

Carl Rogers (1902-1987)

Like Maslow, 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).

Like Freud, Rogers developed his theory based on his work with emotionally troubled people but unlike Freud, Rogers claimed that we have a remarkable capacity for **self-healing** and **personal growth** leading towards **self-actualisation**. Freud emphasised the importance of psychological continuity and hence believed our past to be a strong determinant of the present, whereas Rogers 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 organised, consistent set of perceptions and beliefs about oneself". It consists of all the ideas and values that characterise '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.

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. 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 their real feelings and experiences will defend themselves because the truth hurts. For example, a person on occasion may feel possessive but not want to see themselves as possessive. They will therefore push it out of their awareness, leaving them with a self-image of a generous person, not at all possessive.

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. The self-concept of the *congruent* 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 you 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 call this **unconditional positive regard** and he believes that a 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 your parent would expect). You may feel less ashamed if you behave in an approved manner and so you may behave, think and feel solely in a way that pleases others, to get their approval.

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 approval by 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.

In order to enhance congruence and move towards self-actualisation 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 him/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 characterised by one person experiencing another person who communicates:

- a) **unconditional positive regard**
- b) **empathy** (i.e. accepting that another person experiences the world in an entirely different manner from yourself and reflecting back what this is like)
- c) **genuineness** (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 (nor is this the only kind of 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. Listening is a skill and something which we have to work at, unlike hearing which occurs without our effort.