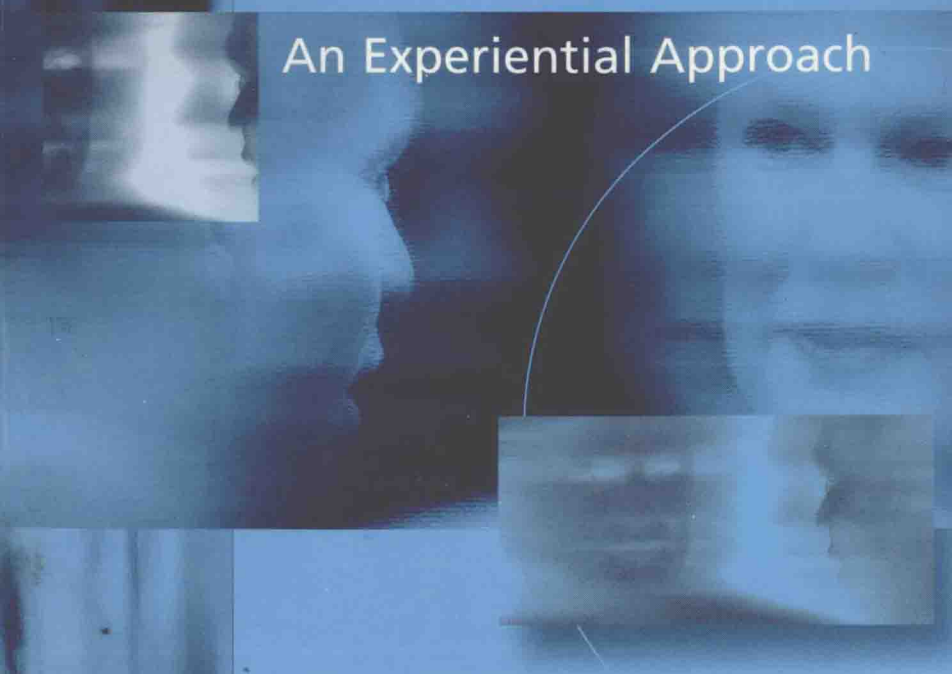
Person-Centred Counselling

An Experiential Approach



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Preface

Carl Rogers is widely hailed for his humanism and, of course, for the approach to counselling that often bears his name. Yet he was a deeply divided individual. As an American he was swept up in American pragmatism and, despite his deep respect for the individual and for the subjectivity of human experience, he failed to appreciate fully the nature and significance of consciousness. As a therapist, he was shy and, although unsurpassed in his ability to be empathic and supportive, never adequately dealt with the interpersonal relationship between counsellor and client. As a producer of knowledge, he operated hermeneutically as a theorist but positivistically as a scientist.

Following in Rogers's wake, person-centred and experiential counsellors and therapists have similarly taken on the best and the worst of modernism. They have embraced humanistic individualism and, with it, subjectivity. This ontology has allowed them to value human dignity in ways not seen in psychoanalysis, behavioural therapy and even cognitive therapy. They have also subscribed to objectivism and the correspondence theory of truth, however, which has prevented them from embracing fully the qualities of human 'beingness' that their ontology entails. Meanwhile, postmodernists have been been snapping at their heels, challenging that experiencing is shot through with social constructionism.

The current approach to counselling was developed with one foot – but only one – in the person-centred and experiential mainstream. I have been privileged to be a member of a university department that has been home to Laura Rice and Les Greenberg, both leaders in person-centred and experiential counselling/therapy, while not being involved in their research programmes. After a stint of using natural science methods in my early years in the department, I changed to qualitative methodology. Over the years since that decision, the adoption of the alternative method has led me to enquire into basic questions of the nature of the

person and whether or not it is possible for people to develop knowledge objectively.

All of these considerations were stimulated by my enquiry into the client's subjective experience of counselling and were brought to bear on that same enquiry. Freed from positivism, I have gradually come to realize that qualitative research – at least the way my research group has been practising it – is, at root, hermeneutical. Thus, we are now doing the same kind of work that Rogers did as a theorist. Rather than seeing such work as a means to the end of experimental confirmation, however, we consider it to be good science in its own right. The enquiry has involved asking people about their experience and interpreting what they say while staying close to their language. The method has allowed us to be radically empirical, to attempt to understand the meaning of verbal reports on experience.

Much of what has informed the current approach to counselling represented in this book has to do with what clients have told me about what counselling is like for them. Their reports have made me realize how keenly interested they are in what counsellors think of them and in how counsellors deal with them. It has also made me aware, with great force, of the extent to which clients are active – discursively and silently – in managing their relationship both with themselves and with their counsellor.

The approach thus revolves around clients' and counsellors' reflexivity, defined as self-awareness and the agency involved in and flowing from it. This concept opens the door to the significance of matters such as silent experiencing, the balance of power between the client and counsellor, and the importance of their communication about their communication. The implications of reflexivity are thus far-reaching, extending into all levels of practice and all forms of person-centred and experiential counselling. Moreover, the approach represented in the book has strong affiliations with feminist therapy, existential therapy and interpersonal therapy, and has implications for them as well. In this sense, it is my hope that the book will have integrative impact – something that is sorely needed given the contemporary threat to humanistic counselling approaches imposed by their putatively more empirically oriented and efficient brethren. The approach represented here has an eye on efficiency while adhering fervently to humanism.

This book began as a training manual that I wrote ten years ago. Over the years of its use, a number of students have commented on it, for which I am grateful. More recently, John McLeod encouraged me to expand it and submit it for publication. Once in

the capable hands of Susan Worsey of Sage, the manual was turned over to Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne to add to John's review, and both were convinced that the approach represented in it falls somewhere within the person-centred tradition, although I would have to position it. After further consideration of the literature, I decided that it fits between the person-centred and experiential genres, hence the title.

In recognition of the approach having been influenced by the reports of clients in counselling, I owe a huge debt to those who participated in my research and their counsellors who encouraged the participation, some of whom participated themselves. My students Pavla Reznicek, Yaacov Lefcoe and Kimberley Watson were able research assistants throughout the project and I am grateful for their contributions. As always, my wife Judy has been wonderful in her support.

David Rennie

Contents

1
Situating the Approach

The counselling described in this book is in keeping with those that share Carl Rogers's deep interest in working within the client's frame of reference but do not subscribe strictly to Rogerian theory and practice. It thus joins the broad category of person-centred and experiential counselling and psychotherapy approaches described by Lietaer as:

> the classic Rogerians; the client-centered therapists who are in favour of some form of integration or even eclectism; the Gendlians, for whom the whole focusing approach is a precious way of working; the client-centered therapists who look at the therapy process in information-processing terms; the client-centered therapists for whom the interpersonal aspect, the here-and-now of interaction between the client and therapist is their central focus, and maybe some other suborientations or combinations of them. (1989, p. 17)

Like the orthodox or, as Shlien (1970) terms it, the 'literal' person-centred approach, the present one places its main emphasis on the client's experience, choice and personal freedom and makes following the client's lead a priority. It both differs from the literal approach in some respects and adds to it. Rather than traditional Rogerian theory, it is organized around the concept of reflexivity, which I have defined as self-awareness and agency within that self-awareness (Rennie, 1992, 1997).[1] Moreover, as much emphasis is placed on the counsellor's reflexivity as on the client's, which brings the counsellor's process into the picture equally with the client's. A high value is placed on the counsellor's demystification of his or her presence in the counselling transaction through the activity of being open about what he or she is up to, so long as doing so does not detract from the focus on the client. In this regard, it contributes to the emphasis being placed in many quarters on counsellor transparency. The approach also draws upon metacommunication as practised in most forms of interpersonal therapy, while going beyond the conceptualization and application of metacommunication as used in that form of therapy. Finally, the approach entails counsellor directiveness of the client's processing of experience when it seems warranted by both client and counsellor.

It is the counsellor's guidance of the client's processing of experience that gives rise to the book's subtitle: *An Experiential Approach*. Yet, as will be seen, the process work outlined is non-technical. It takes the form either of directing clients' attention to the cognitive activity in which they appear to be currently engaged or of suggesting that they might engage in a particular process. This kind of process work is integral to the flow of the client's experience and fits smoothly into the emphasis on empathic responding characteristic of the literal approach. At the same time, it constitutes a bridge between that mode of responding and the more technical experiential approaches, if the counsellor is so inclined.

In terms of Lietaer's classification, then, the implicit assumptions and practices involved in the approach position it between the literal person-centred approach and therapies characterized by, as Rice (1974) succinctly put it, the therapist being directive in terms of the client's process and non-directive regarding content. These therapies include Gendlin's experiential therapy (Gendlin, 1981, 1996), the process-experiential approach developed by Rice and Greenberg (Greenberg, 1984; Greenberg, Rice and Elliott, 1993; Rice and Saperia, 1984) and the perceptual-processing approach advanced by Toukmanian (1986, 1990, 1992). There are, of course, many differences that separate these various 'directive' approaches. Gendlin's is holistic whereas the process-experiential and perceptual-processing approaches draw upon information-processing theory and are more reductionistic. In this respect, the current approach is more in keeping with Gendlin's holism. The middle ground occupied by the approach is thus compatible with the views of thinkers and practitioners such as Mearns (1994; Mearns and Thorne, 1988), Thorne (1989; Mearns and Thorne, 1988), Lietaer (1984), Sachse (1989), Liejssen (1990),[2] Holdstock (1996) and O'Hara (1984), among others.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I consider these points more fully. I begin with the quality of reflexivity. Following that, I address how this approach and the theory supporting it compare with the others in terms of self-actualization, the necessity and sufficiency of the core conditions, experience and its leading edge, and holism.

Reflexivity and its embodiment

The most significant quality of 'human beingness' is our ability to think about ourselves, to think about our thinking, to feel about

our feelings, to treat ourselves as objects of our attention and to use what we find there as a point of departure in deciding what to do next. This is reflexivity as I understand it. Many thinkers attach significance to reflexivity in terms of its implications for the concept of self but its importance is much broader; reflexivity is a major feature of consciousness and is integral to action. I was led to its pervasiveness after interviewing clients about their moment-to-moment experience of counselling/therapy (e.g. Rennie, 1984, 1990, 1992, 1994a, 1996). By virtue of reflexivity we can intervene into ourselves, make decisions, change ourselves. This is not to say that this capacity is total. The evidence for unconscious determination of actions, for societal constraints on change and for resistance to change is indisputable. But these considerations should not be allowed to diminish the centrality of reflexivity in our experience. We move in and out of streams of thought, just as we move into and out of various bodily activities associated with them. At one moment, we are 'in' a stream of thought; we are not aware that we are – we just 'are' (see Searle, 1983). The next moment or hour, as the case may be, the stream ceases, enabling us to be aware that we were in the stream. In that moment of awareness, we may either undeliberatively think of something else and go along with that thought, or deliberate on what to attend to next and enter the stream resulting from that decision, thus the repeating cycle. This is consciousness – an ongoing alternation of non-reflexive and reflexive thought.

Thinking is activity. We know this because when someone asks us what we are doing when we are immersed in thought, it is perfectly natural and correct to reply, 'I'm thinking'. For this and other reasons given in Chapter 2, I make no attempt to separate reflexivity and agency. They are part of each other in that agency is purposive activity emanating from reflexive activity and returning to it (Rennie, 1997).

There are reasons for being suspicious of reflexivity, especially if one is a client or a counsellor helping a client. In the act of attending to ourselves, we can detach from ourselves, as when we distance ourselves from painful feelings while allowing ourselves to be aware of what the feelings are about. Still we may not distance thought from our experience in this way. It is possible to draw our attention to our feelings as well as to our thoughts. Furthermore, although we are not capable of thinking about what we are thinking in precisely the same instant, we are capable of being aware of what we are feeling in a given instant. The reason the first is true is that we cannot think and be aware of that thinking simultaneously. Instead, either we think without being

aware of it, or we think about what we just thought or should next think about; we cannot catch in action the 'I' that instigates activity. Interestingly the same does not seem to be true of feeling, at least not to the same extent. Somehow, feeling is 'there' – an ongoing presence – ready for scanning and symbolization. Feeling seems to be in a different place than our thoughts; it seems to be in our bodies.

Some philosophers are sceptical of reflexivity precisely because of its implicit dualism. This was true of Dewey who, in his attempt to overcome philosophical problems raised by dualism, combined Darwinism with the Romantic idea of growth and created a form of monistic naturalism in which human functioning (including thinking) is action in the service of adaptation and growth (Rennie, 1998). Dewey had a tacit but strong influence on Rogers (Van Belle, 1980) and the vestiges of this influence can be seen in many of his followers as well. Rogers and the literalists (e.g. Bozarth, 1984, 1990a; Bozarth and Brodley, 1986; Patterson, 1990; Shlien, 1996) appear to mistrust reflexivity, instead placing more trust in a non-reflexive union of feeling and action. This is not to say that they have discounted reflexivity totally. Influenced by Gendlin, particularly, Rogers realized increasingly that we have a felt-sense to which we can attend and that doing so is an important step towards the productive processing of experience. For Rogers, however, full functioning is non-reflexive: a union of feeling and thought and behaviour. Thus, Rogers never put much stock in the concept of the ego (Van Belle, 1980). Instead, very much like Dewey, his ontology is closer to a monistic processing of experience.[3]

Gendlin's experiential approach to therapy, on the other hand, engages reflexivity. Gendlin maintains that embodied meaning as a felt-sense is a *direct referent* (e.g. Gendlin, 1962) or, more recently, an *exact form* (Gendlin, 1990) available for symbolization (the claim that it is thus analogous to a Husserlian 'essence' is debatable; cf. Gendlin, 1978/1979, 1990; Sass, 1988; see also Greenberg, Rice and Elliott, 1993). Thus, we can and should direct our attention to our felt-sense. This is a prescription of active reflexivity and is explicitly dualistic, for which Gendlin has been unfairly criticized (Leijssen, 1990; Wexler, 1974). There is a difference between subject–object and mind–body dualism (with the latter being exemplified by Descartes's characterization of mind and body as separate substances). As Gendlin is well aware, contemporary philosophical thought is moving in the direction of characterizing human beingness as non-reductive, *incarnated* embodiment and thus disputes substance dualism (e.g. Merleau-

Ponty, 1962; for an Anglo-American perspective, see Margolis, 1986, 1987). Reflexivity is but another aspect of that same incarnated embodiment, in that people have the ability to look at themselves as 'objects'. Hence, there is nothing special about reflexivity. It is simply the most wonderful quality of being human (Donald, 1991; May, 1958a).[4, 5]

In contrast, the process-experiential and perceptual-processing therapists are midway between the literal Rogerians and the Gendlians in terms of the recognition and application of reflexivity. For example, especially in their recent work that emphasizes the importance of emotion in therapeutic change (e.g. Greenberg, Rice and Elliott, 1993), the process-experiential therapists employ the Gendlian focusing technique when clients have difficulty making contact with their emotions. Thus, focusing is used as a means to the end of contacting (hypothesized) emotion schemes so that a given task (such as resolving a conflict split, dealing with unfinished business, resolving a problematic reaction to a past event, and so on) can proceed.

Reflexivity and silent activity

In the reflexive moment we are in a position to choose what to do next, and how. When engaged in discourse, in what seems like a rapid series of feedback loops, we sense the possible impact – on the other person and on ourselves – of expressing a thought or feeling. We are guided by this sense in deciding whether or not to express an inner experience at all, and, if proceeding, in managing how much of it we express and how we go about expressing it. This monitoring is done feelingly and seemingly almost instantaneously but is reflexive all the same.

In the counselling situation, such self-monitoring goes on in clients as much as in counsellors, of course. The result is a complex and dynamic situation in which the conscious goings-on between the counsellor and client variously occur on either one or two levels, depending on whether each person is conversing non-reflexively or reflexively. Non-reflexive talk is simply the talk itself, within which those involved in discussion are not deliberating on what they are saying but rather are just saying it in expression of an intention in the process of fulfilment. Reflexive talk, on the other hand, involves thoughts and feelings *between* utterances in the way described.

Accordingly, in the present approach, great significance is attached to silent activity. Rogers and his literalist followers

appear to recognize such activity implicitly but, seemingly because of their tacitly monistic ontology, do not accord it the attention it deserves. In the same vein, with the exception of the work by J.C. Watson (e.g. Watson, 1997; Watson and Greenberg, 1994; Watson and Rennie, 1994), the members of the process-experiential group do not make much of such covert, conscious control because of their interest in stimulating the client's activation and *expression* of non-reflexive cognitive/affective schemes. Toukmanian addresses tacitly the significance of covert experience through her valuing of controlled as compared with automatic perceptual processing, with the former having to do with reflexivity. In contrast, Gendlin recognizes covert experience explicitly when he encourages clients to work silently when focusing. Gendlin pays comparatively less attention to the client's silent experience of the therapist and of the therapy relationship, however. The approach put forward by Mearns (1994) is closest to the present one in recognizing and attempting to work productively with the full implications of silent activity.

Self-actualization and the necessity and sufficiency of the core conditions

Rogers and the literalists hold that all organisms have an actualizing tendency. The emphasis is on growth, optimal conditions for it, and individualism. As part of his most thorough theoretical statement, Rogers wrote:

> It should be noted that this basic actualizing tendency is the only motive which is postulated in this theoretical system. It should also be noted that it is the organism as a whole, and only the organism as a whole, which exhibits this tendency. There are no homunculi, no other sources of energy or action in the system. The self, for example, is an important construct in our theory, but the self does not 'do' anything. It is only one expression of the general tendency of the organism to behave in those ways which maintain and enhance the self.[6] (1959, p. 196)

In this same work, Rogers (1959) distinguishes between actualization of the organism and actualization of the self. Self-actualization may or may not be congruent with actualization of the organism, depending on the compatibility of organismic and societal influences on self-development. Thus, some social conditions are more conducive to growth than others. In the interests of adaptation and in response to conditional regard, individuals comply and identify with social admonitions in order to reduce

conflict with the social environment. This reduction in conflict is achieved at the expense of inducing conflict with organismic experiencing, however. The result is incongruence (see Ford, 1991). In order to achieve congruence, it is necessary for individuals to encounter the antidote to conditional regard so that they can safely contact and identify with their suppressed organismic promptings. In his famous statement, Rogers (1957) proposes that six conditions, highlighted by the therapist's three attitudes of empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence, are both necessary and sufficient as conditions for positive therapeutic change in that they determine the client's establishment of congruence with organismic experiencing.

Rogers's and the literalists' belief in self-actualization as defined appears to be the source of their respect for the uniqueness of the individual. It is also the origin of their belief that individuals can change themselves given the right conditions. Moreover, inherent in the concept of self-actualization is the belief that the growth impetus is intrinsically towards goodness. Hence, this theory is profoundly Romantic and even mystical, much as Dewey's belief in growth is seen by some as mystical (Murphy, 1951; Thayer, 1968).

I have further difficulty with the theory of self-actualization because it fails to account for a great deal of what we know about people, particularly in terms of their negative aspects. As Land (1996) remarks, it is not easy to reconcile the concept of inherent, organismic goodness with the existence of so much evil in the world. For Land, support for the notion of organismic actualization comes from faith more than evidence (see also O'Hara, 1995; Wood, 1996).

Alternatives to the concept of organismic evaluation and self-actualization have been proposed by experientially inclined therapists as well as by existential ones. Gendlin (1974) suggests that the felt-sense should be substituted for the organismic valuing process. This suggestion is an improvement in that it addresses experience that is immediate and is not burdened with the mysticism surrounding organismic evaluation. Butler and Rice (1963) propose that there are three main classes of drives (maintenance, emergency and pain, and developmental) and two levels of activation (chronic and acute). This formulation encompasses the complexity of motivation more fully than does the singular concept of organismic actualization and, correspondingly, allows for the possibility that some people actively resist change and so change very slowly, if at all. Similarly, conceptualizing within the existential perspective, Maddi (1988) suggests that growth entails

possibility but may be precluded by facticity, or facts having to do with 'human beingness' (Heidegger coined this term to denote that facts having to do with *Dasein* (being – here/there) are different than facts having to do with things). In a tacit criticism of self-actualization, Maddi proposes the alternative concept of *hardiness*, meaning that some people are hardy and hence open to change whereas others are less so. Therapy for unhardy people goes through three stages: the exploration of facticity and possibility, hopefully leading to the successful taking of challenges; if that fails, the instigation of focusing to get into the repressed emotion; and if that fails, the coming to terms with no change. Other criticisms of Rogers's self-actualization theory have been made (e.g. Seeman, 1988; Wexler, 1974).

The literalists' claim to person-centred therapy seems unduly exclusionary to practitioners and theorists who (a) deeply believe in the relationship more as person-to-person than agent-to-patient; (b) like nothing better than following the client's lead; yet (c) recognize that for some clients the prospect of changing is more disturbing than the prospect of staying the same, regardless of whatever impulse they may have to change; and (d) are sceptical about the claim that the Rogerian core conditions determine positive personality change (Rogers, 1957). The position taken in this book is that the core conditions are necessary and *perhaps* sufficient. Apart from the empirical evidence indicating that the conditions are not always sufficient, especially for clients who do not process their experience well (e.g. Rogers, 1961), the tenability of this proposition is called into question if we grant that people may be patients as well as agents. Under the assumption that the client is motivated to change for the better (an assumption that does not require the notion of self-actualization), Rogers's if-then proposition is tenable if it may be assumed that the client is primarily an agent as opposed to a patient. However, if the person is effectively controlled by aspects of his or her beingness, whether in the form of extreme feelings or unconscious structures and processes of various sorts, then he or she is a patient, by virtue of that control (Macmurray, 1957).

The question then arises as to whether or not people who are primarily agential, but nevertheless insufficiently agential to be able to solve their problems on their own, may solve them in the presence of an empathic, positively regarding and congruent therapist. The position taken in this book is that the answer to this question is a definite 'Yes'. Alternatively, clients may be patients more than agents in relation to their troubles, in which case, given assent, the counsellor may have to seize the reins for a while until

the client can take over. It is unlikely that the client's cooperation could be gained in the absence of the core conditions which means that they are necessary but not sufficient in such a case.

In this respect, then, the approach outlined in this book is in the 'directive' camp in its recognition that, depending on the circumstances, the therapist may expedite the progress of therapy by being directive about the client's processing of experience. A feature of the approach, although certainly not unique by any means, is the importance placed on making sure that interventions into clients' processing of experience are acceptable to them, given that they are reluctant to criticize their counsellors (Rennie, 1994a; Rhodes et al., 1994; Safran, Muran and Wallner Samstag, 1994).

The approach differs from Gendlin's emphasis on focusing and from the process-experiential approach, however, in that the process work it entails is less technical (and, by the same token, is closer in this respect to Toukmanian's approach). In this sense it has kinship with the non-technical work of the literalists. At the same time, as indicated, it lays the groundwork for the technical work of the experiential and process-experiential therapists, should someone trained in it wish to incorporate those techniques.

Experience and its leading edge

Rogers (1959) has defined experience as everything that is in awareness and potentially available for awareness. More fitting is the concept of experiencing as a felt-meaning, or felt-sense, which was a notion that Rogers gradually came to use under Gendlin's influence, and one that is very much in keeping with Rogers's practice of therapy. Incongruence then becomes more clearly a matter of inaccurate symbolization of experience.

The felt-sense is the leading edge (Gendlin, 1981) of the client's experience. When the client and therapist are fully and actively engaged in following the client's leading edge, the client's experience is one of directional movement in the pursuit of meaning and the resolution of troubling feelings. Catching the edge of the client's experience and following that lead is foremost in the current approach. As with the practice of person-centred counsellors who emphasize therapist congruence and its expression – counsellors like Mearns, Thorne and Lietaer – the approach encourages counsellors to communicate their inner experience if it seems appropriate. This deliberate, discretionary expression of the

internal experience is more interpersonal and existential than is characteristic of the literal person-centred approach as typically practised. This expression of congruence is also similar to the empathic engagement practised by the process-experiential group, and it is very much like Gendlin's use of his experience of himself while in relation with the client. Such approaches differ from the present one, however, because of its emphasis on metacommunication, or communication about communication (cf. Kiesler, 1996).

Holism

For reasons that are mysterious, we seem to 'be' an 'I' and a 'me', and there seems to be an intrinsic and dynamic relationship between them. There are all sorts of difficulties associated with this notion from a philosophical point of view. The concepts of the individual and of personal identity are considered by some to be Western and to have a surprisingly short history, arising at the onset of the Enlightenment (Taylor, 1989). In this vein, the distinction between the 'I' and the 'me', which was made by James ([1890] 1950) and Mead (1934), originated with Kant's contrast between the transcendental and empirical egos. In any case, the 'I' is the 'executive' that directs attention and forms intentions. Its nature is beyond our grasp because there is no 'ultra-I' to observe it. On the other hand, the 'me' is our sense of ourselves when our 'I' directs our attention to our thoughts and feelings about ourselves – it is our sense of identity.

The concepts of the 'I' and 'me' have come under attack by behaviourists, language philosophers, connectionists and postmodernists alike. It is argued that the concepts are thoroughly modern legacies of Cartesian dualism, Romanticism and Rousseau's humanism, and are mere metaphors. This may be so but I think that it is incontestable that the concepts capture our (admittedly Westernized) *experience* of ourselves. Rogers was led to the same conclusion during the development of his thought. He began by discounting the concept of self (like Dewey) but was led back to it when encountering repeated references to it by his clients (Rogers, 1959).

Related to our sense of the 'I' and 'me', we cherish the sense, whether illusory or not, that we are free to make choices regarding ourselves, our lives. We resist determinisms in the form of reductions of all sorts, believing that we are more than drives, neural nets, schemas, templates or programmes.