

## Preface

Several years ago there was a series of jokes doing the rounds with the question 'How many "x" does it take to change a light bulb?' The one I remember finding most appealing was, 'How many psychotherapists does it take to change a light bulb?' Answer: 'Only one, but it has to really want to change.' As with many classic jokes, it works so well because it satirises what many people consider to be true. But what the joke implies, perhaps unintentionally, is that the notion of change is central to the activity of psychotherapy.

Now, years have gone by and there has been much debate about the interchangeability of the terms 'psychotherapy' and 'counselling'. (Indeed, I will use the terms interchangeably throughout this book, a convention that previously was not so acceptable.) But the principle remains unaltered for this therapeutic activity, whatever the term used to describe it: change happens! At least, that is the intention of most of the work undertaken in the name of therapy, even if it is not successful. Most schools of thought within the counselling field have evolved out of the desire to facilitate change, an outcome that is generally hoped to be in some way or other positive, whatever the description of 'positive' might be. Even those therapists who do not explicitly claim 'change' as their goal would not deny, I suspect, that some change occurs during or as a result of the therapeutic relationship.

Given the centrality, then, of the notion of change to the activity of counselling, what this book offers is a description and exploration of the theory and practice of person-centred counselling, with particular reference to the notion of change and how and why it occurs during the process of counselling. Perhaps more than any other theoretical orientation, the person-centred approach places the notion of change at the very centre of its conception of the psychologically healthy person. While other therapies may attempt to facilitate a person's cognitive reordering from 'wrong' thought to 'right' thought, or perhaps a more holistic transformation from being person A to person B, person-centred theory hypothesises something fundamentally more radical: that to exist in a constant state of change is in fact the goal. Indeed, this is perhaps too radical, even for some who would probably align themselves with the person-centred approach.

Although in theory the notion of a person being in a constant state of change may seem a little nonsensical, the reality is not so bizarre. For

what this notion of constant change underpins is a concept that is not so unusual – a concept of an unconditional acceptance of oneself. The person who can achieve an unconditional self-acceptance or *unconditional positive self-regard*, as Rogers described it, will be fluid and ever-changing because their development will never be curtailed by external value-judgements as to what is right or wrong. External value-judgements or *conditions of worth*, which can lead to a highly complex as well as a rigid self-concept (as described in Chapters 3 and 4), are what prevent the client from being open to experience and therefore change. (These and other terms will be clarified throughout the book.) Thus a person who is free of their conditions of worth will continually change in whatever way they feel best fulfils their needs in light of their experience. This is not to suggest that the person will become oblivious to the needs of others, a criticism that has been levelled at the person-centred approach (see Chapter 2). It is simply proposing that the most constructive development will occur where the person does not need to defend themselves against their experience and so is free to adapt and change uninhibitedly.

A liberation from the fear and anxiety that experiencing can provoke is what the person-centred approach is suggesting is possible. Fundamental to that liberation, and therefore to the practice of person-centred counselling, is a trust in the nature of human beings. This means that, given the right therapeutic conditions, clients will be able to make decisions about how best to maintain and enhance themselves as they develop an increased sense of self-acceptance. This book outlines the theoretical framework on which such a trust is based and describes how the framework informs person-centred practice. The emphasis within practice is not so much on doing something *to* the client as being *with* the client in a facilitative manner, hence the notion of *indwelling* the client and offering 'the core conditions' (see Chapters 5 and 6). Thus the ethos of the counselling relationship is one of facilitating client self-acceptance: it is only through this that the client can move toward the enhancing existence of ever-changingness.

This is such a simple notion and yet, half a century on from when Rogers first developed his theory, it still has profound consequences for the person and their ability to maintain and enhance themselves. An openness to experience because of a self-acceptant attitude means the person can adapt and change to whatever experience is encountered. The profound sense of freedom arising out of this shift away from defensiveness towards openness in relation to *all* experience is certainly an enticing prospect and one that would seem to offer a genuinely new way of being. Even in today's society, when perhaps more than ever before we are confronted by conditions of worth through the media and the complexities of modern-day living (see Chapter 8), Rogers' notion of a continual changingness seems entirely valid and appropriate. Indeed, this simple notion perhaps offers a pathway into the future as our society becomes increasingly complex and psychologically demanding.

**x** The Person-Centred Approach to Therapeutic Change

Hopefully this book will aid anyone seeking to clarify how and why change occurs from a person-centred perspective. Rogers did not intend his hypotheses to be taken as fact and applied rigidly within the counselling relationship, forcing client experience to fit theoretical construct. Similarly, this book is intended to provide a deeper understanding of the process of change that can be used to inform counselling practice, not define and curtail it. Offering a counselling relationship within the person-centred approach can be an extremely demanding undertaking, as discussed in Chapter 6. Approaching such a relationship with a clear working map of the process can be a useful preparation for the endeavour ahead, as long as it remains just that – a working map that is a rough guide to be continually updated. Hopefully that is what this book can provide – a working map of the process of change which can be continually updated.