

# Carl Rogers: Architect of Humanistic Psychology

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## Carl Rogers

Carl Ransom Rogers (January 8, 1902 - February 4, 1987) was an influential American psychologist and among the founders of the humanistic approach to psychology. Rogers is widely considered to be one of the founding fathers of psychotherapy research and was honored for his pioneering research with the Award for Distinguished Scientific Contributions by the American Psychological Association in 1956.

The person-centered approach, his own unique approach to understanding personality and human relationships, found wide application in various domains such as psychotherapy and counseling (client-centered therapy), education (student-centered learning), organizations, and other group settings. For his professional work he was bestowed the Award for Distinguished Professional Contributions to Psychology by the APA in 1972. Towards the end of his life Carl Rogers was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work with national intergroup conflict in South Africa and Northern Ireland. In an empirical study by Haggblom et al. (2002) using six criteria such as citations and recognition, Rogers was found to be the sixth most eminent psychologist of the 20th century and second, among clinicians, only to Sigmund Freud.

## Biography

Rogers was born on January 8, 1902, in Oak Park, Illinois, a Chicago suburb. His father Walter A.

Rogers was a civil engineer and his mother, Julia M. Cushing, was a housewife and devout Pentecostal Christian. Carl was the fourth of their six children.

Rogers was quite smart and could read well before kindergarten. Following an education in a strict religious vicarage of Jimpley and ethical environment as an altar boy, he became a rather isolated, independent and disciplined person, and acquired a knowledge and an appreciation for the scientific method in a practical world. His first career choice was agriculture, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, followed by history and then religion. At age 20, following his 1922 trip to Peking, China, for an international Christian conference, he started to doubt his religious convictions. To help him clarify his career choice, he attended a seminar entitled Why am I entering the Ministry?, after which he decided to change his career.

After two years he left the seminary to attend Teachers College, Columbia University, obtaining an MA in 1928 and a PhD in 1931. While completing his doctoral work, he engaged in child study. In 1930, Rogers served as director of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in Rochester, New York. From 1935 to 1940 he lectured at the University of Rochester and wrote *The Clinical Treatment of the Problem Child* (1939), based on his experience in working with troubled children. He was strongly influenced in constructing his client-centered approach by the post-Freudian psychotherapeutic practice of Otto Rank. In 1940 Rogers became professor of clinical psychology at Ohio State University, where he wrote his second book, *Counseling and Psychotherapy* (1942). In it, Rogers suggested that the client, by establishing a relationship with an understanding, accepting therapist, can resolve difficulties and gain the insight necessary to restructure their life.

In 1945, he was invited to set up a counseling center at the University of Chicago. While a professor of psychology at the University of Chicago (1945-57), Rogers helped to establish a counseling centre connected with the university and there conducted studies to determine the effectiveness of his methods. His findings and theories appeared in *Client-Centered Therapy* (1951) and *Psychotherapy and Personality Change* (1954). One of his graduate students at the University of Chicago, Thomas Gordon, established the Parent Effectiveness Training (P.E.T.) movement. In 1956, Rogers became the first President of the American Academy of Psychotherapists. He taught psychology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (1957-63), during which time he wrote one of his best-known books, *On Becoming a Person* (1961). He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1961.

Rogers continued teaching at University of Wisconsin until 1963, he became a resident at the new Center for Studies of the Person in La Jolla. Rogers left the WBSI to help found the Center for Studies of the Person in 1968. His later books include *Carl Rogers on Personal Power* (1977) and *Freedom to Learn for the 80's* (1983). He remained a resident of La Jolla for the rest of his life, doing therapy, giving speeches and writing until his sudden death in 1987. In 1987, Rogers

suffered a fall that resulted in a fractured pelvis. He had a successful operation, but his pancreas failed the next night and he died a few days later.

Rogers' last years were devoted to applying his theories in situations of political oppression and national social conflict, and he traveled worldwide to accomplish this. In Belfast, Northern Ireland, he brought together influential Protestants and Catholics; in South Africa, blacks and whites; in Brazil people emerging from dictatorship to democracy in the United States, consumers and providers in the health field. His last trip, at age 85, was to the Soviet Union, where he lectured and facilitated intensive experiential workshops fostering communication and creativity. He was astonished at the numbers of Russians who knew of his work.

Together with his daughter, Natalie Rogers, and psychologists Maria Bowen, Maureen O'Hara, and John K. Wood, between 1974 and 1984, Rogers convened a series of residential programs in the US, Europe, Brazil and Japan, the Person-Centered Approach Workshops, which focused on cross-cultural communications, personal growth, self-empowerment, and learning for social change. Rogers was nominated for the Nobel Peace prize for his work though the nomination arrived just days after his death.

## Theory

Rogers' theory of the self is considered to be humanistic and phenomenological. His theory is based directly on the "phenomenal field" personality theory of Combs and Snygg (1949). Rogers' elaboration of his own theory is extensive. He wrote 16 books and many more journal articles describing it. However, Prochaska and Norcross(2003) states Rogers "consistently stood for an empirical evaluation of psychotherapy. He and his followers have demonstrated a humanistic approach to conducting therapy and a scientific approach to evaluating therapy need not be incompatible."

Carl Rogers applied his experiences with adult therapy to the education process and developed the concept of learner-centered teaching. He had the following five hypotheses regarding learner-centered education:

- "A person cannot teach another person directly; a person can only facilitate another's learning" (Rogers, 1951). This is a result of his personality theory, which states that everyone exists in a constantly changing world of experience in which he or she is the center. Each person reacts and responds based on perception and experience. The belief is that what the student does is more important than what the teacher does. The focus is on the student (Rogers, 1951). Therefore, the background and experiences of the learner are essential to how and what is learned. Each student will process what he or she learns differently depending on what he or she brings to the classroom.

- "A person learns significantly only those things that are perceived as being involved in the

maintenance of or enhancement of the structure of self" (Rogers, 1951). Therefore, relevancy to the student is essential for learning. The students' experiences become the core of the course.

"Experience which, if assimilated, would involve a change in the organization of self, tends to be resisted through denial or distortion of symbolism" (Rogers, 1951). If the content or presentation of a course is inconsistent with preconceived information, the student will learn if he or she is open to varying concepts. Being open to consider concepts that vary from one's own is vital to learning. Therefore, gently encouraging open-mindedness is helpful in engaging the student in learning. Also, it is important, for this reason, that new information is relevant and related to existing experience.

"The structure and organization of self appears to become more rigid under threats and to relax its boundaries when completely free from threat" (Rogers, 1951). If students believe that concepts are being forced upon them, they might become uncomfortable and fearful. A barrier is created by a tone of threat in the classroom. Therefore, an open, friendly environment in which trust is developed is essential in the online classroom. Fear of retribution for not agreeing with a concept should be eliminated. A classroom tone of support helps to alleviate fears and encourages students to have the courage to explore concepts and beliefs that vary from those they bring to the classroom. Also, new information might threaten the student's concept of him- or herself; therefore, the less vulnerable the student feels, the more likely he or she will be able to open up to the learning process.

"The educational situation which most effectively promotes significant learning is one in which (a) threat to the self of the learner is reduced to a minimum and (b) differentiated perception of the field is facilitated" (Rogers, 1951). The instructor should be open to learning from the students and also working to connect the students to the subject matter. Frequent interaction with the students will help achieve this goal. The instructor's acceptance of being a mentor who guides rather than the expert who tells is instrumental to student-centered, nonthreatening, and unforced learning.

### **Nineteen propositions**

His theory (as of 1951) was based on 19 propositions:

All individuals (organisms) exist in a continually changing world of experience (phenomenal field) of which they are the center.

The organism reacts to the field as it is experienced and perceived. This perceptual field is "reality" for the individual.

The organism reacts as an organized whole to this phenomenal field.

A portion of the total perceptual field gradually becomes differentiated as the self.

As a result of interaction with the environment, and particularly as a result of evaluational

interaction with others, the structure of the self is formed - an organized, fluid but consistent conceptual pattern of perceptions of characteristics and relationships of the "I" or the "me", together with values attached to these concepts.

The organism has one basic tendency and striving - to actualize, maintain and enhance the experiencing organism.

The best vantage point for understanding behavior is from the internal frame of reference of the individual.

Behavior is basically the goal-directed attempt of the organism to satisfy its needs as experienced, in the field as perceived.

Emotion accompanies, and in general facilitates, such goal directed behavior, the kind of emotion being related to the perceived significance of the behavior for the maintenance and enhancement of the organism.

The values attached to experiences, and the values that are a part of the self-structure, in some instances, are values experienced directly by the organism, and in some instances are values introjected or taken over from others, but perceived in distorted fashion, as if they had been experienced directly.

As experiences occur in the life of the individual, they are either, a) symbolized, perceived and organized into some relation to the self, b) ignored because there is no perceived relationship to the self structure, c) denied symbolization or given distorted symbolization because the experience is inconsistent with the structure of the self.

Most of the ways of behaving that are adopted by the organism are those that are consistent with the concept of self.

In some instances, behavior may be brought about by organic experiences and needs which have not been symbolized. Such behavior may be inconsistent with the structure of the self but in such instances the behavior is not "owned" by the individual.

Psychological adjustment exists when the concept of the self is such that all the sensory and visceral experiences of the organism are, or may be, assimilated on a symbolic level into a consistent relationship with the concept of self.

Psychological maladjustment exists when the organism denies awareness of significant sensory and visceral experiences, which consequently are not symbolized and organized into the gestalt of the self structure. When this situation exists, there is a basic or potential psychological tension.

Any experience which is inconsistent with the organization of the structure of the self may be perceived as a threat, and the more of these perceptions there are, the more rigidly the self structure is organized to maintain itself.

Under certain conditions, involving primarily complete absence of threat to the self structure, experiences which are inconsistent with it may be perceived and examined, and the structure of self revised to assimilate and include such experiences.

When the individual perceives and accepts into one consistent and integrated system all his sensory and visceral experiences, then he is necessarily more understanding of others and is more

accepting of others as separate individuals.

As the individual perceives and accepts into his self structure more of his organic experiences, he finds that he is replacing his present value system - based extensively on introjections which have been distortedly symbolized - with a continuing organismic valuing process.

Additionally, Rogers is known for practicing "unconditional positive regard," which is defined as accepting a person "without negative judgment of .... basic worth."

### **Development of the personality**

With regard to development, he described principles rather than stages. The main issue is the development of a self concept and the progress from an undifferentiated self to being fully differentiated.

Self Concept ... the organized consistent conceptual gestalt composed of perceptions of the characteristics of 'I' or 'me' and the perceptions of the relationships of the 'I' or 'me' to others and to various aspects of life, together with the values attached to these perceptions. It is a gestalt which is available to awareness though not necessarily in awareness. It is a fluid and changing gestalt, a process, but at any given moment it is a specific entity. (Rogers, 1959)

In the development of the self concept, he saw conditional and unconditional positive regard as key. Those raised in an environment of unconditional positive regard have the opportunity to fully actualize themselves. Those raised in an environment of conditional positive regard feel worthy only if they match conditions (what Rogers describes as conditions of worth) that have been laid down for them by others.

### **The fully functioning person**

Optimal development, as referred to in proposition 14, results in a certain process rather than static state. He describes this as the good life, where the organism continually aims to fulfill its full potential. He listed the characteristics of a fully functioning person (Rogers 1961):

A growing openness to experience - they move away from defensiveness and have no need for subception (a perceptual defense that involves unconsciously applying strategies to prevent a troubling stimulus from entering consciousness).

An increasingly existential lifestyle - living each moment fully - not distorting the moment to fit personality or self concept but allowing personality and self concept to emanate from the experience. This results in excitement, daring, adaptability, tolerance, spontaneity, and a lack of rigidity and suggests a foundation of trust. "To open one's spirit to what is going on now, and discover in that present process whatever structure it appears to have" (Rogers 1961)

Increasing organismic trust - they trust their own judgment and their ability to choose behavior that is appropriate for each moment. They do not rely on existing codes and social norms but trust that as they are open to experiences they will be able to trust their own sense of right and wrong.

Freedom of choice - not being shackled by the restrictions that influence an incongruent individual, they are able to make a wider range of choices more fluently. They believe that they play a role in determining their own behavior and so feel responsible for their own behavior.

Creativity - it follows that they will feel more free to be creative. They will also be more creative in the way they adapt to their own circumstances without feeling a need to conform.

Reliability and constructiveness - they can be trusted to act constructively. An individual who is open to all their needs will be able to maintain a balance between them. Even aggressive needs will be matched and balanced by intrinsic goodness in congruent individuals.

A rich full life - he describes the life of the fully functioning individual as rich, full and exciting and suggests that they experience joy and pain, love and heartbreak, fear and courage more intensely.

Rogers' description of the good life:

This process of the good life is not, I am convinced, a life for the faint-hearted. It involves the stretching and growing of becoming more and more of one's potentialities. It involves the courage to be. It means launching oneself fully into the stream of life. (Rogers 1961)

## **Incongruence**

Rogers identified the "real self" as the aspect of one's being that is founded in the actualizing tendency, follows organismic valuing, needs and receives positive regard and self-regard. It is the "you" that, if all goes well, you will become. On the other hand, to the extent that our society is out of sync with the actualizing tendency, and we are forced to live with conditions of worth that are out of step with organismic valuing, and receive only conditional positive regard and self-regard, we develop instead an "ideal self". By ideal, Rogers is suggesting something not real, something that is always out of our reach, the standard we cannot meet. This gap between the real self and the ideal self, the "I am" and the "I should" is called incongruity.

## **Psychopathology**

Rogers described the concepts of congruence and incongruence as important ideas in his theory. In proposition #6, he refers to the actualizing tendency. At the same time, he recognized the need for positive regard. In a fully congruent person realizing their potential is not at the expense of experiencing positive regard. They are able to lead lives that are authentic and genuine. Incongruent individuals, in their pursuit of positive regard, lead lives that include falseness and do not realize their potential. Conditions put on them by those around them make it necessary for them to forego their genuine, authentic lives to meet with the approval of others. They live lives that

are not true to themselves, to who they are on the inside.

Rogers suggested that the incongruent individual, who is always on the defensive and cannot be open to all experiences, is not functioning ideally and may even be malfunctioning. They work hard at maintaining/protecting their self concept. Because their lives are not authentic this is a difficult task and they are under constant threat. They deploy defense mechanisms to achieve this. He describes two mechanisms: distortion and denial. Distortion occurs when the individual perceives a threat to their self concept. They distort the perception until it fits their self concept.

This defensive behavior reduces the consciousness of the threat but not the threat itself. And so, as the threats mount, the work of protecting the self concept becomes more difficult and the individual becomes more defensive and rigid in their self structure. If the incongruence is immoderate this process may lead the individual to a state that would typically be described as neurotic. Their functioning becomes precarious and psychologically vulnerable. If the situation worsens it is possible that the defenses cease to function altogether and the individual becomes aware of the incongruence of their situation. Their personality becomes disorganised and bizarre; irrational behavior, associated with earlier denied aspects of self, may erupt uncontrollably.

## **Applications**

Rogers originally developed his theory to be the foundation for a system of therapy. He initially called this "non-directive therapy" but later replaced the term "non-directive" with the term "client-centered" and then later used the term "person-centered". The first empirical evidence of the effectiveness of the client-centered approach was published in 1941 at the Ohio State University by Elias Porter, using the recordings of therapeutic sessions between Carl Rogers and his clients., Porter used Rogers' transcripts to devise a system to measure the degree of directiveness or non-directiveness a counselor employed. The attitude and orientation of the counselor were demonstrated to be instrumental in the decisions made by the client.

Even before the publication of Client-Centered Therapy in 1951, he believed that the principles he was describing could be applied in a variety of contexts and not just in the therapy situation. As a result he started to use the term person-centered approach later in his life to describe his overall theory.

Person-centered therapy is the application of the person-centered approach to the therapy situation. Other applications include a theory of personality, interpersonal relations, education, nursing, cross-cultural relations and other "helping" professions and situations.

In 1970, Richard Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike published Rhetoric: Discovery and Change, a widely influential college writing textbook that used a Rogerian approach to communication to revise the traditional Aristotelian framework for rhetoric.

The application to education has a large robust research tradition similar to that of therapy with studies having begun in the late 1930s and continuing today (Cornelius-White, 2007). Rogers described the approach to education in Client-Centered Therapy and wrote *Freedom to Learn* devoted exclusively to the subject in 1969. *Freedom to Learn* was revised two times. The new Learner-Centered Model is similar in many regards to this classical person-centered approach to education.

The application to cross-cultural relations has involved workshops in highly stressful situations and global locations including conflicts and challenges in South Africa, Central America, and Ireland. This work resulted in a Nobel Peace Prize nomination for Rogers.

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