


Lived experiences of customers in the person-centered approach: A phenomenological study

Experiências vividas de clientes na abordagem centrada na pessoa: Um estudo fenomenológico

Experiencias vividas de clientes en el enfoque centrado en la persona: Un estudio fenomenológico

Expériences vécues par les clients dans l'approche centrée sur la personne : Une étude phénoménologique

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Abstract

Psychotherapy presents itself as a modality of clinical psychological care that represents a space for mental health care in the face of contemporary demands, with interpersonal relationships as a decisive factor for the psychological growth of clients. This phenomenological research aimed to intersubjectively understand the experiences of clients treated in Client-Centered Psychotherapy, developed in the context of the Person-Centered Approach. From individual dialogical meetings held with nine participants, Comprehensive Narratives contained significant elements of their experience, learned by the researcher, and later a Synthesis Narrative contemplating the essential elements of these experiences was written. The structuring elements of the phenomenon that emerged were: 1) The relationship with the psychotherapist provides the client with the awareness that “I exist in this relationship”; 2) Recognition of yourself as an autonomous person who does not need to be directed, as you are the owner of your path and history; 3) Psychotherapy is experienced as a construction in partnership; and 4) Possibilities that open up in the therapist-client relationship resonate beyond psychotherapy sessions. The results enabled a psychological understanding of the phenomenon in focus, and demonstrated that the participants’ experiences are structured based on an experiential path that begins with the “self” and goes towards the other (first the psychotherapist, then other people), highlighting the active role of the client in the therapeutic process and the transformative potential of the intersubjective relationship, providing self-knowledge and psychological growth.

Keywords: client-centered psychotherapy, phenomenology, person-centered approach, phenomenological research, clinical psychology

Resumo

A psicoterapia se apresenta como uma modalidade de atenção psicológica clínica que representa um espaço de cuidado à saúde mental diante das demandas da contemporaneidade, tendo as relações interpessoais como um fator decisivo para o crescimento psicológico dos clientes. Esta pesquisa fenomenológica objetivou compreender intersubjetivamente vivências de clientes atendidos em psicoterapia centrada no cliente, desenvolvida no contexto da abordagem centrada na pessoa. A partir de encontros dialógicos individuais realizados com nove participantes, foram escritas narrativas compreensivas, contendo elementos significativos da experiência deles, apreendidos pelo pesquisador e, posteriormente, uma narrativa síntese contemplando os elementos essenciais dessas vivências como um todo. Os elementos estruturantes do fenômeno que emergiram foram: 1) A relação com o psicoterapeuta proporciona ao cliente a tomada de consciência de que “eu existo nessa relação”; 2) O reconhecimento de si como uma pessoa autônoma que não precisa ser direcionada, pois é dona do seu próprio caminho e da sua história; 3) A psicoterapia é vivida como uma construção em parceria; 4) Possibilidades que se abrem na

relação terapeuta-cliente ressoam para além das sessões de psicoterapia. Os resultados possibilitaram uma compreensão psicológica do fenómeno em foco e demonstraram que as vivências dos participantes se estruturam a partir de um percurso experiencial que se inicia pelo eu e vai em direção ao outro (primeiro o psicoterapeuta, depois as outras pessoas), evidenciando o papel ativo do cliente no processo terapêutico e a potencialidade transformadora da relação intersubjetiva, propiciadora de autoconhecimento e crescimento psicológico.

Palavras-chave: *psicoterapia centrada no cliente, fenomenologia, abordagem centrada na pessoa, pesquisa fenomenológica, psicologia clínica*

Resumen

La psicoterapia se presenta como una modalidad de atención psicológica clínica que representa un espacio de cuidado a la salud mental ante las demandas de la contemporaneidad, teniendo las relaciones interpersonales como un factor decisivo para el crecimiento psicológico de los clientes. Esta investigación fenomenológica objetivó comprender intersubjetivamente vivencias de clientes atendidos en Psicoterapia Centrada en el Cliente, desarrollada en el contexto del Enfoque Centrado en la Persona. A partir de encuentros dialógicos individuales realizados con nueve participantes, fueron escritas Narrativas Comprensibles conteniendo elementos significativos de la experiencia de ellos, aprehendidos por el investigador y, posteriormente, una Narrativa Síntesis contemplando los elementos esenciales de estas vivencias como un todo. Los elementos estructurantes del fenómeno que emergieron fueron: 1) La relación con el psicoterapeuta proporciona al cliente la toma de consciencia de que “yo existo en esta relación”; 2) El reconocimiento de uno mismo como una persona autónoma que no necesite ser direccionada, pues es dueña de su propio camino y de su historia; 3) La psicoterapia es vivida como una construcción en parceria; 4) Posibilidades que se abren en la relación terapeuta-cliente resuenan para allá de las sesiones de psicoterapia. Los resultados possibilitaron una comprensión psicológica del fenómeno en enfoque y demostraron que las vivencias de los participantes se estructuran a partir de un trayecto experiencial que se inicia por el “yo” y va en dirección al otro (primero el psicoterapeuta, después las otras personas), evidenciando la función activa del cliente en el proceso terapéutico y la potencialidad transformadora de la relación intersubjetiva, propiciadora de autoconocimiento y crecimiento psicológico.

Palabras clave: *psicoterapia centrada en el cliente, fenomenología, enfoque centrado en la persona, investigación fenomenológica, psicología clínica*

Résumé

La psychothérapie se présente comme une modalité de soins psychologiques cliniques, offrant un espace de soutien en santé mentale face aux demandes contemporaines. Les relations interpersonnelles y jouent un rôle décisif dans la croissance psychologique des clients. Cette recherche phénoménologique visait à comprendre de manière intersubjective les expériences des clients en psychothérapie centrée sur le client, développée dans le cadre de l'Approche Centrée sur la Personne. À partir de rencontres dialogiques individuelles tenues avec neuf participants, des récits complets ont été rédigés par le chercheur, contenant des éléments significatifs de leur expérience appréhendés. Par la suite, un récit de synthèse a été élaboré, contemplant les éléments essentiels de ces expériences dans leur ensemble. Les éléments structurants du phénomène qui ont émergé sont : 1) la relation avec le psychothérapeute procure au client la conscience que « J'existe dans cette relation » ; 2) la reconnaissance de soi en tant que personne autonome qui n'a pas besoin d'être dirigée, étant propriétaire de son propre chemin et de son histoire ; 3) la psychothérapie est vécue comme une construction en partenariat ; 4) les possibilités qui s'ouvrent dans la relation thérapeute-client résonnent au-delà des séances de psychothérapie. Les résultats ont permis une compréhension psychologique du phénomène en question et ont montré que les expériences des participants sont structurées à partir d'un parcours expérientiel qui commence par le « Je » et se dirige vers l'autre (d'abord le psychothérapeute, puis les autres personnes). Cela met en évidence le rôle actif du client dans le processus thérapeutique et le potentiel de transformation de la relation intersubjective, fournissant la connaissance de soi et la croissance psychologique.

Mots-clés : *psychothérapie centrée sur le client, phénoménologie, approche centrée sur la personne, recherche phénoménologique, psychologie clinique*

The significant evolution of studies on psychotherapy in the 20th century was triggered by the great interest of researchers in scientific evidence that would prove its effectiveness and reveal relevant aspects of the process (Brum et al., 2012; Leonardi & Meyer, 2015; Souza, 2006; Wampold, 2015). Historically, the division between investigations that prioritized therapeutic effectiveness and those that emphasized the relevance of understanding the elements of the psychotherapeutic process involves epistemological and methodological issues that express the old division between explanation and understanding (Souza, 2006). The division between effectiveness research (emphasis on objectivity,

technique, use of manuals, diagnostic categories and assessment instruments) and research on the process (emphasis on understanding aspects of the psychotherapeutic process, therapeutic change and the therapist-client relationship) has been established to this day.

The American psychologist Carl Ransom Rogers, the greatest exponent of humanistic psychology in the 20th century and creator of the person-centered approach (PCT), was the pioneer and main reference in research focusing on the process. His contributions, derived from research developed by him and his team in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s (Rogers, 1951/1992; 1961/1982) were decisive for the development and evolution of psychotherapies in general. The clinical proposal developed by Carl Rogers in the context of humanistic psychology (Cury, 2021) constituted an original approach in the field of psychotherapy and, to a certain extent, revolutionary (Cury, 1993; Telles et al., 2014). The notion of an actualizing tendency, present throughout Rogers' work (1980/1983) as a force inherent to human existence and which drives the person in the process of psychological growth, it was described as "vast internal resources for self-understanding and modification of one's self-concepts, attitudes and autonomous behavior" (Rogers, 1980/1983, p. 38).

In the 1940s, Rogers developed the nondirective counseling method against the psychoanalytic and behavioral models that prevailed at the time, and the term non-directive signified a reaction to approaches based on directive techniques, just as the word patient was replaced by client to avoid the hierarchization of roles in the doctor-patient relationship (Cury, 1993; Moreira, 2010; Shlien, 1976). The clinical and research activities of Rogers (1951/1992) and his team enabled reformulations of the therapeutic relationship, giving rise to a psychotherapy model with its theoretical-philosophical proposal in the 1950s: client-centered therapy. The change from non-directive to client-centered was an update of the therapist's role, who acquired a more active role (Pagès, 1976; Shlien, 1976) and inaugurated an evolution in conceiving the therapeutic relationship (Cury, 1993). Emphasis was placed on the therapist's attitudes, considered decisive for the success of psychotherapy, and which were defined later as empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard and congruence (Rogers, 1961/1982).

Between 1957 and 1965, a period known as the experiential phase, Rogers and his team questioned the scope of client-centered therapy, which led them to attempt to prove the validity of the theory in the care of schizophrenic patients in a complex research study in a psychiatric hospital (Rogers & Stevens, 1967/1976). The emphasis during these sessions with unmotivated patients who had difficulty in contact with reality was placed on communicating human warmth and unconditional acceptance; psychotherapists offered their active presence to these lonely people and, in doing so, rediscovered their feelings of loneliness and hopelessness. Thus, they considered the therapist's feelings and their subjectivity during the process as essential elements for the client's change, so that the emphasis is no longer on the subjective aspects of the client or the therapist separately, but rather on the experience of the two, on the intersubjective relationship and its therapeutic function (Cury, 1993), making the clinical event "an intersubjective phenomenon by definition" (Fadda & Cury, 2021, p. 8).

Since its origin, Rogers' theoretical principles, based on the clinical practice of client-centered therapy, have remained essentially the same, which has enabled its application in different purposes and psychosocial contexts such as education, groups, workshops and communities, giving rise to the person-centered approach - PCT (Cury, 1993; Moreira, 2010; Rogers & Stevens, 1967/1976; Rogers, 1980/1983), a broader term that means "an attitude, a way of approaching human problems, which was already present in Rogers' first formulations on psychotherapy" (Cury, 1993, p. 38). The applications of these principles to other types of relationships such as teacher-student, members of an encounter group and facilitators, psychotherapy with patients with severe mental disorders, etc., changed the way psychotherapists considered the therapist-client relationship and contributed greatly to the theoretical-methodological innovations of the phases of the therapeutic process that sought to describe and understand the therapist-client relationship, the main point of this person-centered approach.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Carl Rogers' theoretical assumptions about psychotherapy and its clinical proposal were developed based on several studies and his experiences with his clients, corroborating his deep confidence in human potential and highlighting the valuable contributions of clients to the advancement of the theory and practice of psychotherapy. At that time, the field of investigation into clients' experiences of the psychotherapeutic process was still little explored and Rogers (1992/1951) considered it fertile ground for the future, emphasizing that knowledge in psychotherapy would advance greatly if it answered: "What does it mean for the client to experience a relationship as therapeutic? How can we facilitate the experience of a relationship as therapeutic?" (Rogers, 1992/1951, p. 79).

Several studies on clients' experiences in psychotherapy have been taken up by contemporary researchers in the field of the person-centered approach and support the central and active role of the client in the process and results of psychotherapy, being creative, capable of creating solutions to their problems and actively contributing to the psychotherapy process (Bohart, 2000; Bohart & Tallman, 1999). More recent research from the ACP perspective in various contexts has investigated the experiences of clients in group psychotherapy (Correia & Moreira, 2016), in an intersubjective perspective in humanistic play therapy (Bezerra & Cury, 2023), on unconditional positive regard in psychotherapy (Suzuki, 2018), in a home psychological care service (Oliveira & Cury, 2020) and on the power dynamics of the therapeutic relationship with adolescent clients served in the ACP framework (Cook & Monk, 2020).

This study contributes to the field of psychotherapy and expands scientific knowledge on humanistic psychology research, which is essential for supporting and updating humanistic clinical practice. Furthermore, it aims to contribute to psychological care practices in improving interpersonal relationships that promote psychological growth through listening that is sensitive to human experience in the face of contemporary demands. Thus, the objective of this research was to phenomenologically understand the experience lived by clients regarding the therapeutic process, from the perspective of the person-centered approach.

Method

This empirical study was developed as a qualitative exploratory research, methodologically inspired by the phenomenology developed by Edmund Husserl and Edith Stein: he was a German mathematician and philosopher with notable academic performance in the late 19th century, and she was his disciple, who in addition to philosophy also studied psychology in depth. Husserl (1913/2006) explained the impossibility of applying the hegemonic paradigm of natural sciences to understand human phenomena. He denounced the objectification of man as the root of the crisis in Western sciences, by eliminating the subject of experience and reducing the psyche (Mahfoud & Massimi, 2008), making scientific psychology unfeasible as a science of the person. Thus, he sought to construct a rigorous method as a way of accessing knowledge about human beings based on a return to things themselves and overcoming such reductionisms. For Husserl (1907/2020, p. 79), phenomenology constitutes “a method and an attitude of thinking” that differs from objective a priori sciences in its method and purpose: “It is science in a different sense and with totally different tasks and different methods”(Husserl, 1907/2020, p. 114).

Husserlian phenomenological method applied to qualitative research in clinical psychology is distinguished by its attempt to intersubjectively understand the meaning of experiences that emerge from subjective experiences. The journey of returning to the things themselves is made through two stages: the epoché or phenomenological reduction, which aims to reach the essence of the phenomenon through the effort to suspend the natural attitude, that is, to put in parentheses the judgments, theories and explanations about the existence of a surrounding world; and the transcendental reduction, which consists of a reflection on who we are and what the subject who seeks meaning is like (Ales- Bello, 2004; Husserl, 1913 / 2006; Mahfoud & Massimi 2008).

These reductions constitute the fundamental path of the researcher when turning to the subjectivity of the participant and, simultaneously, to his/her own subjectivity, implying an understanding of what Husserl and Edith Stein investigated: the universal structure of the subject. Edith Stein starts from Husserl’s work and elaborates a phenomenological analysis of the structure of the person, consisting of three universal dimensions: corporal, psychic and spiritual (Ales-Bello, 2015; Guimarães & Mahfoud, 2013; Husserl, 1913/2006; Stein, 1932-3/2013), which are interconnected with each other with their dynamism (Stein, 1932-3/2013). This structure integrates corporeal acts (instincts in general), psychic acts (emotional reactions) and spiritual acts (reflection, decision-making, evaluation and control) (Ales- Bello, 2015).

In this type of research, the researcher’s intention is not to test hypotheses. They emerge at the end of the research, in a movement opposite to what happens in other types of research in which previously formulated hypotheses are tested (Brisola et al., 2017; Cury, 2021). For Amatuzzi (2009), humanistic-oriented phenomenological research describes subjective experiences to explain their potential meanings in a context, not as an accumulation of quantitative data, but as a comprehensive understanding of the meanings involved and the contexts.

The researcher’s participation in the process of a phenomenological qualitative research is marked by the intentional involvement of his/her subjectivity, actively and constantly throughout the investigation, and the process of discovering the phenomenon is personal (how it affects me, how I perceive it), creative (it opens space for new ideas) and of self-discovery (this is how it affects me) (Brisola & Cury, 2016). The researcher “mingles” with the research process and is affected by it, which requires the researcher to be open to launching themselves into the unknown that inhabits each step of this journey. Investigating the lived experience as a possibility of accessing the meanings we seek is a comprehensive approach in psychological research that occurs from an intersubjective relationship, in which the researcher and participant are co-authors of this process, as opposed to a stance in which the researcher objectively investigates, “from the outside”, the aspects of the participant.

Research participants

This study included nine participants, men and women, aged 21 and over, who had been undergoing therapeutic processes, either in person or online, for at least six months with the same psychotherapists who treated them from the perspective of the person-centered approach (see description of participants in Table 1). Possible participants considered by their psychotherapists to have severe mental disorders and who were fragile, emotionally unstable or who did not adhere to the therapeutic process were excluded. A diversity of participants of different age groups, locations and time in

psychotherapy was sought, although this is not a criterion, but rather aims to contemplate the experiences of people with different profiles and ages. Once a favorable opinion was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Research with Human Beings, the research was disseminated among Brazilian psychotherapists. The selected clients were psychotherapists who practiced clinically as their main activity; had at least five years of clinical experience treating patients using the person-centered approach; and had a specialization or training course in this perspective. The researcher asked psychotherapists to refer clients who might be interested in participating and contacted them via WhatsApp, inviting them and scheduling an individual meeting with those who were interested. The option for online meetings was due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it opened up the possibility of including participants from different regions and from other countries. A dialogic meeting was held with each participant between July and November 2021.

Table 1*Characterization of research participants*

Participants*	Participant data	Therapy time
Bisky	45 years old, married, has children, is a civil servant, teacher and lives in Belo Horizonte/MG.	4 years
Chrollo	26 years old, single, no children, postgraduate, lives in Bragança/Portugal, PhD student/researcher.	1 year and 3 months
Ging	30 years old, single, no children, high school education, lives in Belo Horizonte/MG and is self-employed (store owner).	8 months
Killua	29 years old, single, no children, has higher education, is a lawyer and lives in Belo Horizonte/MG.	4 and a half years
Leorio	21 years old, single, no children, studying higher education, lives in Belo Horizonte/MG and does an internship.	6 months
Neferpitou	34 years old, single, no children, has higher education, lives in Bangu/RJ and works as a nurse.	1 year
Pakunoda	27 years old, single, no children, has a high school education, is self-employed (manicurist) and lives in Paulínia/SP.	1 year
Palm	22 years old, single, no children, student (attending higher education) and lives in Taubaté/SP.	4 years
Shizuku	21 years old, single, no children, has a high school education, is a student and lives in Belo Horizonte/MG.	6 months

(*) The names used for each participant are those of fictitious characters and have no relation to the way of being or appearance of the participants. In the text, the names will be written in italics.

Research path: from dialogic encounters to comprehensive narratives as a methodological strategy

From a person-centered and phenomenological perspective, we sought to broadly understand the participants' lived experience, using intersubjectivity as the access route, which essentially constitutes the encounter between participant and researcher. The dialogic encounter consists of an intersubjective relationship in which the researcher is willing to talk to the participant about a topic that he or she wishes to understand based on the participant's lived experience. The dialogic encounters began as an invitation to the participant to delve deeper into his or her experience based on the following guiding question: "I would like you to tell me about your experience in psychotherapy." However, the duration of each of the encounters was not previously defined, which lasted an average of one hour.

The dialogic meeting is not an interview. Nor is it about collecting testimonies, data, and information from participants, as occurs in other types of qualitative research. Therefore, it is defined as a meeting, to highlight the importance of being with the participants and, instead of just seeking information by collecting objective data about them, creating an intersubjective relationship based on interested listening (Brisola et al., 2017). Priority is given to speaking from rather than speaking about. In this sense, the researcher did not make written records or recordings during the meetings because he did not intend to develop an analysis of the content extracted from the participants' literal testimonies. After all, the use of recorders or other means of recording would distance the researcher from the immediate experience of that meeting (Fadda, 2020).

The purpose of the meetings was to interact with each participant to be able to grasp, in a phenomenological sense, the ideas, feelings, gestures, verbal expressions and emotions from an intersubjective relationship. The researcher welcomed the participants in a welcoming, open and available manner, seeking to create an atmosphere of warmth and acceptance, based on the facilitating attitudes of empathy, positive regard and authenticity proposed by Rogers (1961/1982), so that the

participants could feel comfortable discussing their experiences. The researcher intentionally allowed himself to be affected by the experience lived in the intersubjective encounter with the participant, in order to grasp the participant's experience. He then recorded each encounter in the form of a comprehensive narrative. It can be said that the researcher leaves each encounter "soaked" by the flow of experiences that he had while being with the participant and that now resonates with him.

Comprehensive narrative is a methodological strategy that has been used in qualitative studies in the area of clinical psychology, from a humanistic and phenomenological perspective (Bezerra & Cury, 2023; Brisola et al., 2017; Cury, 2021; Fadda, 2020; Oliveira & Cury, 2020). It finds inspiration in the propositions of Walter Benjamin (1994), who considers this a way of expressing experience in which "the narrator takes from the experience what he tells: his own experience or that reported by others" (Benjamin, 1994, p. 201).

Narratives serve both to contextualize and describe what happens in dialogical encounters and to insert the researcher's experience as an object of analysis and interpretation of the phenomenon studied from an intersubjective perspective (Cury, 2021). Narratives tell lived stories not as something ready and static but rather preserve the dynamics of the experience and are updated when rewritten or narrated, enriching the record of the lived experience. "Half the art of narrative is avoiding explanations" (Benjamin, 1994, p. 203), because we pay attention to understanding the meaning and structure from the subject's perspective as it is experienced by him (Davidson, 2003). Thus, the writing and rewriting of narratives resembles the creative process of an artist who creates his art, letting it take shape, being enriched and polished little by little.

After each dialogic meeting, a first version of the narrative was written, which sought to record the researcher's understanding of the participant's experience based on what was experienced during the meeting. Each narrative was rewritten several times, to enrich the record of the experience and present greater reliability to the researcher's impressions of the meeting; the chronological order of the meetings was preserved when writing the narratives, since this is an analysis process in which the temporal element is important, as if it were storytelling with a succession of moments of intersubjectivity in an event between people. When the nine comprehensive narratives were completed, the researcher carefully read all of them and wrote the first version of the summary narrative. As with the comprehensive narratives, the summary narrative was rewritten until a final version was reached that comprehensively covered the structuring elements of the experience. The summary narrative contemplated the main significant elements that emerged from all intersubjective encounters with the participants, composing a totality of the experience in focus.

Results and Discussions

By intersubjectively understanding the participants' lived experiences through dialogic encounters and recording them in the form of comprehensive narratives and a summary narrative, the researcher carried out the most interpretative stage of the phenomenological analysis, that is, he described the significant elements that constitute the structure of the phenomenon studied. These structuring elements that interpenetrate each other, composing a unity of human experience, will be presented below.

The relationship with the psychotherapist provides the client with the awareness that "I exist in this relationship"

Based on what was learned intersubjectively by the researcher in the dialogic meetings, the recognition of the self in the context of the therapeutic relationship is experienced by the participants as "feeling that I exist and am important". The psychotherapist, through his/her attitudes, shows the client that he/she considers him/her as himself/herself, that he/she does not see him/her as an object or a mere field of reactions. The client is recognized as a person worthy of being valued and his/her experiences are welcomed and treated with deep respect by the psychotherapist. A therapeutic relationship of this nature is affirming for the client, that is, the client feels that the psychotherapist legitimizes his/her experiences, without making value judgments or trying to direct or "fix" them, but rather, welcoming them with openness and valuing them regardless of how they present themselves.

Participants felt that their psychotherapists genuinely cared about them so the psychotherapist's presence and genuine involvement in the relationship were decisive for the participant's personal growth and autonomy. It was evident that the quality of the intersubjective relationship is central to the clinical proposal of PCT (Amatuzzi, 2009; Fadda, 2020; Moreira, 2010; Oliveira & Cury, 2020; Rogers, 1980/1983). In the relationship with their psychotherapists, participants felt seen, understood, and valued, in line with the facilitating attitudes proposed by Rogers (1961/1982). Among the meanings attributed by participants to their relationships with their psychotherapists, Bisky spoke of "a very intimate relationship" in which "his look already says a lot to me"; for Chrollo, it is "a very trusting relationship" in which "we started together and went on"; Neferpitou emphasized the presence of the psychotherapist: "She was always there with me."

How did this type of interpersonal relationship enable participants to confirm their (own) existence in their unique experience? By encouraging the client to become aware of themselves, the psychotherapist confirms them as such. When

the psychotherapist legitimizes them as a person and worthy of value, the client becomes aware of this attitude and can turn their gaze to themselves, recognizing themselves as a subject. The client updates their experience of “*I am*,” “*I exist*,” “*I am not just anyone*”. I exist and I have value. I am important in some way. This is illustrated in the study by Bezerra and Cury (2023), in which the subjectively implied presence of the therapist in the clinical process is fundamental to the child’s involvement and motivation in the intersubjective relationship, enabling them to overcome the invisibility they experience in other relationships and become seen and considered.

Stein (1932-3/ 1999) states that the self manifests itself as a moving point and, where it stops and positions itself, the light of consciousness illuminates that area. This light means that consciousness illuminates a new field that has been opened by the subject and points to his interiority and to the world, in the same movement. This makes it possible to elaborate the experience. It is not a static or changing self, but a self that stops at different levels of experience and that manifests itself through this own movement, which constitutes the human person. An example of this movement of the self can be thought of in the clinical context, specifically in client-centered psychotherapy, when a client, at a given moment, focuses on a problem that he is experiencing and that is important to him; he positions himself on that problem. It is exactly at that point that his consciousness illuminates at that moment and gives it meaning (Stein, 1932-3/1999). It is on that specific problem experienced that the ego dwells at that moment. The psychotherapist, who is also an ego, is affected and asked to participate in this movement that springs up before him. In this way, the psychotherapist accompanies this movement of the client’s ego and legitimizes it, as something that exists, that is happening and that is worthy of value and importance.

According to Fadda (2020), the self in front of a you is structuring for the human person, which makes their personality emerge in the most varied positions taken in life, spontaneous or not. For Guimarães and Mahfoud (2013), the values that the person learns resonate within them, supporting the way they position themselves, so that, when a person positions themselves concerning something, they put something new into the world: “Putting something of oneself into the world in a careful way constitutes, in fact, the person themselves” (Guimarães & Mahfoud, 2013, p. 211). When an aspect of the client’s experience is illuminated by their consciousness and they position themselves regarding this aspect, the client’s personality emerges. By positioning themselves, the client opens a new field where the encounter with the psychotherapist can take place through this path that they have opened, emerging a broader dimension: this is the dimension of the we.

The psychotherapist accepts the client as he or she presents himself or herself, in an attitude that Pagès (1976) called refusal to propose changes, that is, the client seeks therapeutic help to change patterns of behavior that are harming him or her, but the psychotherapist does the opposite: confirms him or her as someone worthy of appreciation and esteem, precisely because he or she is the way he or she is. This stems from the notion that only if the client can accept himself or herself and understand his or her motivations will he or she be able to change his or her perceptions and attitudes. In this sense, the psychotherapist acts as an ally of the client concerning his or her potential to develop self-knowledge, but not about his or her desire to be changed from the outside in. An example of this is demonstrated in the study with autistic adults carried out by Fadda (2020), in which facilitating the participants’ experience of expressing themselves as they are before the researcher proved to be a possibility for them to emerge as people, thus transcending their limits and difficulties as people diagnosed with autism: “This is the starting point that they recognized, and they dared to cross the door of the true encounter: the validation of who they already were” (Fadda, 2020, p. 119).

Participants experienced a sense of belonging when meeting with their psychotherapists, feeling truly heard and valued, and not treated as if they were just another number or that the psychotherapist was simply fulfilling his or her role as a professional. One participant described this experience:

There I am no longer a number, I am not just another patient among many other patients who are treated, who have their problems, and the psychologist is there only to fulfill her work day. I feel the importance of being there, it makes me feel that I am important. (*Pakunoda*, 27 years old)

This experience of belonging in the therapeutic relationship is similar to the concept of community proposed by Edith Stein. According to Ales- Bello (2015), community is characterized by belonging, where the individual’s uniqueness is taken into account and valued, being decisive. At this point, the notion of community differs from the notion of society, as the latter would sacrifice the individual for the sake of the collective, while the community also considers the person in their subjectivity.

The recognition of oneself as an autonomous person who does not need to be directed, as one is the owner of one’s own path and one’s own story

The resumption of autonomy constituted a structuring element of participants’ experiences in client-centered therapy and emerged significantly in the dialogic meetings, showing itself as an experiential discovery that it is possible to make active choices and be the protagonist of one’s existence. This was shared by participant Bisky, when reaffirming her decision-making power. For her, being authentic is choosing how to act in a situation. It is not about simply reacting to

events but taking an active role in the face of them and being able to position oneself in different areas of one's life. It is about realizing oneself as the author of one's story and responsible for giving direction to one's own existence as a protagonist. This illustrates that the elaboration of the dimensions (body, psyche and spirit) allows the subject to make voluntary, autonomous and free choices about how to act (Stein, 1932-3/2013), as expressed by one of the participants:

I am responsible for this entire journey! There is no way to blame my therapist, I was the one who brought all that to the session. (...) Allowing myself to look at all these situations without judging myself. I looked at myself and my path and thought: if I don't improve for myself and others, what will the outcome be? Will I have lived as a protagonist or will I just be a character narrated in this story? (Pakunoda, 27 years old)

The autonomy of clients, which was evidenced in this study, corroborates the results of other studies, most of which were carried out by researchers from the Institutional Research Group on Psychological Care in Institutions: Prevention and Intervention, such as Bezerra and Cury (2023); Oliveira and Cury (2020) and Fadda and Cury (2021). For the last two authors, Rogerian psychotherapy aims to subjectively stimulate the client to update their experiences (in order) to make decisions autonomously, which implies the person's ability to assume their uniqueness and live with people in an authentic way that is congruent with their values. For Amatuzzi (2009), in the assumption of autonomy, the person is not the result of multiple influences, but rather the initiator of new things, having some power over the determinations that affect them; thus, the role of the psychotherapist is to promote the release of this power through an authentic relationship. The study by Telles et al., (2014) with Brazilian humanistic psychotherapists pointed to a connection between the actualizing tendency and autonomy.

Participants experienced taking ownership of their own lives, assuming a central and active role in making constructive changes in themselves and their lives. Recognizing one's capabilities proved to be an element of growth, as one participant described her moments in psychotherapy:

Ah, I feel like I can conquer the world, you know? (...) I end up realizing that it's not the end of the world, you know? That I don't need to despair. That I'm capable of dealing with it, of understanding who I am and my feelings (...). Today I can understand that I'm capable. (Shizuku, 21 years old)

While the potential of the participants was revealed in the meetings with the researcher, significant aspects of the therapist-client relationship and the role of the client-centered psychotherapist were illuminated. The participants showed themselves active in their therapeutic processes, relying on their references and not on external references, such as the psychotherapist. They found space and freedom to conduct themselves without being directed, and the psychotherapist, in turn, trusted this potential, facilitating it to occur freely. This autonomy was expressed in this way by the participant Leorio, when he emphasized that he does not want anyone to tell him what to do, because he does not recognize it as true when it did not come from him. For the participant Killua, it is useless if he has not understood, because he feels that he cannot act as others want. Rogers (1977/1986) emphasized that the therapist must consciously renounce any attempt to control the client or their decisions, facilitating their self-possession, if the locus of decision-making and responsibility for the effects of these decisions lies exclusively with the client. Participants perceived that this involvement with themselves stemmed from an openness to change and the decision to commit to their personal issues, not expecting psychotherapists to solve their problems.

Based on the researcher's experiences during the meetings, the paradigm of specific interventions in psychotherapy (Bohart & Tallman, 1999; Souza, 2006; Leonardi & Meyer, 2015) proved to be contrary to the experiences of the participants, who recognize that they should be the ones guiding them, not a professional expert with their techniques. They were critical of directive psychotherapists, rejecting the hypothesis that an expert knows more about them than they do. On the other hand, the dodo bird's verdict (Brum et al., 2012; Souza, 2006; Trancas et al., 2008; Wampold, 2015) – an allusion to a passage from Alice in Wonderland – was supported by the results of this study, which, based on the participants' experiences, demonstrated that the source of therapeutic change is associated with the client's capabilities that emerge in the context of a meaningful therapeutic relationship, and not with the psychotherapist's techniques or interventions. For Bohart and Tallman (1999) and Bohart (2000), the dodo verdict can be resolved by the fact that clients use different therapeutic approaches and their "tools" to their advantage, demonstrating that the client's capabilities are more decisive in the results of psychotherapy than the psychotherapist's technical expertise. Bohart (2000) proposes a change in the understanding of the effectiveness of psychotherapy: instead of discussing whether "therapy works or not", we could consider "whether the client works or not".

Psychotherapy is experienced as a partnership construction

The therapeutic process is experienced by participants as a gradual process that is built from a partnership with the psychotherapist. There are no barriers or hierarchy; it is a person-to-person partnership characterized by a two-way street

between therapist and client. The therapeutic space is experienced by participants as a team effort, where the client is the protagonist, and the psychotherapist is seen as a welcoming partner who actively contributes to involving and motivating the client in their psychotherapy journey. Participants described this as something built by two people, so that the use of resources or tools is the result of a consensus or based on what the participant perceives that he could use to his advantage, in psychotherapy, and benefit from them. One participant reported that, in sessions, his psychotherapist helps him make connections and organize his thoughts, which he describes as an alphabet: “Together, we organize it like this: here is question A, here is B, here is C and so on” (Killua, 29 years old). O’Hara (1983, p. 99) refers to this collaborative partnership:

Rather than being an *expert*, the therapist becomes a collaborator, a companion in the exploration of the client’s immediate world. The therapist must relinquish power and control over the unfolding situation and be prepared to enter fully into the dance of possibilities that the two of them together will create. Relinquishing control means that we must be prepared to accept that each person’s world is unique.

Psychotherapy was perceived by participants as a learning opportunity offered in the therapist-client relationship, in line with Rogers’ (1951/1992, p. 154) statement that psychotherapy is “a learning process”. Bohart (2000) emphasizes that the conception of psychotherapy as a treatment obscures the essence of psychotherapy as learning and collaboration. After all, saying that the client came to “be treated for an anxiety disorder” is very different from saying that the client came to “learn how to deal with his or her anxiety.” Participants referred to a partnership in the therapeutic process; participant Killua mentioned that readings and films represented good resources in psychotherapy for him, but they were not proposed by his psychotherapist: they were thought of and constructed in partnership. Participant Pakunoda makes an analogy of a construction made with his psychotherapist, in which he feels he is putting together his (own) puzzle. Participant Leorio perceived that his psychotherapist respected his time and that what they did in the sessions was always “dialogued”. In turn, one participant was critical when describing that, in his previous experience in psychotherapy, he was not the one who reached the conclusions: “The psychotherapist just threw all that in my face” (...) “I only accept it if I arrive or if we arrive together at something, at a conclusion, whatever it may be” (Chrollo, 26 years old).

The relevance of experiencing a partnership in psychotherapy has been highlighted in research, such as that of Fernandes (2012), who provides an example of the development of therapeutic collaboration in a successful clinical case in person-centered therapy, and that of Florêncio (2014), whose participants expressed a view of psychotherapy as a co-constructed process, as they did not see themselves as mere “recipients” of interventions from the psychotherapist. Bohart and Tallman (1999) and Bohart (2000) propose a collaborative model in which the client is genuinely a partner in equal position with the psychotherapist and, therefore, instead of applying techniques, it is more important for the psychotherapist to give clients tools, involve them in the therapeutic process, mobilize their active efforts in the face of problems, stimulate focus on possibilities and encourage a learning attitude.

Researchers have investigated mutuality between therapist and client, which refers to a bidirectional, non-hierarchical experience empathy, positive regard and congruence, experienced by each person in the relationship (Murphy & Cramer, 2014). The mutuality between therapist and client configures a psychotherapy centered not only on the client, but on the intersubjective relationship between both (Cury, 1993). Contemporary theory supports a bidirectional structuring of the facilitating conditions proposed by Rogers (1961/1982; 1980/1983), as there is evidence that this mutual experience in the therapist-client relationship is significantly associated with the outcome of psychotherapy (Murphy & Cramer, 2014).

Possibilities that open in the therapist-client relationship resonate beyond psychotherapy sessions

Participants find a welcoming and growth-oriented space in psychotherapy sessions that facilitates their development as individuals. Throughout this process, they soon realize that their progress is not limited to psychotherapy and transcends it: it is the realization that “I can do more.” Participants become aware of their possibilities to expand various aspects that emerged from the relationship with their psychotherapists into their daily lives and relationships. One participant perceived her psychotherapy as a space for growth that goes beyond the sessions, as the benefits have repercussions on her work, personal life, relationships, and her life as a whole:

It has happened several times that I am not in a session, but some intervention from my psychotherapist comes to mind at random moments in my daily life and always brings me reflections. As if I were giving it fuel. I take these interventions from the sessions into my life, so that I can be active, able to choose. (Bisky, 45 years old)

Participants described an experience of freedom in the therapist-client relationship that helps them recognize themselves as active people in their lives and capable of making significant changes that go beyond the sessions. They know, in advance, that they can express themselves freely and be themselves, without threats, judgments or criticism. This freedom allows participants to evolve in their processes and resonates beyond psychotherapy, remaining present in their daily lives and in their relationships. For Shlien (1976), this is the broadest field of choice, of openness to experience and with the greatest

probability of an adaptive response from the client, since the desire for freedom seems to be a desire for health. For the author, client-centered therapy presupposes that man must be free and, to this end, makes freedom an important means in the therapeutic experience.

Participant Bisky felt that her psychotherapist gave her “wings to fly,” which stems from the psychotherapist’s unshakable trust in the client’s ability to reintegrate psychologically, finding socially constructive and creative ways to promote changes in their way of thinking and feeling, if they are in an interpersonal relationship endowed with positive regard, empathy, and congruence. These “wings” allowed her to integrate her experiences beyond the office and bring them into her life. It should be emphasized that these “wings” are not given by the psychotherapist. They are “wings” that she already had, and the psychotherapist merely facilitated their emergence. As Rogers (1977/1986) pointed out, the psychotherapist does not confer power on the client: he or she simply does not take it away from the client.

Studies have supported the client’s ability to expand their developments from psychotherapy to everyday life. The study by Florêncio (2014) systematized skills and abilities acquired by clients and generalized in their daily lives, and the results demonstrated that most participants were able to play an active role in and out of sessions, applying skills and strategies that are not specific to theoretical guidelines in their daily lives. The research by Correia and Moreira (2016) revealed that strengthening bonds between participants in group psychotherapy enabled fluid interventions and growth for clients, psychotherapists, and the group, as well as mutual care and concern, overflowing beyond the group. The study by Bezerra and Cury (2023) demonstrated that the intersubjective experience of psychotherapists and children gives rise to processes and results that can be experienced by the child beyond the play therapy sessions, reverberating after the end of the therapeutic contract. When the child feels validated by the psychotherapist, he or she can expand the attributes of this experience to his or her interpersonal relationships.

Final considerations

This study sought to intersubjectively understand the meaning of the experiences of people undergoing therapeutic processes using a person-centered approach. The meetings with the participants brought to light fundamental elements about the therapist-client relationship, so that the centrality of this specific type of intersubjective relationship was evidenced from the experiences that were shared by the participants, confirming the transformative potential of the therapeutic relationship in the clinical proposal of the person-centered approach.

The structuring elements of the participants’ experiences revealed an experiential journey that begins when the client feels validated by the psychotherapist and realizes that he or she exists and has value. This movement makes the client become self-aware. Next, there is a perception of his or her potential to exercise his or her own autonomy; that he or she can be his or her own master and lead his or her own path, without needing anyone else to interfere or point out paths to follow. Possibilities open for the client to take ownership of his or her life. The next movement is to realize that there is a partnership in the relationship with the psychotherapist, a joint effort that is developed for the benefit of the client. Finally, possibilities open for the progress made in the therapeutic process to be expanded to life as a whole, extending into daily life and all other relationships. These structuring elements, therefore, begin with the self and move toward the other, first the psychotherapist, then other people.

Among the limitations of this study, we highlight the fact that it focused only on the experience of clients from the perspective of PCT. We suggest new studies that consider subjective experiences and interpersonal relationships that promote psychological growth from other theoretical perspectives and other modalities of clinical psychological care. We hope that this way of researching, intertwining personality with the role of researcher, can be inspiring for those who share our interest in better understanding the surprising field of psychotherapy centered on people and not on techniques. Thus, the phenomenological method from a dialogical perspective has made it possible to creatively develop strategies to approach the clinical event, aiming to contribute new knowledge to the field of clinical psychology. Ethically, we are committed to the mission of contributing new knowledge to improve psychotherapeutic processes that can strengthen personal autonomy and the potential for psychological growth of clients who seek an alternative to survive such a turbulent historical moment marked by suffering and uncertainty.

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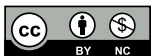
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