault: lack of faith (Welby-Roberts, 2017)
Julian of Norwich, “perhaps the most radical psychotherapist there has ever been” (Thorne, 1998, p115)

• “astonishing insights into the nature of God, who is experienced by Julian as unconditionally loving and totally devoid of judgment. He does not even forgive because he has never accused in the first place” (Thorne, 1998, p103)

• “her vision of God and her deep belief in the essential belovedness of all humanity enables her to proclaim that ‘all shall be well’ despite the pain, the sin and the havoc she sees around her” (p104)

• non-judgmental, listening, loving, respectful approach to Dame Margery Kempe, but Julian “in no way evades the truth that for the passionate and impulsive Margery life will continue to be tough”
• “psychological and spiritual journey” (Lines 2006, p131)

• the attractiveness of a travelling companion and hence the role for a “spiritually-centred” counsellor as “fellow traveller” (Lines 2006, p87)

• “we are pilgrims on a journey/fellow trav’llers on the road... I will hold the Christlight for you/in the night-time of your fear” Gillard (1977)
O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.

(George Matheson)

Rainbow’s end

• God’s promise to Noah (Genesis 9:13)
• LGBT+ symbol of hope and diversity
References


Matheson, G. (1882) O Love that wilt not let me go. In *Life and Work: the Church of Scotland Magazine*, January 1882


