

πClient-Centered Psychotherapy from Standpoint of Cultural-Activity Theory: CCT as Psychotechnical System

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Abstract.

Client-centered psychotherapy(CCT) is analyzed from standpoint of cultural-activity theory of Lev Vygotsky and its new development – psychotechnical approach. It is shown, that change of a client in the CCT goes in accord with laws of development of higher psychological formations. On the basis of introduced definition and description of concept of “psychotechnical system” personal characteristics of a client-centered therapist, goals, conceptual system and system of practice of CCT, system of interaction between client and psychotherapist are described.

Key words. Cultural-activity theory, psychotechnical system and it’s elements, client-centered psychotherapy (CCT), congruence, empathy, unconditional positive regard, interaction of the counselor and client, specifics of the CCT

There is still a **problem** in understanding psychological mechanisms of psychological practices.

From my point of view, *cultural-activity theory*, developed by famous Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and his colleagues (Luria A.R., Leontyev A. N., Alconin D.B., and others) and followers(Zinchenko V.P., Asmolov A.G., Vasilyuk F.E., Puzirei A.A and others) has valuable input in comprehending psychological mechanisms of psychological practices.

The cultural-activity theory stresses, on the one hand, a role of culture and, on the other hand, a role of activity of a person (people) in developing human psyche. Culture is a set of sustainable ways of human being in the world. It consists of a system of practices and knowledge, which transfer to each new member of society, a child, in particular. A child may acquire cultural ways of being through activity and interaction with other members of the society (adults, in particular), who transfer cultural knowledge and practices to the child in practical interaction.

A very important part of cultural-activity theory is a notion of a sign – a cultural tool, which transforms natural psyche of a child into cultural, higher psychological formations. Main characteristics of higher psychological formations are their self-

regulation, self-awareness, system interconnectedness, etc. All these are consequences of mediation by cultural signs.

One of modern developments of the cultural-activity theory is so called "psychotechnical approach". Experts who develop psychotechnical approach today (Puzirei A., 1986, 2005; Vasiluk F., 1992, etc.), understand it as a methodology of general psychology, which subject is not "consciousness" itself, but "work with consciousness" (Vasilyuk, 1992). Psychotechnical approach can be considered as practical use of regularities of development and functioning of human consciousness in educational, counseling and other practical work. Within development of psychotechnical approach we offer a concept of *psychotechnical system* (the footnote this representation closely, but doesn't coincide with understanding of psychotechnical system of F.E.Vasilyuk, 1992) as purposefully or spontaneously organized practice aimed at change of consciousness and behavior of people. It is possible to allocate the following *elements of any* psychotechnical system (Kolpachnikov V. V., 2004, 2014)

1. A purpose of influence. The purpose can be declared obviously or remain implicit.
2. A coordinated conceptual system of knowledge. This sign and symbolical system serves as means for estimation, explanation and regulation (control, correction) of practice.
3. An organized system of activity, practice of people at whom "the psychotechnical system" is aimed. This activity will be organized according to system of the knowledge, mentioned above, and plays a crucial role for efficiency of any psychotechnical practice, producing real experience. This experience, in turn, is understood, comprehended, systematized according to the concepts inherent in this psychotechnical system.
4. A specialist (psychologist, counselor or other) as a person (or group of people) who acts and "lives" according to this psychotechnical system in unity of its conceptual and practical parties, embodies it in a system of their personal being.
5. An organized system of interaction between the specialist and the client. In the course of proceeding intensive interaction the specialist inspires, organizes, instructs, supports, supervises and corrects activity of the client according to a conceptual basis of this psychotechnical system.

We see the concept of psychotechnical system and its elements as a useful tool for analyzing (and constructing!) psychological practices. Indeed, the elements described

are necessary and sufficient in any psychological practice for it to be complete and, consequently, effective and efficient.

Let's consider *client-centred psychotherapy(CCT)* according to the allocated elements of psychotechnical system.

I want to begin the description of the psychotechnical system of the client-centered psychotherapy with the characteristic of the **personality of a specialist** who introduces and creates corresponding situation of development in client-centered psychotherapy (element 4 in the above list). Carl Rogers and many of his followers claimed that the Person-Centered Approach is "a way of being", when the approach becomes a vital philosophy and a basis of actions, experiences, choices and acts in an everyday life of such person, instead of being simply a tool set of professional skills. At all variety of unique individual worldviews and ways of life of people, who for a long time and successfully practicing CCT, my experience of communication and interaction with them allows to allocate some of their general personal characteristics. Thus, a deep positive belief in constructive character of human nature, its ability to live and develop constructively, to solve arising difficulties and to move forward is characteristic for them. As well as a conviction that the best answer to questions and problems of the person is inherent in the person oneself. Also for them is characteristic a conscious personal choice and personal value to assist people in their desire to live and develop constructively. They live existential way of life, which is based on attention, understanding and acceptance of responsibility for their own life and experience. They feel and appreciate deep, open, true communication and interaction with other people. In their life they are close to an ideal of fully functioning person (Rogers C., 1960). These characteristics and values define actions and acts of such people in their everyday life - not just in a therapeutic office.¹ This deep conviction and commitment to the described principles and values "appears" in the complete quality of presence of such specialist in therapeutic contact, so that the specialist becomes a "convincing figure" for the client, making important impact on feelings, reflections, actions and acts of a client. Many clients and participants of encounter groups of Carl Rogers noted that "just his presence" had a surprisingly constructive effect on them. It is a very important aspect of the whole situation of Client-Centered Therapy .

The purposes of the Client-Centered Therapy are the following according to Carl Rogers (1959, 1961) and other researchers of CCT (see, e.g., Corey, 1990):

¹ From our point of view (Kolpachnikov V. V., 2012) it is possible to speak about Person-Centered Approach as a cultural movement, which develops and broadcasting its values, principles and a way of being not only within a professional setting, but influencing complete culture of mankind.

1. Assistance to a client in solution of actual difficulties/problems;
2. Personal growth/full functioning and self-actualizing of the person in life.

If the first of the purposes is characteristic for all approaches of psychotherapy, the second is specific to the CCT. Really, in spite of the fact that psychotherapy applies for deep influence and reorganization of personality of the client, the majority of psychotherapeutic approaches are aimed at simplification and overcoming of suffering or psychopathology of the client. Unlike them the client-centered psychotherapy seeks not only for simple overcoming of client's psychopathology, but is based on aspiration to promote really full functioning and development of the person. It corresponds to values of the client-centered Therapy and the Person-Centered Approach as a whole: recognition and respect of a sovereignty of the person, one's freedom and responsibility; assistance to development of the person's capacities and abilities; conviction of the person's aspiration to full functioning – actualizing and self-actualizing, and existence of resources for the best solving of personal difficulties and problems in the client oneself.

The coordinated system of concepts/knowledge. In CCT the complete system of concepts/knowledge is developed about the person, one's nature and development; about conditions and results of the person's constructive development and full functioning as well as about conditions and results of distorted development; theory of interpersonal relations and theory of psychotherapy, etc. This theoretical knowledge is constantly supplemented with observations and researches within CCT. Each client-centered psychotherapist to some extent acquired and accepted this system of concepts, views reality through a prism of these concepts, introduces it in own practice of interaction with clients. It is important, that client-centred therapist by one's practice and speech inevitably introduces and uses the conceptual knowledge in interaction with the client.

The organized system of activity, practice of people at whom the CCT is aimed. A client is comprehending one's life experience while the therapist is fully present in empathetic, congruent and unconditionally regarding stand. We will describe in detail process and results of this system of practice below, discussing the process of interaction of the consultant and client.

Organized system of interaction of the psychotherapist with the client. A process of CCT within which there is an interaction of the client and the counselor is usually long enough. In a sense, the process is similar to growth and development of a child in social situation of development (Vygotsky L.), when in the process of practical life and interaction with adults the child interiorizes and begins to apply to one's own

behavior and experience cultural signs/knowledge and practices, initially introduced into interaction with a child by adults.

Let's consider "work" of basic personal attitudes of the counselor – congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard (C. Rogers) - in the process of CCT.

The therapist is congruent. **Congruence** and full presence of the counselor (Bugental J., 2002) - as openness to experience (both internal and external), absorption in a situation "here -and -now" while empathically concentrated on experiences of the client, enables the former to feel and understand nuances of experience of the client, which the last, sometimes, is not aware of. A congruent expression by the counselor of conscious experience allows the client to pay attention to aspects of the life situation which the last didn't see before or weren't aware of, to become more aware of one's experience and a life situation. This creates a condition for making of the best choices and decisions. Besides, the counselor remains authentic and is devoted to one's identity. This example of the other being authentic/congruent, devoted to one's beliefs and principles can appear for the client an important developing experience, to motivate one to become congruent, authentic, to develop courage to be oneself (Tillich. P., 1952). In the congruence of the counselor there is a high potential of influence on the client. While being empathic and unconditionally positive regarding for the client, one's identity and uniqueness, the counselor remains devoted to one's identity, and expresses oneself for the client². Certainly, for the client there is always a choice concerning acceptance or rejection of representations, beliefs and principles expressed by the counselor. But, taking into consideration authoritative position of the psychologist, this influence potentially always is very strong. It imposes requirements to the personality and psychological health of the consultant. There is a wish to believe that full functioning - in all its characteristics – is inherent in the client-centered counselor. It is a crucial condition of positive influence of the specialist on the client (see also above about personality of a client-centred therapist).

The **unconditional positive regard** for experience of the client and suspension of judgment create an atmosphere of safety which is so important for exploration and acceptance of client's own experience. Carl Rogers more than once specified that the atmosphere of conditions of value characteristic for modern education and everyday life, conduces to that all people - to a greater or lesser extent – start denying and distorting their own experience, start to follow external expectations, estimations and requirements. As a result a person "leaves" oneself more and more, turns into "mirror reflection" of external social standards and instructions. As a result the tendency to actualizing in everyday conditions is more and more distorted by following to the

² The expressivity is the second measurement of presence according to J. Bugental (ibid.)

external standards with naturally following dissatisfaction, disappointment and tension.

The uncertainty of the client "meets" with the definiteness and unconditional positive regard of the therapist and his sincere trust to the client's ability to solve one's problems. This belief in the client, his abilities and opportunities to solve problems and to function fully – is expressed by the counselor congruently both non-verbally, and verbally. In proceeding dialogical contact multiplied by real unconditional positive regard, co-experiencing and understanding by the psychotherapist the client acquires self-confidence, starts listening to oneself, looks for solutions of problems, makes best choices and takes responsibility for their embodiment in own life.

In proceeding dialogical contact the *empathy* of the psychotherapist is directed on co-experiencing and sharing of experience of the client in details. Full absorption in experience of the client (without loss of oneself) allows the psychologist to understand and to experience the tiny nuances of experience of the client, sometimes yet not available to the last. Return of this understanding to the client in the atmosphere of unconditional respect and sincerity leads with a high probability to acceptance of this experience by the client. It leads to subtle understanding of one's own experience by the client.

Empathy should be understood as holistic organismic facilitation by a therapist to holistic organismic process of actualization and self-actualization of the client (Rogers, 1959, 1994). Modern findings of neuroscience support the view. "Mirror neurons" discovered (Gallese et al., 1996) and actively studied by neuroscientists (Silani G., Zucconi A., Lamm C., 2013) lay new light on understanding these processes on organismic level.

Carl Rogers noted as the first conditions of constructive change of the client in CCT the existence of psychological contact between the client and the counselor. Important conditions of such contact are substantial motivation on the part of the client to change, to solve one's problems, as well as humane motivation and competence in the CCT "core conditions"³ by the psychotherapist. Proceeding contact, dialogue, psychological unity have crucial importance for the client-centered therapy. In such deep contact the counselor has an opportunity due to empathic co-experiencing of a life situation of the client to perceive his experience 'as if' one's own. In this deep contact may appear phenomenological an "over - individual unity" which Carl Rogers's mentioned in his latest works (1980). This "over - individual unity" creates a basis of that deepest understanding and ingenious intuitions of both

³ The unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence.

the therapist and client about life situation of the last and resources-paths of its change to the best. In this regard it is interesting to mention a construct of "Personality of contact" introduced by Russian researcher O. Shvedovsky (2007).

The Personality of contact is an association of resources, opportunities, visions of both the client and the counselor in united synthetic whole, which enables deep, precise experiencing and understanding of nuances of life situation of the client. It creates conditions for finding ways of resolution of vital contradictions and problems in it. We will add to it that the client in this unity has opportunity to adopt tools and means introduced by the psychotherapist in this contact and to use them independently later. That happens quite in accord with cultural-historical theory of Lev Vygotsky, the 'law of the higher psychological formations'.

Phenomenologically client and counselor move together in the complex, confused, distorted field of experience of the client. They jointly listen empathetically, jointly comprehend, co-experience the life situation of the client. While being together with the client psychotherapist does not solve problems of the client. By empathic presence psychotherapist facilitates, assists, supports the client in experiencing, applying meaning to one's experience. As if inside the whole Personality of contact the counselor, *while being fully present in the space of experience of a client*, represents supporting, trusting, understanding and facilitating sub personality. And the client keeps searching, comprehending and making decisions sub personality⁴.

In the vast majority of psychotherapeutic approaches sub personality of the psychotherapist takes more "active stand" in the unity by making interpretations, decisions and instructions. In such situation a real danger appears that the counselor will impose his own visions and decisions to the client. For the client-centered psychotherapy is characteristic tremendous care of experience of the client, interest in the client finds one's own, authentic decisions which are the best for him/her, the client's accurate symbolization and signification of the experience, most precisely corresponding to one's experience. This care is one of distinctive features of CCT in comparison with the vast majority of other types of psychotherapy, where experience of the client is substantially shaped in accord to theoretical constructs and concepts of that theory on which the psychotherapy is based. Thus, classical psychoanalysis leads sooner or later the client to judgment of the experience in terms of unconscious drives, defense mechanisms and resistance, the transaction analysis – in terms of life scenarios, games, ego states and transactions, etc.

⁴ The described process well corresponds to the theory of "being-inside-the Other" of human personality developed by V.A. Petrovskiy (1996). Existing inside the Other the human personality makes an effective impact on experiences and acts of the Other.

In other words, the majority of existing psychotherapies approach to the specific person with some initial general "theoretical model" of this person to which - sooner or later - that person and his/her experience will be attuned/"adjusted". Such predetermined view of the person, certainly, reasonable and repeatedly checked by adherents of this or that approach, of course, does more "economic" the work of the psychotherapist, who initially knows "what" to look for and do with each specific client. But a danger of stereotypical, sample approach to the specific person and his/her unique life situation increases. The client-centered psychotherapy in this context is more respectful to the uniqueness and freedom of the person, more flexible in comprehension of one's experience, assisting each person in one's unique symbolization and signification, which is most relevant for the person.

In this process client comprehends and accepts one's experience without rejection and distortion. It is important, that client looks for words and meanings which accurately correspond to one's experience. Carl Rogers repeatedly underlined this client's search for accurate, distinct words which correspond, reveal, and crystallize the experience.

In an intense interpersonal field of psychological unity of the psychotherapist and the client where the last designs meanings of one's life situation taking into consideration all personal nuances and circumstances. This individual design of personal meaning of life situation is always individual and unique, corresponding to unique characteristics of the individual vital world and the identity of the client. But having been built, this design of personal meaning most effectively regulates activity of the client, as much as possible answering his vital aspirations, resources and opportunities, circumstances of an individual life situation. As C. Rogers has put it, if experience is most fully conscious and is signified most accurately, that results in definiteness and conviction concerning the best ways of actions in this situation. And this decision tends to be realized with all energy and force of self-actualizing with acceptance responsibility for the decisions and actions. Such result costs those efforts and time sometimes required for finding of these best decisions by the client!

One of the main results of the process is an achievement by the client of more or less definiteness in one's living situation. The client comes to understanding of sources of one's problems and to making decision on how to treat them in order to improve one's life situation. Openness to experience gives the chance to the person to find the best solution of the problem, the decisions which are coordinating with actualizing tendency. The client realizes more clearly what occurs in his life, accepts responsibility for necessary decisions and actions. That leads to conscious self-

actualization in the situation – the organization, regulation and control of own actions. All his life comes closer to full functioning.

Conclusions.

Our analysis shows, that change and development of a client in the client-centered therapy is similar to growth and change of a child in social situation of development. Indeed, in a process of active continuous interaction of a client and a client-centred psychotherapist the former acquires practices (congruence, empathy, unconditional positive regard/self-regard) and knowledge of client-centred psychotherapy and applies them to one's own activity.

Life and personality of a client in the process of a client-centred therapy changes in accord with cultural-activity laws and mechanisms.

Client-Centered psychotherapy may be conceptualized as a psychotechnical system with its necessary and sufficient elements for constructive change of a client.

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