

## Rogers' Humanistic Person-Centred Approach to Counselling

The starting point of the Rogerian approach to counselling and psychotherapy is best stated by Rogers himself.

*"It is that the individual has within himself or herself vast resources for self-understanding, for altering his or her self-concept, attitudes and self-directed behaviour - and that these resources can be tapped if only a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided." (Rogers 1986)*

Rogers rejected the deterministic nature of both psychoanalysis and behaviourism and maintained that we behave as we do because of the way we perceive our situation. "As no one else can know how we perceive, we are the best experts on ourselves." (Gross 1992 p.905)

Believing strongly that theory should come out of practice rather than the other way round, Rogers developed his theory based on his work with emotionally troubled people and claimed that we have a remarkable capacity for **self-healing** and **personal growth** leading towards **self-actualization**. He placed emphasis on the person's current perception and how we live in the **here-and-now**.

Rogers noticed that people tend to describe their current experiences by referring to themselves in some way, for example, "I don't understand what's happening" or "I feel different to how I used to feel". Central to Rogers' theory is the notion of self or **self-concept**. This is defined as "the organized, consistent set of perceptions and beliefs about oneself". It consists of all the ideas and values that characterize 'I' and 'me' and includes perception and valuing of 'what I am' and 'what I can do'. Consequently, the self-concept is a central component of our total experience and influences both our perception of the world and perception of oneself. For instance, a woman who perceives herself as strong may well behave with confidence and come to see her actions as actions performed by someone who is confident.

The self-concept does not necessarily always fit with reality, though, and the way we see ourselves may differ greatly from how others see us. For example, a person might be very interesting to others and yet consider himself to be boring. He judges and evaluates this image he has of himself as a bore and this valuing will be reflected in his self-esteem. The confident woman may have a high self-esteem and the man who sees himself as a bore may have a low self-esteem, presuming that strength/confidence are highly valued and that being boring is not.

According to Rogers, we want to feel, experience and behave in ways which are consistent with our **self-image** and which reflect what we would like to be like, our **ideal-self**. The closer our self-image and ideal-self are to each other, the more consistent or **congruent** we are and the higher our sense of **self-worth**. A person is said to be in a state of **incongruence** if some of the totality of their experience is unacceptable to them

and is denied or distorted in the self-image. Incongruence is "a discrepancy between the actual experience of the organism and the self-picture of the individual insofar as it represents that experience." (Rogers 1957) As we prefer to see ourselves in ways that are consistent with our self-image, we may use defence mechanisms like denial or repression in order to feel less threatened by some of what we consider to be our undesirable feelings. A person whose self-concept is incongruent with her or his real feelings and experiences will defend because the truth hurts. For example, a person on occasion may feel possessive but not want to see herself or himself as possessive. Possessiveness will therefore be pushed out of awareness, leaving a self-image of a generous person, not at all possessive. Here is an example from Rogers (1957).

*"An instance would be the mother who develops vague illnesses whenever her only son makes plans to leave home. The actual desire is to hold on to her only source of satisfaction. To perceive this in awareness would be inconsistent with the picture she holds of herself as a good mother. Illness, however is consistent with her self-concept, and the experience is symbolized in this distorted fashion. Thus...there is a basic incongruence between the self as perceived (in this case as an ill mother needing attention) and the actual experience (in this case a desire to hold onto her son)."*

The total experiencing individual including all feelings and experiences, denied or accepted, is called the **organismic self** by Rogers. The greater the gap between the organismic self and the self-concept, the greater the chance of confusion and maladjustment and the lower the person's ability to function satisfactorily. The self-concept of the *congruent, fully-functioning person*, however, reflects the inevitability of change that occurs in the environment and is therefore, flexible.

Similarly, as stated above, the closer the ideal-self is to the self-image (i.e. the closer the person you would *like* to be is to how you see yourself), the more fulfilled and happier the person will be.

So, we can see that two kinds of incongruence can develop:

- i) incongruence between self-concept and organismic self
- ii) incongruence between ideal-self and self-image.

How do these incongruences develop? Rogers believed that we need to be regarded positively by others, we need to feel valued, respected, treated with affection and loved. If someone accepts us and everything we are, faults and all, they set no conditions on respecting or loving us. Rogers calls this **unconditional positive regard** and he believes that a major consequence of being totally accepted by others is total acceptance of ourselves by ourselves. This would mean that we accept our organismic experiences and there is no incongruence. However, if significant others offer only **conditional positive regard**, valuing us only when we behave, think or feel as they want us to behave, think or feel, we are most likely to do those things which please them. This will lead to our being valued by others but only on condition that we deny otherwise valid

personal experiences. For example, you may feel jealous of a younger sibling or threatened by an older sibling and these feelings may be perfectly valid. However, a parent may be disapproving of this and reject you if you feel like this, making their acceptance of you conditional on something. You will need to incorporate this into your self-concept and may decide that you are wrong to feel as you do (because a parent says so) and so may feel ashamed (perhaps a feeling you imagine a parent would expect). You may feel less ashamed if you behave in an approved of manner and so you may behave, think and feel solely in a way that pleases others in order to get their approval, such as acting lovingly, believing you must like your sibling and feeling affectionate towards that person.

As a result of the way significant others respond, a person may develop an imagined or idealised set of **conditions of worth**, standards used to judge what kinds of behaviours would gain the approval of others. When we behave according to conditions of worth, we create an incongruence between organismic self and self-concept. Similarly, if the standards are unrealistically high, we create an incongruence between ideal-self and self-image, feeling that we are never good enough. "Our need to be loved and accepted can impair our ability to be 'congruent', to be whole and genuine." (Kirschenbaum et al 1989).

In order to enhance congruence and move towards self-actualization the person needs to be self-accepting and to replace the conditions of worth with truer, organismic values. This is established according to Rogers by having at least one relationship in which the person experiences unconditional positive regard, where the person is totally accepted and supported regardless of what they do, think or feel. The relationship obviously must be controlled or directed not by the other person in the relationship but by oneself. The person himself or herself is at the centre, hence the term '**person-centred**'.

Any relationship which reduces incongruence is a **therapeutic relationship** according to Rogers. Such a relationship is characterized by one person experiencing another person who communicates:-

- a) **unconditional positive regard**
- b) **empathy** (i.e. "sens[ing] accurately the feelings and personal meanings the client is experiencing and communicat[ing] this acceptant understanding to the client." Rogers 1986)
- c) **genuineness** (realness or congruence i.e. being oneself rather than playing a role of, say, therapist, friend, parent or teacher)

If a person demonstrates these three qualities consistently in a relationship, they are offering a therapeutic context to the other person. If a person feels these three qualities in a relationship, they are said to be in a therapeutic, healing or growing relationship. Typically this happens in a counselling situation but is not exclusive to counselling. A person can experience such qualities only if they are effectively communicated and so much of Rogers' work focuses on communicating accurately and honestly with each other. This entails really listening to what someone else is saying/feeling without your own experiences, expectations or 'baggage' blocking the way.

For therapy to occur it is necessary that the following conditions are satisfied:

1. that two persons are in contact
2. that the first person, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable, or anxious.
3. that the second person, whom we shall term the therapist, is congruent in the relationship.
4. that the therapist is experiencing unconditional positive regard toward the client
5. that the therapist is experiencing an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference.
6. that the client perceives, at least to a minimal degree, the unconditional positive regard of the therapist..., and the empathic understanding of the therapist.

When these conditions are met, the process of therapy begins which has these characteristics:

the client...

- a) is increasingly free in expressing feelings
- b) expresses feelings which increasingly have reference to the self, rather than non-self
- c) expresses feelings which increasingly acknowledge incongruity between experiences and self-concept
- d) is more aware of the disadvantages of incongruence
- e) experiences in full awareness feelings that previously were unavailable to awareness
- f) is more able to incorporate these feelings into self-concept
- g) increasingly feels unconditional self-regard
- h) is more and more self-accepting

### ***Discussion points***

- This approach is a very optimistic view of human nature. Is Rogers right to assume that we all have this tendency for self-growth?
- Is unconditional positive regard possible?
- Is it possible to empathize or is some of your own baggage inevitable?
- Is congruence itself or congruence in the relationship possible for the therapist?
- 'Person-centred' entails emphasizing the individual rather than the context in which the individual exists. This puts the person back into the picture, something which skills orientated approaches seem to neglect. Is it too individualistic, placing too little emphasis on rights/needs/values of others?
- If the person is not 'fully-functioning' it is seen as the person's problem and the person's responsibility to change personally. Is it appropriate to assume that all restrictions to being fully functioning in society are the individual's problem? Is it appropriate to demand that the system (e.g. relationship/job/society) in which the person is living should change instead?