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Mindfulness: A foothold for Rogers’s humanistic person-centred approach

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Abstract

This article probed and contextualised the strong parallels between meditation derived mindfulness and Rogers’s humanistic person-centred (PC) approach. This was done through a conceptual and evaluative literature review of the PC framework in relation to definitive descriptions of mindfulness. Elements of mindfulness within the core conditions of PC therapy were explored and verified. Quotations, pragmatic, behavioural descriptions and explications provided evidence of a shared ideology inherent in both concepts via “way of being”. The findings suggested that mindfulness cultivates, harmonises and deepens essential therapist qualities in PC therapy. This review article could supply a rationale for significant inferences in the implementation of meditation-inspired activities in the practical preparation of trainee therapists as well as optimising proficiency and refinement in professional practice.

Keywords: mindfulness, meditation; person-centred (pc) approach, therapist,

Introduction

At present, there appears to be an emergent interest in the interrelatedness between Western schools of psychology and Eastern Buddhist traditions (Robins, 2002; Kumar, 2002; Tophoff, 2006; Bazzano, 2010; McWilliams, 2012; Beitel, Bogus, Hutz, Green, Cecero, & Barry, 2014). Carl Rogers argued that the PC approach embraces a naturalistic phenomenon typified by a profound sense of presence which bears a strong resemblance to oriental views (Rogers, 1961; Rogers, 1979). This notion is largely based on a person-centred (PC) therapist's deep-seated awareness and liberation of the self when consulting with clients to avoid the interference of some preconceived structure of reality or rigid self-concept (Thorne, 2010). The affirmation arising from this notion was that the Eastern meditatively inspired concept of mindfulness is a skill that is associated with increased awareness of the self, and acceptance of the situation at hand without the desire to enforce a preconceived scientific objectivity, especially in the process of service delivery (Ponton, 2012). In recent years, several researchers have linked mindfulness with a more effective therapeutic presence (McCollum & Gehart, 2010; Campbell & Christopher, 2012). Mindfulness amongst therapists has proven not only to improve their levels of self-efficacy, empathy and ability to direct attention (Greason & Cashwell, 2009; Bruce, Manber, Shapiro, & Constantino, 2010), but also to advance their levels of compassion for and acceptance of themselves and others (Christopher & Maris, 2010; McCollum & Gehart, 2010). Mindfulness was also found to contribute to developing therapists' global counselling skills such as establishing a therapeutic relationship, tolerating affect, session management and appropriate self-disclosure (Buser, Buser, Peterson, & Seraydarian, 2012).

This article contends that mindfulness in therapy not only "paves the way for human flourishing" (Brito, 2014, p. 358) but could also provide a strong foothold for effective PC therapy. Despite the apparent possibilities, mindfulness in relation to PC therapy has not been

studied in great detail. For this reason, the authors of this paper seek to explore the elements of mindfulness in PC therapy to promote informed dialogue between Western psychology (the PC approach in particular) and Eastern Buddhist-inspired practices such as mindfulness. Improved knowledge and understanding of the interrelatedness between these constructs is likely to advance PC therapy by way of training, education, and professional practice. In this paper the authors will attempt to relate a theoretical framework for the PC approach (which they provide) to core constructs of mindfulness (which they disseminate), since this relation holds particular promise to inform PC therapy. Before mindfulness elements in the PC approach are explored, some background on both constructs is provided since they are remarkably multifaceted.

Person-centred approach: a theoretical framework

PC therapy emanated from the work of the humanist psychologist Dr Carl Rogers (1902–1987). The PC approach is robustly rooted in a humanistic philosophy, which relies on people’s self-actualising capability for therapeutic change, given the proper environment. The quintessential objective of this approach in therapy is to establish a supportive therapeutic climate which permits self-healing and personal growth within the client (Africa, 2011). Unlike concomitant approaches in psychology such as psychoanalysis and behaviourism, the PC approach values the nature of the therapeutic relationship in which the client, instead of the therapist, directs the process of therapy (Rogers, 1952). Rogers explained that the client is the expert of his or her own distress and should therefore be the mechanism that directs the process of healing. Rogers’s own clinical experiences, research and observations led to the notion that people have the inherited potential for self-understanding and constructive personality change (self-actualisation) given a definable atmosphere of six “necessary and sufficient” conditions namely: psychological contact between two persons; a client that is incongruent, vulnerable or anxious; a therapist who is congruent or integrated in the

relationship; an unconditional positive regard for the client; empathetic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference, and a communication of the therapist's empathetic understanding; and unconditional acceptance of the client (Rogers, 1957). Of the six fundamental and facilitative conditions, therapist congruence, empathic understanding, and unconditional positive regard have evoked the most research interest since they form the core (3rd, 4th and 5th conditions respectively) of the six conditions needed for therapeutic personality change (Rogers, 1957). With a view to underscoring the relevance of this paper, these three conditions, which mostly reflect the therapist's qualities, will be discussed in greater detail.

Therapist congruence

Congruence within the confines of the counselling relationship signifies the therapist's awareness of the self which allows a genuine, wholehearted and honest expression of the actual experiences held at that moment with the client (Rogers, 1957). Therapists' reactions are therefore consistent with their inner thoughts and feelings, and this develops a sense of authenticity. Rogers's personal account of practice verifies this notion: he states that:

I let myself go into the immediacy of the relationship where it is my total organism which takes over and is sensitive to the relationship, not simply my consciousness. I am not consciously responding in a playful, or analytic way, but simply react in an unreflective way to the other individual, my reaction being based, (but not consciously) on my total organismic sensitivity to this other person (Rogers, 1952, p. 343).

This extract reflects the non-directional emergence into the client's subjective world without a desire to fit it into a preconceived notion of reality. Hence, the challenge for therapists here is to make sure that their own needs do not interfere with or gain preference over the client's unique needs and concerns (Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999). Communication of realness, honesty and openness by therapists in this respect has proven to

be critical to establishing a collaborative working relationship with clients (Rivera, Phan, Maddux, Wilbur, & Arredondo, 2006).

Empathetic understanding

Empathy is defined as the “therapist’s sensitive ability and willingness to understand the client’s thoughts, feelings, and struggles from the client’s point of view” (Rogers, 1980, p. 85). An African perspective draws on the Pedi idiom “*mollo ofisa baori*” which means that “only the person exposed to the fire can tell how hot it is” to convey the need for therapists to adopt the frame of reference of their clients in order to experience their inner world (Grobler, Schenck, & du Toit, 2003, p. 48). Therefore, empathy is the ability to see and experience the world from the client’s frame of reference in a manner which is constituted by the therapist’s unconditional openness to whatever the client discloses about their immediate experiences. A felt sense of the client’s inner world enables the therapist to communicate his or her understanding and make inferences about the client’s subjective worldview. For that reason, empathy is a skill that requires significant awareness, concentration and communication to accurately communicate the client’s experiences.

Unconditional positive regard

Rogers (1957) explained that an unconditional positive regard is one in which a therapist fosters care towards the client regardless of the client’s individual experiences and feelings. In other words, the therapist unreservedly accepts all the client’s experiences at a particular point in time without any “ifs” or “buts” – no matter what the presenting behaviour is. This implies that the therapist does not have to approve or critically judge the client’s actions but prizes their personhood instead (Barret-Lennard, 1998; McLeod, 2008). Therefore, the notion of unconditional acceptance by a therapist is that clients will grow and fulfil their potential when they are truly valued as persons of worth.

The intuitive appeal of the aforementioned is that the PC approach seems rather unorthodox as it holds a very positive and optimistic view of human nature which is underpinned by an utmost respect for individual clients and a value of their self-worth. The PC therapist trusts that the client knows best and that, with the appropriate provision of facilitative circumstances, the client's self-concept will actualise in accordance with his or her organismic valuing process (Patterson & Joseph, 2007), which resonates with Rogers's idea of therapeutic change.

Mindfulness: what is mindfulness?

Mindfulness as a tradition is rooted in Eastern introspective practices such as Buddhist meditative practice (*Vipassana*), which can be traced back more than 2 600 years in history to the teachings of Buddha, who existed in north-east India (Bodhi, 2011). The teaching by Buddha, referred to as "*Dhamma*", was established on principles and practices for human beings to overcome suffering (*dukkha*) and gain insight into their pursuit of true happiness and spiritual freedom (*nibbāna*) (Sayādaw, 1977). This practice, together with Buddhism, has spread throughout Asia and eventually to other parts of the world where the thoughtful life tends to take on a religious fervour.

A general English rendition of mindfulness from the Pali language *Sati Sampajaña* connotes an estimation of awareness, circumspection, discernment, and retention (Shapiro, 2009). A renowned Western definition of mindfulness described the concept as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present, and nonjudgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994), who was one of the forerunners of integrating mindfulness into Western therapeutic practices, briefly characterised mindfulness as a kind of attention that is underlined by greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of one's immediate experience. Almost a decade later and after much scientific scrutiny and rigorous evaluation, a consensus meeting between mindfulness teachers, experts and practitioners led to a

proposed operational definition which conceptualised mindfulness as “a process of regulating attention in order to bring a quality of non-elaborative awareness to current experience and a quality of relating to one’s experience within an orientation of curiosity, experiential openness, and acceptance” (Bishop, Lau, Shapiro, Carlson, Anderson, Carmody, & Velting, 2004, p. 234). These authors also affirmed that mindfulness is a process of dispassion (de-centred perspective) that skilfully allows one to ascertain the rationality and ephemeral nature of one’s direct thoughts and feelings (Bishop et al., 2004). A more recent and condensed definition of mindfulness also portrayed a state of general receptivity and full engagement with present-moment experiences (Black, 2011). Within the context of psychology, mindfulness is viewed as an outcome (mindful awareness which manifests a resolute presence that is free of grasping, repugnance and delusion) that arises from a systematic process (mindful practice which involves deliberate attendance in an open, accepting, and discerning way) in moment-to-moment cognitive, affective, and sensory experiences (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). Mindfulness is therefore not just the mere allocation of attention to a particular object (as the case is with concentration), but rather a heightened awareness of an unfolding experience that is in co-existence with a non-judgemental, and accepting attitude towards the self and the other (Brown, Marquis, & Guiffrida, 2013). In support of Shapiro and Carlson’s (2009) view of mindful practice, Gardner and Moore (2007) affirmed that individuals can be taught to become mindful with the frequent engagement of exercises that include various meditation-inspired activities.

The above-mentioned clarification of Rogers’s PC approach and Eastern-derived concept of mindfulness underscored collective elements that form the keystones of distinctive phenomena which appear to inspire a shared ideology. The following section will attempt to highlight and verify parallels between these two concepts.

Mindfulness: a foothold for person-centred counselling

The spiritual and mental concept of “right” mindfulness may seem radically different, perhaps even contradictory to Western psychology. Yet, a number of researchers/therapists have over the years deliberated and advocated the interrelatedness between the facets of mindfulness and various schools of psychology (Robins, 2002; Geller, 2003; Kumar, 2002; Tophoff, 2006; Bazzano, 2010; McWilliams, 2012; Beitel et al., 2014). The inference has been that the core teachings of Buddhism (such as the *Four noble truths and the eight-fold path and its factors explained* by Sayādaw, 1977) document the understanding of human suffering which, in its constituent parts, is significant in the field of psychotherapy (Robins, 2002). This notion could be strongly connected with the PC therapist, especially if one considers the fact that, in contrast to other psychological approaches, the PC therapist and the client are equal partners – a relationship which requires a cultivated way of being rather than the attainment of expertise (Rogers, 1949; McLeod, 2008). Such intricate practice surely necessitates a conscious and harmonious character to fully proffer the core conditions (congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathetic understanding) needed for therapeutic change as specified by Rogers (Bazzano, 2011).

Similarly, instead of being a contextualised tool, mindfulness is a refinement of awareness, insight, and compassion that paves the way for human flourishing (Brito, 2014). A more specific argument is that the frequent practice of mindful attendance for moment-to-moment cognitive, affective, and sensory experiences will result in the harbouring of sanity and stability, which is characterised by prevailing qualities in the self, such as being:

- accepting: embracing and accommodating all present-time thoughts and sensations without a desire to resist or push against them
- non-judgmental: allowing any kind of thoughts and sensations that arise to be without judgment – neither good, bad nor indifferent but just as they are

- patient: having the ability to venerate the natural ebb and flow especially of the self as it evolves through learning, not hastily and without forcing anything
- trusting: accepting our inner wisdom as true and not trying to be any different from the true self
- non-striving: remaining relaxed in the direct experience, with no hope or intention for anything in particular to happen
- able to let go: separating the self from any thought, feeling or sensation, whether good or bad
- able to remain present with the emergence and evolution of active occurrences, accompanied by (being)
- able to hold a beginner's mind: perceiving each moment, breath, experience as new, regardless of similar past experiences – not allowing what we know to interfere with the direct experience (adapted from *Full catastrophe living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn, 2013, pp. 33–39).

Seemingly, these qualities hold strong parallels with PC therapists' embodied way of being when fostering a climate that permits self-healing and personal growth within the client (Rogers, 1957). Nonetheless, detailed reference to the mindfulness elements/qualities concerning the core conditions of the PC approach could substantiate this contention.

Mindfulness: a way of informing therapist congruence (3rd condition of PC counselling)

Rogers (1957) proposed that PC therapists should be fully aware and accepting of all the experiences presented by clients, in addition to the feelings and attitudes within the self at that point in time. This proposition of PC therapy firmly resonates with the contention of having a fuller “awareness” of one's experience, whilst holding an open and “accepting attitude” to every aspect at that precise moment as proposed by Bishop and colleagues (2004) whose operational definition of mindfulness is cited in this paper. In therapy, those aspects

presented by the client are expected to stimulate a great part of the therapist's own sensations and experience. However, as with mindfulness, the need for accurate awareness of one's self and all that is present (e.g. the client), openness to, and acceptance of arising aspects then forms a cornerstone of the consulting behaviour of PC therapists.

Complementing this behaviour, the view of PC therapists in Rogers (Rogers, 1952) evinces neither the desire to judge or be biased against any aspect that is presented by the client and experienced within, nor the wish to impose or suppress any particular occurrence during therapy. This behaviour resembles the mindfulness-instilled qualities such as perceiving things in a non-judgmental manner and remaining relaxed or non-striving in order to stay present with the experience of active occurrences (see these writers' interpretation of Kabat-Zinn (2013) in the preceding pages). Much like mindfulness and similar Eastern teaching, Rogers's PC approach to counselling values an "Oriental attitude" within the therapist (Tophoff, 2006). Rogers (1980) (cited in Tophoff, 2006) explained that "I don't try to control a sunset. I watch it with awe as it unfolds" (p. 130). This view in particular additionally holds a strong parallel with the mindfulness qualities of being patient and letting go, which signifies the ability to adopt a decentred perspective and embrace the natural flow of emergence, without the need to change anything (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). This ties in with the meaning that PC counselling, akin to mindfulness, is accepting and honouring the natural ebb and flow (letting go) in counselling without being influenced by a pre-conceived opinion of reality or a rigidly defended self-concept (beginner's mind) (Thorne, 2010). In other words, the therapist sees each experience with the client as novel and new. Rogers (1952) shared this view, explaining that therapists who liberate themselves of all intellectual inhibitions, conscious thought and analytical thinking will become integrated persons (congruent – 3rd condition) in the relationship with the client. He implies that PC therapists do not knowingly hold any façade and are openly living their thoughts and feelings as they flow within at that

precise moment. The result of this openness with the client safeguards the client's experiences with the therapist in an authentic way (Rogers, 1957). In the light of this, it is apparent that congruence in PC counselling is a secondary effect emanating from the therapists' ability to effectively employ mindfulness-like qualities such as holding an accurate awareness of the aspects presented by the client and the feelings flowing within. This coexists with an accepting, non-judgmental and non-striving attitude in the emerging situation as each aspect is perceived with a beginner's mind.

Mindfulness: a way of informing unconditional positive regard (4th condition of PC counselling)

Mindfulness also paves the way for PC therapists to move beyond a cognitive understanding of the client's world to a level of embodiment (unconditional *positive regard* – 4th condition) (Bazzano, 2011; Bazzano, 2010). For example, the mindfulness qualities of experiential openness to and unconditional acceptance of present moment experiences garner a much deeper understanding not only of the self but also of its inter-subjective and interdependent relationship with existential phenomena which dissolves all boundaries that define the distinctive self (Padilla, 2010) – thus implying liberation from self-interest for a meaningful awareness of one's interdependence with what is (Beitel et al., 2014), which is believed to result in an embodied presence and natural unconditional *positive regard* for what is in the present-moment experiences (Bazzano, 2011). Similarly, the behaviour of PC therapists bears no barrier of “you-ness” or “me-ness” and is intentionally aimed at becoming one with the client (Rogers, 1979). This signifies that the client's world view is completely and utterly accepted, thereby denoting a demonstration of unconditional *positive regard*. Analysis of recorded conversations with PC therapists, who regularly engaged in *mindful meditation*, sustained the interrelatedness of mindfulness and their ability to offer unconditional openness and embodied presence (Bazzano, 2011). One therapist in particular confessed that *mindful*

meditation facilitated the breakthrough in his ability to connect with the world and with others (Bazzano, 2011). A personal account from that author's experience of how *mindfulness meditation* informs his ability to practice as a PC therapist stated that "what I did notice was that if I discontinued meditation practice for a day or two, the quality of attention and empathy I gave to the clients was affected: the quality of my awareness became more opaque, and the ability to be in the present moment with the client did not feel as natural" (Bazzano, 2010, p. 32). With due regard for both Bazzano's (2010) personal account and the collected views of other PC therapists (Bazzano, 2011), it was concluded that *mindful meditation* cultivates an open-hearted way of being that appreciates life's imperfections, which in effect promotes the ability to show a deep care and understanding of both the self and the client. This notion echoes Rogers's (1957) view on empathetic understanding (5th condition) which underscores the therapist's ability to deeply experience the client's world with no self in mind.

Mindfulness: a way of informing empathetic understanding (5th condition of PC counselling)

In view of the preceding, mindfulness provides an explanatory framework for the facility of empathising with the other. Mindfulness, as used here, promotes a decentred perspective on thoughts and feelings, which provides a clearer understanding of the impermanence and transient nature of experience (Geller, 2003; Bishop et al., 2004) – hence enabling one to stay present with a full range of experiences whether they are positive or negative without the possibility of being emotionally overwhelmed or developing a need to resist or judge. This capability allows one to "slide along" with the emerging nature of the experience, providing a richer understanding of what is (Geller, 2003). Bazzano (2010) corroborated this, claiming that mindfulness provides the self with a sense of fluidity that is mouldable to the experiencing situation, which, in turn, allows for a deeper understanding of and acquiescence

to phenomena. This view on mindfulness corresponds to Rogers's (1961, p. 111) notion of an "organismic experiencing" that imparts a sense of oneness with the client rather than a self-existing entity. Mindfulness will therefore facilitate empathetic understanding in PC counselling, thus enabling therapists' to effectively set aside their own frame of reference in order to see the world through the client's eyes. Padilla (2010) concurred and explained that compassion for the self and the other is a natural extension of mindfulness as it enables one to experience an "innate affinity with all beings" (p. 8).

This leads to the proposal that mindfulness encapsulates *empathetic understanding* (5th condition) since it embraces a deep enquiry into the existential dilemma of a client's world view together with a curious and accepting appreciation of human nature (Bazzano, 2010; Bazzano, 2011; Beitel et al., 2014). Researchers have confirmed this notion thus buttressing the association between mindfulness and therapists' ability to show compassion for and understanding of clients' perspectives (Davis & Hayes, 2011; Reid, Farragher, & Ok, 2013). In view of the authors' preceding viewpoint, Table 1 reflects a synthesis of critical findings which document the relevance of *mindfulness meditation* in the facilitation of PC therapy.

<Insert Table 1 approximately here>

Conclusion

Established from the above, it is apparent that mindfulness and PC counselling are distinct yet very complementary, especially in view of a collective ideology that intends to inspire an atmosphere for therapeutic change. Mindfulness provides a strong foothold for PC counselling since it was shown to be a behavioural tendency which is based on an alert presence, unshakeable acceptance, openness, patience, curiosity and equanimity. Mindfulness, like the PC approach, informs a life-affirming way of being that embodies an innate identification with human nature that in essence garners acceptance, congruence and

compassion – hence the belief that mindfulness not only forms the pivotal ingredient, but also acts as the catalyst (process guide) which promotes the core conditions in effective PC (non-directive) therapy. In essence, the phenomenological and existential stance taken by the authors of this review is that mindfulness inspires the PC therapist to be grounded in a prodigious way and become aware of the wider organismic reality which is liberated of distortion, bias, skewed acuities or rigid self-concept. The PC therapist is enabled to find affinity with what is and to experience a total organismic sensitivity to the unique inner thoughts and feelings of a client during therapy. In view of the fact that the PC approach is primarily grounded in the therapist's being truthfully human, it appears sensible to cultivate such a profound way of being with meditation-inspired activities. In the light of this, the overriding principles of mindfulness and PC counselling mentioned in this paper will surely provide strong support and motive for the incorporation of meditation-inspired activities in the training of PC therapists as well as the potential value of other Buddhist-derived (*mindfulness meditation*) approaches in therapy such, as the dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) (Linehan, 1993), and acceptance commitment therapy (ACT) (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999), which in essence are founded on the principle of acceptance of all aspects of expression and experience (Padilla, 2010).

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Table 1: Critical findings on how mindfulness-meditation informs the PC therapist

Study	Method	Concluding remarks
Felder et al. (2014:20). <i>Mindfulness at the heart of existential-phenomenology and humanistic psychology: a century of contemplation and elaboration</i>	Historical review of literature	Mindfulness-based work allows for the cultivation of a simple and pure inner awareness of experience that is also, paradoxically, a broad interconnected consciousness of one's woveness into the fabric of the world.
Bazzano (2011). <i>The Buddha as a fully functioning person: towards a person-centred perspective on mindfulness</i> Bazzano (2010). <i>Mindfulness in context</i>	Author's narrative combined with analysis of small scale heuristic research study which involved recorded interviews with person-centred therapists ($n = 4$) with experience in mindful-meditation practices	Mindfulness-meditation promoted therapists': <ul style="list-style-type: none">• unconditional, non-judgemental openness• embodied presence and broader awareness of clients• ability to stay with clients - being present to pleasant and grim experiences• curiosity - the ability to stay with a question• compassion - the self-nurturing provided by meditation-promoted natural empathy and unconditional positive regard towards clients• improved therapeutic relationship• awareness of therapist's self-concept.
Tophoff (2006). <i>Sensory awareness as a method of mindfulness training within the perspective of person-centred psychotherapy</i>	A conceptual exploration of literature	Mindfulness mediated by sensory awareness practices promotes a clutter-free, in-the-moment organismic experience for therapists which ensures a deeper connection with clients. Mindfulness is instrumental to PC therapy.