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Preface to the Fourth Edition

Exactly twenty-five years ago we began writing the first edition of *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* under the series editorship of Windy Dryden. It was a good combination of writers and editor. Brian already had considerable experience as a writer and Dave had none, while Windy had the ingenuity and firmness to harness both. Since then there have been two further editions before this one, around a dozen foreign language translations and worldwide sales of about one hundred and fifty thousand copies. It is a key text not only on person-centred counselling courses but on those based upon other therapeutic approaches where it is seen as the best representative of its tradition.

As well as the Sage '*In Action*' series, over the last twenty years we have implicitly produced a Sage '*person-centred*' series with books such as *Developing Person-Centred Counselling* (Mearns, 2003), *Person-Centred Counselling Training* (Mearns, 1997), *Person-Centred Therapy Today* (Mearns and Thorne, 2000) and *Working at Relational Depth in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (Mearns and Cooper, 2005). While the present book is a general one designed for first level training, the others are second level in that they develop many of the issues raised here. In a sense *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* is the hub of the wheel with spokes pointing to the other books in the series. Throughout this edition there are numerous references to page numbers in the other books in the series where points are further developed.

In all the editions of *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* there have been changes of content both to refresh the material and also to include the most recent developments in practice and theory, but it is two core features which have remained constant that define its success. First, reviews, both formal and informal, have pointed to the ways it brings the reader close to the *humanity* of the counselling endeavour. The clients and the counsellors represented in its pages encounter each other in deeply personal ways that can provoke powerful feelings in the reader as well as themselves. Second, the book describes a principled way of working. At a time when some might want to manualise counselling in order to require conformity to prescribed ways of behaving, *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* bases its approach upon *principles*. If the practitioner is firmly grounded in person-centred principles then her practice may flow from those in ways that can vary fluidly from one counselling relationship to another. Thus she can mesh meaningfully, congruently and uniquely with every client in a fashion that is never an option when the activity is grounded in specified behaviours rather than principles. This second core feature of the book also explains why it is a popular primary text on courses that help participants to develop counselling skills for work other than counselling. In

these other contexts the skills work more effectively if they are grounded in principles rather than behaviourally defined techniques. If a manager seeks to empathise with a difficult-to-understand employee the effort is more likely to be well received if it is seen as coming from a genuine interest in the employee. Otherwise, the same behaviour of the manager is likely to be judged as manipulative and rightly so.

As well as introducing new content to refresh and update the book, in this edition we have added a considerable attention to research. The original '*Counselling in Action*' series purposely sought to concentrate upon practice and the theory that grounded it more than on empirical research. The aim of the series was to create texts that would actively and practically support counselling training in the various mainstream approaches, rather than merely provide a commentary upon them. In the present edition we have invited our friend and colleague for nearly forty years, Professor John McLeod, to add a discussion of research as an entirely new tenth chapter. Positioning it thus we have avoided disturbing the fundamental 'action-oriented' process of the book and the series.

Thus 'Mearns and Thorne' becomes 'Mearns and Thorne with McLeod' in this fourth edition. When, throughout the book, reference is made to 'we the authors', that means the two principal authors, Mearns and Thorne. This takes us to our last point in this Preface to the fourth edition. This edition will mark the end of the involvement of Brian Thorne and Dave Mearns as lead authors of *Person-Centred Counselling in Action*. The book may continue into further iterations but it will no longer be 'Mearns and Thorne'. We shall have finally withdrawn from the counselling scene. For information on our new personal challenges, see the Appendix to this edition.

We hope that readers will enjoy the experience of being with this book as much as we have.

Dave Mearns, Emeritus Professor, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow
Brian Thorne, Emeritus Professor, University of East Anglia, Norwich

Acknowledgements

In this final edition of *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* that will involve us as principal authors we want to acknowledge the people who have read it in all its editions and foreign language translations to date. Over twenty-five years we have enjoyed the feedback from budding counsellors and experienced practitioners alike. We hope that further readers will be similarly encouraged and stimulated.

Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne

Introduction

- Dave: So what was different this time?
Sally and her counsellor had completed their counselling contract a year previously. At the suggestion of the counsellor they were having this follow-up meeting to talk about the client's experience of the process (Chapter 9 and Mearns and Dryden, 1989). The counsellor (Dave Mearns) occasionally invited these review sessions principally for his own learning but he had previously found that former clients got as much out of them as he did. There was payment for the meeting, but it was the client who was paid for her time. Like the earlier counselling sessions, the meeting was audio-taped. Sally had just mentioned that this had been her third counselling experience and that it had been quite different from the others.
- Sally: The way I understand it is that I always had a public self and a private self. My private self would watch my public self 'perform' but it always stayed hidden. Even in counselling it stayed hidden – I would watch my public self being 'genuine' with my counsellor.
- Dave: Like, she really was being genuine, but your private self wasn't in there.
- Sally: Yes, she just sat back and didn't get involved...but it would look like I was fully involved. As long as my private self stayed out, I couldn't get hurt.
- Dave: And this time?
- Sally: This time I really did get involved.
- Dave: Why?
- Sally: I think it was because I believed you.
- [pause]
- Dave: Can you say more?
- Sally: In the first couple of sessions I was doing my usual thing – seeming to be involved but actually holding back. Everything I would say or do had first to go through the 'censor' to make sure there were no vulnerable edges exposed. You poor thing – I bet you never guessed.
- Dave: You are right – I had no idea. You seemed to me to be perfectly genuine.
- Sally: Yes, I'm good at looking genuine. I'm a good actress.
- Dave: So what made a difference after the second session? You said that you 'believed' me.
- Sally: I looked at you at one point early in the third session and realised that you would be able to take anything I had to give – you wouldn't need to 'judge' me. You wouldn't need to call me 'crazy' and refer me to the hospital like happened before to me. You wouldn't be frightened of me – no matter what I gave you of me. So I just opened my mouth and gave you whatever was behind it.

- Dave:* I remember commenting on the fact that you often gave two or more answers to the same question.
- Sally:* Yes, we had some fun with that. Sometimes I would say something and you would look at me and I would realise that it was crap and give you the real answer. Of course, it got easier and easier because every time I gave you uncensored stuff the sky did not fall down and that made it easier for the next time. That's how we got to the-things-I-had-never-spoken-about-before.
- Dave:* Was it something I did in that third session that made the difference or was it something that you did?
- Sally:* That's a really good question. At the time I put it down to you – how completely you were able to be with me. But as time has gone on I have given myself more credit for taking the risk. You see I had actually been getting a bit stronger myself – though I didn't realise it at the time. So it was a combination of you being strong and me being stronger.
- Dave:* That's well put – I might use it in a book some day!

It has taken many years, but Sally has now made it into a book. Here she provides us with an illustration of how the process of change is understood in the person-centred approach. It is not a matter of the therapist being expert in the client's condition, but of the client being able to express themselves fully in the relationship with the therapist. Sally found herself giving expression to dimensions of herself that were previously hidden and openly exploring experiences hitherto kept private. Such open explorations allow her to test the assumptions she had previously made about herself and others. This process gives her a firmer evidential base upon which to face her social world, further developing her *self agency* (Bohart and Tallman, 1999) and allowing her to express the whole person that she is. This kind of change continues not only during the counselling process but also after counselling has ended because the client has not just found a 'quick fix' but an enduring developmental change. For this reason person-centred counselling favours outcome research that looks not at immediate 'symptom reduction' but at long-term developmental change.

So, the person-centred approach places the client at the centre. The central truth for Carl Rogers, the originator of the approach, was that the client knows best. It is the client who knows what hurts and where the pain lies and it is the client who, in the final analysis, will discover the way forward. The task of the counsellor is to be the kind of companion who can relate in such a way that the client can access their own wisdom and recover self-direction. The various names under which the approach has been identified over the years bear witness to the primary principles. Rogers began by calling his way of working *non-directive* counselling, thereby emphasising the importance of the counsellor as a non-coercive companion rather than a guide or an expert on another's life. Because critics interpreted non-directivity as a kind of mechanical passivity on the counsellor's part, Rogers subsequently described his approach as *client-centred* and in this way placed greater emphasis on the centrality of the client's phenomenological world and on the need for the counsellor to stay accurately attuned to the client's experience and perception of reality. Many practitioners throughout the world continue to call themselves 'client-centred'.

They argue that when Rogers himself first used the later expression *person-centred* he was concerned with an attitudinal approach to activities outside the counselling room, such as group work, educational processes and cross-cultural understanding. They maintain that the expression 'person-centred approach' should continue to be reserved for these non-counselling contexts. While respecting this point of view we have opted for the expression *person-centred counselling* and employ it throughout this book. There are at least three reasons for preferring this term. In the first place, it is not true that Rogers himself always confined the expression 'person-centred approach' to non-counselling activities. There are clear instances where he used the terms client-centred and person-centred interchangeably and he was altogether happy to be associated with training courses which aimed to train 'person-centred' counsellors and psychotherapists. More importantly, however, a second reason lies in our belief that the description 'person-centred' more accurately conveys the dual emphasis on the client's phenomenological world and on the state of being of the counsellor. Our therapeutic activity is essentially the development of a relationship between two persons; the inner worlds of both client and counsellor are of equal importance in the forging of a relationship that will best serve the needs and interests of the client. The concept of relational depth has great significance in the pursuit of therapeutic efficacy and the counsellor's ability to meet the client at depth is dependent on her own willingness to enter fearlessly into the encounter. Person-centred counselling is essentially a relationship between two persons, both of whom are committed to moving towards a greater fullness of being.

The third reason for opting for the term 'person-centred counselling' concerns the development of Rogers' work since his death in 1987. When we were working on the first edition of this book (Mearns and Thorne, 1988) Rogers was still alive and there were only limited opportunities in the UK for training in any depth in this approach. The result was a situation, which we lamented with considerable feeling, whereby many practitioners with inadequate or even minimal understanding were prepared to label themselves 'person-centred', bringing the approach into disrepute by their superficial, muddled or misguided anarchy practice, which had no solid foundation in genuine person-centred theory. In a second edition some eleven years later (Mearns and Thorne, 1999) we reported that, although elements of the 1980s situation remained which still fuelled our exasperation, there were now a number of specialised training courses in place with an established track record. In brief, it was increasingly possible to identify a growing cohort of practitioners who had received an in-depth training in the approach. At the same time there had been a burgeoning of literature on the approach, the establishment of professional associations including the *World Association for Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling* and a number of academic, including professorial, appointments in British universities. It was now much more difficult to sport the label 'person-centred' spuriously or to claim ignorance of the 'real' thing in the face of the growing development of the approach through training institutes and scholarly activity.

In more recent years the situation both here and in other countries has taken another turn which, while rendering the field more complex, has, if anything, strengthened the case for retaining the term 'person-centred'. As is perhaps inevitable after the death

of a leading figure, those who have been most influenced by his or her work began to follow their own paths, developing aspects of the original work while abandoning others. In Rogers' case this was an almost predictable outcome for he had himself always insisted on the provisionality of theory and had remained open to fresh experience and new research findings throughout his life. The title of the World Association is again revealing. Incorporation of the word 'experiential' indicates that the Association invites under its umbrella those practitioners who have been profoundly influenced by the work of Eugene Gendlin and his focusing-oriented psychotherapy, as well as those who emphasise the client's process of experiencing and see the counsellor as a skilled facilitator of process, while preserving a stance of non-directivity as far as content is concerned. Such offshoots from the main branch of what might be termed classical client-centred counselling are evidence, we would suggest, of a healthy state of affairs. They demonstrate an approach which is not moribund and where practitioners are open to new practical and theoretical developments in the light of experience. At the same time an attempt has been made by such writers as Lietaer (2002), Schmid (2003) and Sanders (2000) to elucidate the irreducible principles or criteria of person-centred work so that it is possible to identify those developments that remain true to the core concepts against those that have deviated so far from the approach's origins as to be no longer what Margaret Warner (2000a) has described as 'tribes' of the person-centred nation. For us, person-centred counselling serves as an appropriate umbrella term for those 'tribes' that subscribe to the primary or irreducible principles of the approach; it is our hope that what follows will be valuable to practitioners or practitioners in training whether they conceptualise themselves as 'classical' client-centred counsellors or prefer to identify with one or other of the more recently evolved person-centred tribes. Person-centred counselling, as we view it, is neither set in theoretical tablets of stone nor confined to one narrow and exclusive form in practice.

While the book is primarily focused on person-centred counselling practice, in this fourth edition we have taken the deliberate step of adding an emphasis on research awareness. The book was designed as part of the SAGE *'In Action'* series where the aim of the various authors was to keep the reader's attention on what actually happened in counselling within their approach. While that was a sensible and extremely successful strategy, we might still have achieved it while simultaneously encouraging our readers to be research aware. It is interesting to reflect back to the thinking that prevailed about research in the 1980s and 1990s – a formative time in the development of the profession of counselling in the UK. At different times in that period both Brian Thorne and Dave Mearns were involved in Chairing the '*Courses Recognition Group*' of the British Association for Counselling (BAC), later renamed the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). In determining the core dimensions of what constituted adequate professional training, we were concerned that most university courses at that time emphasised academic learning about counselling theories and research, with comparatively little attention to skills and practice. They were courses *about* counselling rather than a training in counselling. To counter that tendency we defined the core areas of a 'Recognised' training to omit research. In the short term this served to achieve the emphasis on practice and skills that was wanted, but in the longer term we may

have done the profession a considerable disservice. In recent years counsellors, as well as those who prefer the label 'psychotherapists', have found themselves challenged for resourcing by others who are much more familiar with research, not to mention the politics of research (see www.davemearns.com/page10.html). It is ironic that we made this misjudgement even within the person-centred approach which was characterised by Rogers in his early years being the pioneer of empirical investigation within the profession. Fortunately, the wider person-centred approach in recent times has been blessed with numerous skilled researchers. Also the international journal, *Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies*, has provided a forum for the discussion of theory and research since 2002. In this fourth edition we will correct the imbalance of the earlier editions by including a larger research dimension, including a dedicated chapter. In doing this our aim is not to equip the reader with the skills and knowledge to undertake major research projects but rather to help them to become interested in the advantages of becoming research aware.

As with past editions we hope that *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* is written in such a way that it will prove useful to practitioners and trainees in Europe, America and other parts of the world. There are two issues, however, which are perhaps peculiar to Britain and need elucidation for readers in other countries. First, there are several references to the work that a counsellor does with her *supervisor*. This emphasis on supervision reflects the British setting where continued accreditation as a counsellor with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy requires life-long supervision, a condition which, as far as we know, is not obligatory in most other parts of the world. Second, it should be understood that as far as the person-centred approach is concerned the activities of counselling and psychotherapy are considered indistinguishable because the *processes* involved between practitioner and client remain the same irrespective of the name given to the activity. For American readers the situation is rendered even more confusing because in Britain the word counselling tends to be used in contexts which in America might well warrant the term *psychotherapy*. In this book we have stayed consistent with the spirit of the series by referring to what we do as 'counselling' and by confining ourselves to relatively short-term therapeutic relationships. None of the cases we present progressed beyond a year.

In Britain we now have, to our minds, the regrettable situation where female counsellors and trainees considerably outnumber male practitioners. Partly for this reason, but mainly to simplify the text, we refer to counsellors as female and clients as male, except where the context clearly demands otherwise. This convention on our part should in no way detract from our absolute belief in the uniqueness of persons and no literary artifice which inadvertently appears to demean individuals because of their gender or for any other reason is intended.

The book, as in its previous editions, attempts to invite the reader into the living experience of person-centred counselling. It seeks to engage practitioners and would-be practitioners at an emotional as well as an intellectual level. Above all, it tries to convey the excitement – sometimes allied to anxiety and risk – of relating to another human being in depth. We hope, too, that the book will be read by would-be clients and more particularly by those who may have had the unfortunate experience of encountering

helping professionals who, either by temperament or through training, have been reluctant to meet them as persons. The opening three chapters present a contemporary overview of the major theoretical constructs of the approach and of the demands placed upon the counsellor in terms of her own awareness and disciplined attitude to the self. Chapter 2, on the new psychology theory underpinning person-centred working, was introduced for the first time in the third edition (Mearns and Thorne, 2007). This theory is particularly important for a modern understanding of the approach and for future theory building and research. However, we found that the clarity of its presentation in the third edition could be improved and we have done that here. Thereafter, the reader is plunged into the moment-to-moment challenges of the person-centred counsellor at work with all the dilemmas these inevitably present. Attitudes and skills are closely explored, especially where these foster in the counsellor the ability and the temerity to enter into relational depth with persons who may previously have been gravely wounded within the context of relationships that proved treacherous or abusive. A substantial part of the book is devoted to the experience of one particular therapeutic relationship and this is greatly enlivened by the client's willingness to be fully participant in the process of reflecting on her therapeutic journey. Thereafter John McLeod, certainly one of the foremost people in the field, offers a chapter on research that is intended to inform the reader about its history in the approach and the research issues and processes that are currently prevalent. The book concludes with the co-authors having an enjoyable time responding to questions often thrown at them by trainees, new practitioners, seasoned practitioners and curious or hostile counsellors from other orientations. We welcome the opportunity to face these queries, which can so often occur at the end of an exhausting lecture or workshop when we are longing for a gin and tonic.

Our hope is that readers will be encouraged to reflect on their own therapeutic journeys – whether as counsellor or client – and that they may catch something of the excitement that we invariably experience as we attempt to put into words the beauty and mystery of the person-to-person encounter that we call counselling. We know, of course, that the attempt must fail because only poetry at its most richly expressive can truly capture such beauty and penetrate the heart of the mystery.