



Victoria McFetridge

Victoria has recently graduated from MSc Counselling and Psychotherapy – Contemporary Creative Approaches in July 2022. She now works at Rochdale and District Mind as a counsellor. Alongside this, she has taught yoga for five years, which has played a part in choosing a career in wellbeing.

The course gave Victoria the freedom to explore topics that she was passionate about. Victoria believes that social/ political/ environmental landscape needs to be held accountable for the impact it has on mental health, as too much emphasis has been placed on the individual as a product of neoliberalist society. She also believes that the natural world is a fundamental part of mental health and more understanding of the reciprocity between nature and people could lead to improved mental health and a more sustainable world. One of her greatest achievements on this course has been her research project into *the experience of female psychotherapy students engaging in embodied workshops in a natural setting*. She equally felt supported and thankful for group supervision and personal development on the course as it has given her the foundations for her career as a creative psychotherapist.

Person-centred Approach in the current political landscape

Client X is a young person in their twenties. They were the only person of their family to be adopted. They had a troubled relationship with their adoptive parents, and subsequently, behaved poorly at school, receiving no qualifications. They later moved into another relative's home, where they were sexually abused. They now live in a refuge with six other people. They barely leave their room or eat because they feel anxious, depressed, and low.

I write this piece, because I want to share my experience on placement at a charity in the Northwest of England as I studied for my MSc in Counselling and Psychotherapy – Contemporary Creative Approaches. My overall experience was fruitful, insightful, and challenging. However, as I worked with more members of the public, and my experience of using the person-centred approach (PCA) in counselling grew, I noticed certain implications with this school of thought, particularly when being in relationship with clients like Client X. Therefore, in this piece I will explore my thoughts around the use of the PCA in the current political landscape.

As I write, we are moving through a time of change; a change in Prime Minister, a cost-of-living crisis, and increasing evidence of environmental crises across the world. It suggests, at best of time of change and transition, and at worst, a time of societal unrest. Nonetheless, during my time on placement, it became evident to me that some of the clients I worked with had long experienced difficulties incurred by the political landscape, including recurrent involvement in social services, tedious applications for housing, and being ostracised from school for not conforming to 'good' behaviour. Thus, it poses the question for therapists – what school of thought is most effective to tackle such problems? And what does this mean for the future of psychotherapy?

This led me to question the PCA while working with these clients on placement. On one hand, Carl Rogers (1965) posited that humans can reach their full potential, and skills such as unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence can help them to reach that. Nevertheless, in the example of client X, I experienced feelings of hopelessness in counselling sessions. They did not feel inspired by their potential for growth, but more just needed someone to talk to. Consequently, 'reaching their highest potential' had a different connotation when working with certain clients. Particularly when working within the limitations of 8 sessions, creating conditions for them to reach their full potential, felt somewhat, well, out of reach. Secondly, the PCA argues that clients are the experts of themselves and the PCA could help them to follow their own internal wisdom (Wilkens, 2015). However, I would argue that these clients have relied on people in authority since their early years. Therefore, I wondered how might they perceive a therapist? I could feel the urgency in their suffering, and at times, it felt as though they wanted me to take the pain away. At times the relationship felt uncomfortable, and this may have been due to them *expecting* me to tell them what to do to make themselves feel better. I believe that they may still view PC therapists as the experts, which poses a difficulty in the effectiveness of the therapy itself.

Whilst I was working with clients, I could see the relevance of Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' (Lester et al., 1983). It was clear that their basic needs had not been met. They live in a refuge, and they do not leave their room due to anxiety of what could happen if they leave. They also do not eat much and get little rest from feeling anxious. This suggests that their physiological need and safety needs have not been met on Maslow's Hierarchy. Accordingly, without these

in place, I questioned how accessible the upper levels of the pyramid would be and at times, it seemed that therapeutic intervention did not seem appropriate. It seemed a more practical conversation of routine, sleeping habits and eating habits were more useful.

It is undoubtedly a complex debate. Whilst on one hand, the PCA could instill hopefulness of transformation and a welcomed difference to their usual interactions with people in authority, some of the theories of PCA, such as clients as the expert or reaching their full potential may be inaccessible to clients. Additionally, the development of such theories originated from white, middle-class, high-income men who may not have had lived experience of these issues.

That being said, I felt grateful for my placement at this charity. With their experience of these issues on a regular basis, they take a more proactive approach to counselling. Rather than a counsellor's role simply being therapeutic, it appears that that more outreach into community services, which could offer more relevant support for clients, was encouraged. This might have a referral to certain groups within the placement setting, such as peer support groups, listening lounges, and self-help groups, or it also encouraged liaison with the GP and community mental health services. I was reassured that therapy in this context had moved away from a strictly therapeutic to something more adaptable to the client's needs, and I wondered if this should be a standard across all organisations offering counselling. Whilst I appreciate this opinion comes from a newly qualified therapist with limited experience within the working psychotherapeutic world, I can feel the shift into more hardship and unpredictable times, such as increased financial strain on families, unknown consequences of the environmental crisis and new political leader with different ideologies and policies for the future. I recognise these issues may impact on mental health, as we all feel the uncertainty of these times. Thus, a more dynamic and adaptable approach to psychotherapy, could be a way to help during these times.

References

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