

Carl Rogers: The Path to Becoming Your True Self

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Carl Rogers was born January 8, 1902 in Oak Park, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, the fourth of six children. His father was a successful civil engineer and his mother was a housewife and devout Christian. His education started in the second grade, because he could already read before kindergarten.

When Carl was 12, his family moved to a farm about 30 miles west of Chicago, and it was here that he was to spend his adolescence. With a strict upbringing and many chores, Carl was to become rather isolated, independent, and self-disciplined.

He went on to the University of Wisconsin as an agriculture major. Later, he switched to religion to study for the ministry. During this time, he was selected as one of ten students to go to Beijing for the "World Student Christian Federation Conference" for six months. He tells us that his new experiences so broadened his thinking that he began to doubt some of his basic religious views.

After graduation, he married Helen Elliot (against his parents' wishes), moved to New York City, and began attending the Union Theological Seminary, a famous liberal religious institution. While there, he took a student organized seminar called "Why am I entering the ministry? I might as well tell you that, unless you want to change your career, never take a class with such a title!" He tells us that most of the participants "thought their way right out of religious work."

Religion's loss was, of course, psychology's gain: Rogers switched to the clinical psychology program of Columbia University, and received his Ph.D. in 1931. He had already begun his clinical work at the Rochester Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. At this clinic, he learned about Otto Rank's theory and therapy techniques, which started him on the road to developing his own approach.

He was offered a full professorship at Ohio State in 1940. In 1942, he wrote his first book, *Counseling and Psychotherapy*. Then, in 1945, he was invited to set up a counseling center at the University of Chicago. It was while working there that in 1951 he published his major work, *Client-Centered Therapy*, wherein he outlines his basic theory.

In 1957, he returned to teach at his alma mater, the University of Wisconsin. Unfortunately, it was a time of conflict within their psychology department, and Rogers became very disillusioned with higher education. In 1964, he was happy to accept a research position in La Jolla, California. He provided therapy, gave speeches, and wrote, until his death in 1987.

Theory

Roger's theory is a clinical one, based on years of experience dealing with his clients. He has this in common with Freud, for example. Also in common with Freud is that his is a particularly rich and mature theory -- well thought-out and logically tight, with broad application.

Not in common with Freud, however, is the fact that Rogers sees people as basically good or healthy -- or at very least, not bad or ill. In other words, he sees mental health as the normal progression of life, and he sees mental illness, criminality, and other human problems, as distortions of that natural tendency. Also not in common with Freud is the fact that Rogers' theory is a relatively simple one.

Also not in common with Freud is that Rogers' theory is particularly simple -- elegant even! The entire theory is built on a single "force of life" he calls the actualizing tendency. It can be defined as the built-in motivation present in every life-form to develop its potentials to the fullest extent possible. We're not just talking about survival: Rogers believes that all creatures strive to make the very best of their existence. If they fail to do so, it is not for a lack of desire.

Rogers captures with this single great need or motive all the other motives that other theorists talk about. He asks us, why do we want air and water and food? Why do we seek safety, love, and a sense of competence? Why, indeed, do we seek to discover new medicines, invent new power sources, or create new works of art? Because, he answers, it is in our nature as living things to do the very best we can!

Keep in mind that, unlike Maslow's use of the term, Rogers applies it to all living creatures. Some of his earliest examples, in fact, include seaweed and mushrooms! Think about it: Doesn't it sometimes amaze you the way weeds will grow through the sidewalk, or saplings crack boulders, or animals survive desert conditions or the frozen north?

He also applied the idea to ecosystems, saying that an ecosystem such as a forest, with all its complexity, has a much greater actualization potential than a simple ecosystem such as a corn field. If one bug were to become extinct in a forest, there are likely to be other creatures that will adapt to fill the gap; On the other hand, one bout of "corn blight" or some such disaster, and you have a dust bowl. The same for us as individuals: If we live as we should, we will become increasingly complex, like the forest, and thereby remain flexible in the face of life's little -- and big -- disasters.

People, however, in the course of actualizing their potentials, created society and culture. In and of itself, that's not a problem: We are a social creature, it is our nature. But when we created culture, it developed a life of its own. Rather than remaining close to other aspects of our natures, culture can become a force in its own right. And even if, in the long run, a culture that interferes with our actualization dies out, we, in all likelihood, will die with it.

Don't misunderstand: Culture and society are not intrinsically evil! It's more along the lines of the birds of paradise found in Papua-New Guinea. The colorful and dramatic plumage of the males apparently distract predators from females and the young. Natural selection has led these birds towards more and more elaborate tail feathers, until in some species the male can no longer get off the ground. At that point, being colorful doesn't do the male -- or the species -- much good! In the

same way, our elaborate societies, complex cultures, incredible technologies, for all that they have helped us to survive and prosper, may at the same time serve to harm us, and possibly even destroy us.

Details

Rogers tells us that organisms know what is good for them. Evolution has provided us with the senses, the tastes, the discriminations we need: When we hunger, we find food -- not just any food, but food that tastes good. Food that tastes bad is likely to be spoiled, rotten, unhealthy. That what good and bad tastes are -- our evolutionary lessons made clear! This is called organismic valuing.

Among the many things that we instinctively value is positive regard, Rogers umbrella term for things like love, affection, attention, nurturance, and so on. It is clear that babies need love and attention. In fact, it may well be that they die without it. They certainly fail to thrive -- i.e. become all they can be.

Another thing -- perhaps peculiarly human -- that we value is positive self-regard, that is, self-esteem, self-worth, a positive self-image. We achieve this positive self-regard by experiencing the positive regard others show us over our years of growing up. Without this self-regard, we feel small and helpless, and again we fail to become all that we can be!

Like Maslow, Rogers believes that, if left to their own devices, animals will tend to eat and drink things that are good for them, and consume them in balanced proportions. Babies, too, seem to want and like what they need. Somewhere along the line, however, we have created an environment for ourselves that is significantly different from the one in which we evolved. In this new environment are such things as refined sugar, flour, butter, chocolate, and so on, that our ancestors in Africa never knew. These things have flavors that appeal to our organismic valuing -- yet do not serve our actualization well. Over millions of years, we may evolve to find broccoli more satisfying than cheesecake -- but by then, it'll be way too late for you and me.

Our society also leads us astray with conditions of worth. As we grow up, our parents, teachers, peers, the media, and others, only give us what we need when we show we are "worthy," rather than just because we need it. We get a drink when we finish our class, we get something sweet when we finish our vegetables, and most importantly, we get love and affection if and only if we "behave!"

Getting positive regard on "on condition" Rogers calls conditional positive regard. Because we do indeed need positive regard, these conditions are very powerful, and we bend ourselves into a shape determined, not by our organismic valuing or our actualizing tendency, but by a society that may or may not truly have our best interests at heart. A "good little boy or girl" may not be a

healthy or happy boy or girl!

Over time, this "conditioning" leads us to have conditional positive self-regard as well. We begin to like ourselves only if we meet up with the standards others have applied to us, rather than if we are truly actualizing our potentials. And since these standards were created without keeping each individual in mind, more often than not we find ourselves unable to meet them, and therefore unable to maintain any sense of self-esteem.

Incongruity

The aspect of your being that is founded in the actualizing tendency, follows organismic valuing, needs and receives positive regard and self-regard, Rogers calls the real self. 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 synch 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 can't meet.

This gap between the real self and the ideal self, the "I am" and the "I should" is called incongruity. The greater the gap, the more incongruity. The more incongruity, the more suffering. In fact, incongruity is essentially what Rogers means by neurosis: Being out of synch with your own self. If this all sounds familiar to you, it is precisely the same point made by Karen Horney!

Defenses

When you are in a situation where there is an incongruity between your image of yourself and your immediate experience of yourself (i.e. between the ideal and the real self), you are in a threatening situation. For example, if you have been taught to feel unworthy if you do not get A's on all your tests, and yet you aren't really all that great a student, then situations such as tests are going to bring that incongruity to light -- tests will be very threatening.

When you are expecting a threatening situation, you will feel anxiety. Anxiety is a signal indicating that there is trouble ahead, that you should avoid the situation! One way to avoid the situation, of course, is to pick yourself up and run for the hills. Since that is not usually an option in life, instead of running physically, we run psychologically, by using defenses.

Rogers' idea of defenses is very similar to Freud's, except that Rogers considers everything from a perceptual point-of-view, so that even memories and impulses are thought of as perceptions. Fortunately for us, he has only two defenses: denial and perceptual distortion.

Denial means very much what it does in Freud's system: You block out the threatening situation altogether. An example might be the person who never picks up his test or asks about test results, so he doesn't have to face poor grades (at least for now!). Denial for Rogers does also include what Freud called repression: If keeping a memory or an impulse out of your awareness -- refuse to perceive it -- you may be able to avoid (again, for now!) a threatening situation.

Perceptual distortion is a matter of reinterpreting the situation so that it appears less threatening. It is very similar to Freud's rationalization. A student that is threatened by tests and grades may, for example, blame the professor for poor teaching, trick questions, bad attitude, or whatever. The fact that sometimes professors are poor teachers, write trick questions, and have bad attitudes only makes the distortion work better: If it could be true, then maybe it really was true! It can also be much more obviously perceptual, such as when the person misreads his grade as better than it is.

Unfortunately for the poor neurotic (and, in fact, most of us), every time he or she uses a defense, they put a greater distance between the real and the ideal. They become ever more incongruous, and find themselves in more and more threatening situations, develop greater and greater levels of anxiety, and use more and more defenses.... It becomes a vicious cycle that the person eventually is unable to get out of, at least on their own.

Rogers also has a partial explanation for psychosis: Psychosis occurs when a person's defense are overwhelmed, and their sense of self becomes "shattered" into little disconnected pieces. His behavior likewise has little consistency to it. We see him as having "psychotic breaks" -- episodes of bizarre behavior. His words may make little sense. His emotions may be inappropriate. He may lose the ability to differentiate self and non-self, and become disoriented and passive.

The fully-functioning person

Rogers, like Maslow, is just as interested in describing the healthy person. His term is "fully-functioning," and involves the following qualities:

Openness to experience. This is the opposite of defensiveness. It is the accurate perception of one's experiences in the world, including one's feelings. It also means being able to accept reality, again including one's feelings. Feelings are such an important part of openness because they convey organismic valuing. If you cannot be open to your feelings, you cannot be open to actualization. The hard part, of course, is distinguishing real feelings from the anxieties brought on by conditions of worth.

Existential living. This is living in the here-and-now. Rogers, as a part of getting in touch with reality, insists that we not live in the past or the future -- the one is gone, and the other isn't anything at all, yet! The present is the only reality we have. Mind you, that doesn't mean we shouldn't remember and learn from our past. Neither does it mean we shouldn't plan or even day-

dream about the future. Just recognize these things for what they are: memories and dreams, which we are experiencing here in the present.

Organismic trusting. We should allow ourselves to be guided by the organismic valuing process. We should trust ourselves, do what feels right, what comes natural. This, as I'm sure you realize, has become a major sticking point in Rogers' theory. People say, sure, do what comes natural -- if you are a sadist, hurt people; if you are a masochist, hurt yourself; if the drugs or alcohol make you happy, go for it; if you are depressed, kill yourself.... This certainly doesn't sound like great advice. In fact, many of the excesses of the sixties and seventies were blamed on this attitude. But keep in mind that Rogers meant trust your real self, and you can only know what your real self has to say if you are open to experience and living existentially! In other words, organismic trusting assumes you are in contact with the actualizing tendency.

Experiential freedom. Rogers felt that it was irrelevant whether or not people really had free will. We feel very much as if we do. This is not to say, of course, that we are free to do anything at all: We are surrounded by a deterministic universe, so that, flap my arms as much as I like, I will not fly like Superman. It means that we feel free when choices are available to us. Rogers says that the fully-functioning person acknowledges that feeling of freedom, and takes responsibility for his choices.

Creativity. If you feel free and responsible, you will act accordingly, and participate in the world. A fully-functioning person, in touch with actualization, will feel obliged by their nature to contribute to the actualization of others, even life itself. This can be through creativity in the arts or sciences, through social concern and parental love, or simply by doing one's best at one's job. Creativity as Rogers uses it is very close to Erikson's generativity.

Therapy

Carl Rogers is best known for his contributions to therapy. His therapy has gone through a couple of name changes along the way: He originally called it non-directive, because he felt that the therapist should not lead the client, but rather be there for the client while the client directs the progress of the therapy. As he became more experienced, he realized that, as "non-directive" as he was, he still influenced his client by his very "non-directiveness!" In other words, clients look to therapists for guidance, and will find it even when the therapist is trying not to guide.

So he changed the name to client-centered. He still felt that the client was the one who should say what is wrong, find ways of improving, and determine the conclusion of therapy -- his therapy was still very "client-centered" even while he acknowledged the impact of the therapist. Unfortunately, other therapists felt that this name for his therapy was a bit of a slap in the face for them: Aren't most therapies "client-centered?"

Nowadays, though the terms non-directive and client-centered are still used, most people just call it Rogerian therapy. One of the phrases that Rogers used to describe his therapy is "supportive, not

reconstructive," and he uses the analogy of learning to ride a bicycle to explain: When you help a child to learn to ride a bike, you can't just tell them how. They have to try it for themselves. And you can't hold them up the whole time either. There comes a point when you have to let them go. If they fall, they fall, but if you hang on, they never learn.

It's the same in therapy. If independence (autonomy, freedom with responsibility) is what you are helping a client to achieve, then they will not achieve it if they remain dependent on you, the therapist. They need to try their insights on their own, in real life beyond the therapist's office! An authoritarian approach to therapy may seem to work marvelously at first, but ultimately it only creates a dependent person.

There is only one technique that Rogerians are known for: reflection. Reflection is the mirroring of emotional communication: If the client says "I feel like shit!" the therapist may reflect this back to the client by saying something like "So, life's getting you down, hey? By doing this, the therapist is communicating to the client that he is indeed listening and cares enough to understand.

The therapist is also letting the client know what it is the client is communicating. Often, people in distress say things that they don't mean because it feels good to say them. For example, a woman once came to me and said "I hate men!" I reflected by saying "You hate all men? Well, she said, maybe not all -- she didn't hate her father or her brother or, for that matter, me. Even with those men she "hated," she discovered that the great majority of them she didn't feel as strongly as the word hate implies. In fact, ultimately, she realized that she didn't trust many men, and that she was afraid of being hurt by them the way she had been by one particular man.

Reflection must be used carefully, however. Many beginning therapists use it without thinking (or feeling), and just repeat every other phrase that comes out of the client's mouth. They sound like parrots with psychology degrees! Then they think that the client doesn't notice, when in fact it has become a stereotype of Rogerian therapy the same way as sex and mom have become stereotypes of Freudian therapy. Reflection must come from the heart -- it must be genuine, congruent.

Which brings us to Rogers' famous requirements of the therapist. Rogers felt that a therapist, in order to be effective, must have three very special qualities:

Congruence -- genuineness, honesty with the client.

Empathy -- the ability to feel what the client feels.

Respect -- acceptance, unconditional positive regard towards the client.

He says these qualities are "necessary and sufficient:" If the therapist shows these three qualities, the client will improve, even if no other special "techniques" are used. If the therapist does not show these three qualities, the client's improvement will be minimal, no matter how many "techniques" are used. Now this is a lot to ask of a therapist! They're just human, and often enough

a bit more "human" (let's say unusual) than most. Rogers does give in a little, and he adds that the therapist must show these things in the therapy relationship. In other words, when the therapist leaves the office, he can be as "human" as anybody.

I happen to agree with Rogers, even though these qualities are quite demanding. Some of the research does suggest that techniques don't matter nearly as much as the therapist's personality, and that, to some extent at least, therapists are "born" not "made."

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