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# Client-centered Approach in Social Work – the Healing Power of Empathy

## Uz klientu centrēta pieeja sociālajā darbā – empātijas dziedinošais spēks

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This article looks into the client-centered approach in social work, and analyzes the term “empathy” in social work practice. Instead of summarizing already well-addressed theoretical issues with that approach, the article reveals the interconnection of this theme with basic and essential social work axioms and values. The purpose of the article is to expose the impact of the client-centered approach to social work, and through analyzing the term “empathy,” reveal its healing power.

**Key words:** Client-centered approach, empathy, social work.

### Introduction

Social work is a profession which focuses primarily on people and their environment. Social workers help people to meet life demands and to live with them in various circumstances. They promote social and individual well-being while embracing a set of core values: *service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, competence* (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). However, the essence of social work is change, at the individual level and at the community level (Zaleski *et al.*, 2016). Social work is not just about controlling the risks of daily life; it is about contributing to social changes and the contexts in which those occur (NASW, 2017). Social workers enable people to make change in their lives and encourage to live as well as possible. The question then arises: what exactly is the precursor of change in social work practice?

According to client-centered (or person-centered) therapy, developed in the 20th century by humanist psychologist Carl Rogers, human relationships are the precursor to change (Murphy & Joseph, 2018). The client-centered approach in social work is not only one of the theories of social work practice, it is the core theory of ethics (Campbell, 2018), as principles and tenets introduced by Carl Rogers are almost synonymous with the standards, values, and principles of social work professionals. The main values of social work are that the individuality and differences of people should be respected, and that through trust

relationships, the capacity to address client's own needs should be promoted (NASW, 2017). In Rogerian language, this value of unconditional acceptance, with a genuine and respectful attitude towards the person and expressed in an empowering relationship, may be named in one word: empathy. This is a core condition in empowering interactions. Empathy means respect for the unique situation the client is in, and the strengths and weaknesses the person has. According to the *Dictionary of Social Work & Social Care* (2018), empathy is "the ability to imagine oneself in the position of another person and to be able to understand how the other person is feeling." Empathy is an emotion that is found in a social context. Therefore, empathy may be stated to be inseparable from the social work field, where the human relationship and the social context are of the most importance.

For this reason, this article is aimed at a revision of the client-centered approach, with the specific targets of showing the interconnection of Rogerian theory and social work's main axioms, and of revealing the healing power of empathy. The latter is a central axis of the client-centered approach and the main underlying factor in social interaction.

## **A Client-centered approach**

Client-centered therapy, developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by humanist psychologist Carl Rogers, is one of the most influential theories of counseling, with an emphasis on the importance of relationships and the self-actualization of the client (Miller & Moyers, 2017). Rogers believed in the actualizing tendency – the human potential to grow and develop autonomy in life (Proctor *et al.*, 2016). This tendency is activated through nondirective, supportive relationships with the following core elements: unconditional positive regard, congruence, and empathy (Washburn & Grossman, 2017). Moreover, Rogers was one of the first theorists to acknowledge the importance of environmental and social context as conditions that may influence personal growth and development. He stated that internal motivation to change is inseparable from environmental and social conditions, and that personal development, being a universal human tendency, is dependent on circumstances (Murphy & Joseph, 2018). His client-centered approach, which emphasizes the relationship as the basis for human development and places importance on environmental and social circumstances as predictors of human behavior, has set a foundation for social work ideas.

Starting from these points about the importance of context, it is almost impossible not to notice the Rogerian connection to main social work axioms, beliefs and values. A person's context influences their behavior; therefore, appropriate social and environmental management helps the client to improve their life (Gentle-Genitty *et al.*, 2014). Even though there are some basic knowledge systems in which social work operates, the client-centered approach is now acknowledged to be the core theory in social work (Campbell, 2018), as principles and tenets introduced by Rogers are almost synonymous with the standards, values and principles of social work professional ethics. Therefore, instead of summarizing the theoretical approach, which is already well analyzed in the literature, we prepared a connection scheme that addresses all important aspects of Rogerian theory and shows their links to the social work field (*see* Table 1).

Table 1

**Rogerian theory and links to the social work field**

<b>Rogerian ideas</b>	<b>Social work axioms and values</b>
<i>Client is an active participant</i> – The client is responsible for improving his or her life, and the therapist has to alter the client's self-directed behavior.	<i>Empowerment</i> – The belief in the capacity of the individual to achieve his/her personal goals and maximize his/her quality of life.
<i>Importance of subjective experience</i> – The client is the expert in his situation.	<i>Dignity and worth of the person</i> – Social workers seek to enhance clients' capacity and opportunity to change, address their own needs, and increase self-determination to achieve personal goals.
<i>Actualizing tendency</i> – An inherent tendency all human beings have to grow and reach their individual full potential.	<i>Strength perspective</i> – Centers on clients' abilities, talents, and resources, and acknowledges individual capacity to learn and change.
<i>Importance of relationships</i> – Human relationships are necessary for development.	<i>Human relationships</i> – The heart of social work, through which social support, aid, and empowerment proceed.
<i>Context as circumstances for development</i> – personal development is dependent on social and environmental circumstances.	<i>Person-in-environment perspective</i> – An understanding of behavior in light of the individual environmental context in which the person lives.
<i>Congruence</i> – The therapist's genuineness with the client.	<i>Integrity</i> – Professional exhibition of trustworthiness, honesty, and responsibility in social work practice.

[Source: Compiled by author according to literature.]

The schematic representation of Rogerian ideas and axioms or values in social work field shows how closely those two practices are connected. With their respect for client individuality and the importance of context in which a person lives, or a belief in the client's ability to change their life and grow, a practitioner is a source of empowering relationships. Their authentic contact with the client helps to start the latter's change journey. Of all the valuable ideas the client-centered approach suggests for an effective therapeutic relationship, the most influential is empathy.

### **Empathy is social work**

Empathy is probably the most widely analyzed, researched and applied term from the client-centered model used in the social work context, and there are some fundamental reasons for that. Empathy is an essential part of interpersonal relationships, plays the main role in helping activity and prosocial behavior, and is the criterion for practitioners' and clients' emotional well being.

Empathy is a phenomenon covering social and emotional issues and is based on relationships (Eriksson & Englander, 2017). Empathy is the background of functioning human relationships because it allows for the identification of the need for

the support of another person (Greeno, Ting, Pecukonis, Hodorowicz & Wade, 2017). Carl Rogers acknowledged that the emotional capability to understand another person's world "as if it was mine" is needed (Farber, Suzuki & Lynch, 2018). That is, empathy allows us to understand and feel another person's emotional state and see his or her perspective, but this should be done without missing the boundaries of two worlds. From a neuroscience perspective, a person is able to feel the emotions (socio-affective process) and understand the perspective of another (socio-cognitive process or "cognitive empathy") because of mirror neurons (Farber *et al.*, 2018). The socio-affective process is based on neural network activations that resemble activations observed when the same emotion is experienced first-hand (Heyes, 2018). To put it in simple words, we feel others' pain and joy as if it was ours. There is great power in this simple biological mirroring mechanism that the human brain does, which implies that all emotions are contagious. Therefore, a positive emotional environment background fosters emotional well-being in the occupants of this environment. Isn't this the healing power of empathy, which can go beyond the individual level and reach society?

As mentioned above, empathy is a core element in helping relationships and is a central part of social work because no social work could exist if the practitioner did not understand the client's situation and needs. Even more globally, no interpersonal relationship would exist if people could not connect to each other. As Riess (2017) states, connection is a cardinal feature of empathy. It is an evolutionary endowment, one on which the survival of humanity depends, because empathy promotes social cooperation and mutual aid, a process which ensures the survival of the species (Riess, 2017). Rifkin (2009) goes so far as to state that empathy is the essence of human happiness, because: "*compassion and comfort between people creates goodwill, establishes the bonds of sociality, and gives joy to people's lives*". Actually, positive empathy (empathizing with positive feelings) is undeservedly forgotten, and some researchers are only now trying to conceptualize this phenomenon (e.g. Telle & Pfister, 2014) in the social work field, even though it has a long tradition and may be briefly described as finding joy in others' success (Morelli *et al.*, 2015).

Further, as a primary term in Rogers' theory, empathy has undergone a long literary and practical analysis (*see* Coll *et al.*, 2017; Dupper, 2017; Eriksson & Englander, 2017) and is now widely recognized as the essential part of *empowerment* (Raitikainen *et al.*, 2014). The essence of social work practice has always been an empowering relationship, that enables and maintains positive change by the client (Megele, 2015). This empowerment can be done professionally. Raitikainen *et al.* (2017) use the term "qualified empathy" as key element in empowerment-based professions. The word "qualified" implies that empathy is not inherited; it can be taught, and it improves with learning (Greeno *et al.*, 2017; Greeno *et al.*, 2018).

Empathic relation, as a foundation for an empowering relationship, is the precursor of change (Murphy *et al.*, 2018). Studies have already proven that empathy is a predictor of therapy outcomes (Benjamin, 2018). Empathy in social work practice increases client satisfaction (Davis *et al.*, 2015) and is associated with reduced client aggression and anxiety (Gerdes *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, empathy is a resource and a tool for empowerment. Both of them are prerequisites in the social work field; without them, a helping relationship could not occur.

An empathetic practitioner is capable of keeping in touch with the client's emotional world and understanding their perspective (Washburn & Grossman, 2017). Adaptable empathy skills allow the practitioner to adjust their emotional and cognitive

reactions in the process of interaction with the client (Ratka, 2018). As a consequence, the practitioner's understanding with active listening and reflection, becomes a source for client's empowerment process. Without self-awareness and emotional resilience, a social worker may lose the crucial "as if" quality, may fall too deeply into the client's world, or become too empathic and mix the professional and personal, which might result in emotional (Wacek & Hueller, 2017). Studies show that empathy is a significant negative predictor for occupational burnout (Yuguero *et al.*, 2017), because the level of empathy the social worker has may influence their management of stressors occurring at work. Empathy is hard work and requires cognitive effort (Cameron, Hutcherson, Ferguson *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, empathy skills training is needed, as it is shown to increase job satisfaction and compassion satisfaction (Wagaman *et al.*, 2015). Empathy also increases self-esteem and professional performance. Therefore, the opportunity to have self-reflection practice during social work studies and later work may increase professional effectiveness (Lee *et al.*, 2019). Empathy skills not only increase the confidence of social work students, they also bolster their social justice activity (Gair, 2017) and the ability and capability to express self-criticism, which protects them from negative occupational hazards (Iacono, 2017). Empathy also helps social workers to maintain boundaries (self-other perspective) and not engage in situations too deeply (Wagaman *et al.*, 2015).

Social work is an emotionally challenging profession; therefore, practitioners' emotional well-being should be a top priority. Therefore, one could think about whether a too-empathetic practitioner constantly crossing emotional boundaries and expressing oversensitivity, or, on the other hand, an apathetic and distant social worker, could become a source of empowerment for the client.

## Conclusion

The client-centered approach, as a theory emphasizing the personal strength to grow and learn to deal with problems effectively within the framework of each individual situation, has made a huge impact on social work's main axioms and values. Interconnections between Rogerian theory and social work are undoubtable. Therefore, analyzing this theoretical knowledge system may help in dealing with contemporary issues in social work practice, as theory is a source of potential causes of problems as well as solutions for them. The term "empathy," being a central axis in Rogerian theory, is also widely analyzed and applied in social work. Therefore, after literature analysis, it could be said that the healing power of empathy is spread in three main directions: the personal, the relational, and the global.

**Relationship dimension.** Empathy defines the quality of a relationship. In social work, the relationship with the client is the most important part of practice, because no social work could occur without connecting to the client. In fact, the quality of the relationship is the most important factor in the success of services provided by a care professional. Positive interaction allows the practitioner to understand the needs of the client and address them in the most appropriate way in every individual situation. An empathetic practitioner creates a safe and trusting environment where the client can feel heard and understood, allowing them to express themselves in the most natural way. As Rogers (1975) explained, the therapist's ability to express empathy enables clients to experience the possible meaning of what they are saying and feeling more clearly.

By respecting the client's subjectivity and expertise in their own individual situation, the social worker can efficiently find the roots of the problems and the solutions needed. Studies have already shown that an empathetic therapist is associated with bigger client progress and higher eventual improvement (Norcross & Lambert, 2011).

**Personal dimension.** Empathy is also a healing agent at the personal level. The capabilities of self-awareness, self-reflection and emotional regulation that empathy creates allow social workers to meet demanding and stressful environmental or social challenges occurring at work. Adaptable empathy skills protects them from emotional disturbances and more serious psychoemotional expressions of stress such as professional burnout or secondary trauma stress (Wagaman *et al.*, 2015). The capability of being in the relation but not drowning in it (or not losing boundaries) allows social workers to increase job or compassion satisfaction, which is inseparable from professional effectiveness (Greeno *et al.*, 2018).

**Global dimension.** Empathy fosters understanding of differences and increased tolerance for diversity of people and situations. Empathy means respecting one another, with full intent to be in the relationship and understand the individuality of every person without judgement, prejudice, or stereotypes. It allows practitioners to work according to the person-in-environment approach of social work in respect to social justice, which is one of the core values of the profession (NASW, 2017). The ability to be sensitive to another's emotions or to perceive another's thoughts comes along with the caring for others well-being motivation (Decety *et al.*, 2016). Empathetic concern leads to caring for others. In other words, it leads to helping behaviors, the foundation upon which humankind stands.

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## Uz klientu centrēta pieeja sociālajā darbā – empātijas dziedinošais spēks

### *Kopsavilkums*

Raksts aplūko uz klientu centrētu pieeju sociālajā darbā, un analizē empātijas jēdzienu sociālajā praksē. Tā vietā, lai apkopotu šīs pieejas jau vispārzināmos teorētiskos jautājumus, raksts atklāj šī tēmas savstarpējo saistību ar sociālā darba pamata aksiomām un vērtībām. Raksta mērķis ir parādīt uz klientu centrētās pieejas iespaidu sociālajā darbā, un ar empātijas jēdziena analīzes palīdzību atklāt tā dziedinošo spēku.

**Atslēgas vārdi:** uz klientu centrēta pieeja, empātija, sociālais darbs.



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