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Existential Theory

of Carl Rogers

Psychologist Carl Rogers believed in experience. Even the way he titles his articles reflects a commitment to personal history as his only rule for living: “This Is Me,” “Personal Thoughts on Teaching and Learning,” “A Therapist’s View of the Good Life.”

Rogers’ major works were written while he was teaching at the Universities of Chicago and Wisconsin, but he is best known as the founder and director of the Center for Studies of the Person in La Jolla, California. His lectures and books are filled with descriptions of his childhood, counselor training, and conversations with clients. He tells how he reacted against the strict religious expectations of his parents and of lonely teenage years surrounded by books instead of friends. We learn of his discomfort in a graduate program that stressed aloofness from patients and of his excitement when he first permitted a client to know his genuine feelings.

EXPERIENCE AS THE ULTIMATE AUTHORITY

Although most people find Rogers’ personal references appealing, his stories are more than a technique to capture the reader’s interest. For Rogers, they are his highest authority. “Neither the Bible nor the prophets—neither Freud nor research—neither the revelations of God nor man—can take precedence over my own direct experience.”²⁰

Rogers doubted the presence of a universal truth “out there,” and was even more skeptical that we could know at all if it does exist. Along with R. D. Laing, he believed that the only reality we can know for sure is our own. But Rogers’ existentialism was more optimistic than Laing’s. Instead of viewing experience as a dangerous battleground, he saw it as a friendly resource to be treasured and embraced. He was careful not to insist that his experience should have meaning for others, but merely presented personal accounts of healthy relationships in the hope that they might strike a responsive chord in his audience.

The subjective tone of Rogers’ writing sets it apart from most social science literature. In order to represent fairly the theory’s texture as well as its text, I’ll present the principles of Rogers that became real to me while leading an intensive small-group seminar on an isolated island in Lake Michigan. This narra-

tive approach is consistent with his belief that “what is most personal is most general.”

THE DESIRABILITY OF EXPERIENTIAL GROUP LEARNING

The purpose of the island course is to learn about relationships by studying what happens among group members over a two-week period. Every year I select eight students who want to change the way they interact with others. They understand that the remote setting will tend to magnify whatever feelings they have for each other. The enforced togetherness can turn ordinary liking to love or irritation to disgust. It is the type of intensive group experience that Rogers enjoyed leading throughout his professional life. He saw his role as a facilitator of growth.

Students come to the seminar with many misgivings. They are looking for ways to improve their self-concept, draw closer to others, and express themselves more freely. But most are suspicious of instant intimacy and fear that the course could degenerate into a “touchie-feelie” session. Many students have chafed under what Rogers calls traditional “jug and mug” teaching styles that stress transfer of information through one-way communication. Although the island course gives them the opportunity to be more than passive learners, they have qualms about what it might mean to take responsibility for their own learning.

Rogers believed that people seeking help in their relationships should come with some initial anxiety and a commitment for continued contact. Since students who sign up for the island course qualify on both counts, he would predict growth over a two-week period as long as I, the leader, convey three caring responses: congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding.

THREE CONDITIONS FOR RELATIONAL HEALTH

It was only after years of counseling experience that Rogers settled on these three conditions as the ones “necessary and sufficient” for relational health. Although they emerged from a therapeutic setting, he was certain that they are equally important in the business world, family life, education, and all interpersonal relationships. I’ll draw on my experience with an island course student named Mitch to illustrate the three necessary and sufficient conditions of a helping relationship.

THE FIRST CONDITION: CONGRUENCE

Rogers used the term *congruence* to describe the match or fit between an individual’s inner feelings and outer display. The congruent person is genuine, real, integrated, whole, transparent. The noncongruent person tries to impress, plays a role, puts up a front, hides behind a façade. Rogers realized that con-

gruence between feelings and actions can never be total, but his experience convinced him that choosing to be real with others is the single most important decision a person can make. "In my relationship with persons I've found that it does not help, in the long run, to act as though I was something I was not."²¹

I put myself into a congruency bind the second day of the island seminar when I lectured on phases of group decision making. Responding to the tone of certainty in my voice, Mitch asked a simple question that threatened to reveal how little I knew. I was tempted to bluff my way through ignorance by tossing the question back to the group, or by making up an answer filled with technical jargon. But recalling Rogers' warning about trying to impress others, I simply said, "I don't know," and then added, "I really feel dumb."

Mitch later told me that this admission of inadequacy was the turning point in our relationship. He could no longer confine me to the role of teacher. Rogers would say that the more Mitch saw me as a person instead of an object, the more he could regard himself the same way. Whatever the explanation, the group conversation grew more spontaneous.

The following night I had another opportunity to be open with the group. Impressed by Rogers' example, I scheduled a "This Is Me" time for members to speak of significant events in their life. Going first, I tried to give more than a bare recitation of historical fact. I also told what the events meant to me. That model seemed to create a safe atmosphere for Mitch to speak of his feelings toward his invalid father. Rogers repeatedly said that genuineness in one person stimulates transparency in others.

Does congruence mean sharing negative reactions? For example, I inwardly cringed at some of Mitch's biting sarcasm. I didn't say anything, but would it have hurt our relationship if I'd told Mitch of my discomfort? According to Rogers, that worry is seldom justified. He was much more concerned that closeness would be frozen out through the chilling effect of emotional censorship. For significant and/or long-term relationships, he thought it best to express persistent feelings regardless of whether they are positive or negative.

THE SECOND CONDITION: UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD

In "Characteristics of a Helping Relationship," Rogers asked, "Can I let myself experience positive attitudes toward this other person—attitudes of warmth, caring, liking, interest, and respect?"²² He already knew the answer he wanted to give. A few years earlier he had spoken of the pleasure he received when he let himself feel unconditional positive regard. "I have found it highly rewarding when I can accept another person."²³

Rogers didn't claim this attitude comes automatically or easily. He believed the professional roles of doctor, teacher, supervisor, minister, and therapist were created to maintain a safe distance from those seeking help. Yet when he established a warm and trusting climate for the client, he found he liked and trusted himself as well.

He saw even greater benefits for the clients. When they experienced themselves as fully received regardless of whether they expressed fear, anger, shame, pleasure or affection, they got better. In the terms of symbolic interactionists (see Chapter 7), the constant appreciation allowed clients to ignore images of judgmental others in their looking glass self and thus become their own significant social other. Mead didn't think that was possible. Rogers reports its happening whenever he allowed himself to trust the other person.

Rogers could let himself express an unconditional positive regard for others because he believed in the basic goodness of humankind. He realized this optimism was directly opposed to the prevailing Western cultural conviction that people are dangerous and need to be taught, guided, disciplined, and controlled. But along with Abraham Maslow, he assumed that given a suitable climate, people are trustworthy, creative, constructive, and capable of releasing vast amounts of untapped human potential. As a counselor and friend, he saw his responsibility as one of creating a warm atmosphere in which clients could explore, understand, and solve their own problems.

My initial reaction to Mitch on the island was slightly negative. In addition to sarcasm, he also displayed a win-at-all-costs competitiveness and a chauvinistic attitude that regarded women as unlikely candidates for serious intellectual discussion. Unconditional positive regard didn't come naturally. But I worked at viewing his sarcasm as evidence of a keen sense of humor, his competitiveness as a sign of a desire for excellence, and his male superiority as a plea for a cross-sex relationship that could be more than physical.

My efforts fell short of Rogers' standard, but after a few days I saw movement in Mitch toward greater sensitivity. Not surprisingly, it became easier for me to show an equal appreciation for every aspect of Mitch's personality. There may have been no connection, but by the end of the course he was enjoying mutual and thoughtful discussions with members of both sexes.

THE THIRD CONDITION: EMPATHIC UNDERSTANDING

When in doubt, listen. That was Rogers' advice for those who are willing to explore what it's like to be another person. He used the term *empathic understanding* to describe the caring skill of temporarily laying aside our views and values and of entering into another's world without prejudice. It is an active process of seeking to hear the other's thoughts, feelings, tones, and meanings as if they were our own. This focused style of listening is described well in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*:

Natasha, leaning on her elbow, the expression on her face continually changing with the story, watched Pierre, never taking her eyes off of him, and seemed to be experiencing with him all that he described. Not only her look but her exclamations and the brief questions she put showed Pierre that she understood just what he wanted to convey.²⁴

The book contains a cartoon at this place.
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Empathic listening is nonjudgmental. Rogers regarded judgment, evaluation, and appraisal as major barriers to interpersonal communication. Avoiding the natural tendency to approve or disapprove of what is heard is the single most difficult task faced by the average listener. Counselors must overcome the added tendency to interpret or diagnose. Rogers thought it was a waste of time to be suspicious or wonder, "What does he really mean?" People receive the most help when we assume they are sharing their world as it really appears to them and accept what they have to say at face value.

Rogers coined the terms *client-centered* and *nondirective* to refer to the form of therapy that follows the lead of the client rather than imposing the counselor's agenda. On the island I tried to resist the urge I felt to rush in and "fix" the things I didn't like in Mitch. This took great willpower when he talked about organizing student janitors into a spy network that rifled office wastebaskets. I had to remind myself of existential doctrine that I am responsible only for my own behavior. I employed the Rogerian technique of paraphrasing Mitch's statements as a way of checking the accuracy of my understanding. Mitch

seemed to find it gratifying to have a teacher listen noncritically to his gripes about the college administration. He later said he had heard his own words and regretted searching through private papers.

CRITIQUE: NECESSARY BUT NOT SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS

Rogers claimed that congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding are necessary and sufficient conditions for interpersonal growth. Without all three, relationships stall. When all are present, closeness develops. If Rogers were right, Mitch and I should have been well on our way toward a healthy camaraderie by the end of the island course. Since we've now been friends for ten years, it appears that Rogers was right.

But one example doesn't prove a theory. How has the concept of "necessary and sufficient conditions" stood up under scrutiny in the years since Rogers put forth his hypothesis? William Lockhart of Ulster Polytechnic in Northern Ireland reviewed over three decades of research on Rogerian counseling and concluded that the results are mixed.

Before 1970 research on nondirective therapy confirmed the notion of necessary and sufficient factors for client improvement. But most of the published work was conducted by true believers in the humanistic approach. Their soft procedures and possible bias caused many outsiders to doubt the scientific value of the evidence. Research over the last two decades has shown greater objectivity and employed a methodology that stimulates confidence in the results.

The findings suggest that the three therapeutic qualities are important—perhaps essential—characteristics of a helping relationship. But their influence is greatest in the early stages of therapy, and they alone don't determine the worth of the counselor-client interaction. Apparently it's not enough that the counselor experience congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding. Somehow she or he must effectively communicate them to the client.

Rogers wasn't discouraged by research suggesting the three qualities are less important than he had stated. He had always maintained that the client is the best judge of whether or not the therapist had communicated these values. You might also remember that experience was Rogers' ultimate authority. He already had results from the only laboratory that counted for him, his relationships with clients.

Rogers could easily dismiss negative research findings as far as his own counseling was concerned. But a response of "all I know for sure is that this works for me" falls short of the requirements of a good theory stated in Chapter 1. Rogers' radical existential approach to knowledge makes prediction and testing impossible.

Yet no other therapist since Freud has had the widespread impact of Carl Rogers. This may be because his theory is easy to understand and easy to apply. It doesn't take a trained therapist to be genuine, warm, and attentive.

His popularity might also be due to his upbeat view of human nature, that people are basically trustworthy. Most of us would rather hear a message that affirms our human potential rather than one which points out our destructive tendencies.

Rogers' critics charge that his optimism was dangerous. They fear by glossing over the selfish acts that taint every human relationship, he gave license to "do your own thing" without regard to harmful consequences. New York psychologist Paul Vitz writes that Rogers' existential glorification of personal experience has created a cult of self-worship. Regardless of whether or not Vitz is right, his reaction is tacit evidence that Rogers' humanistic theory has become the dominant approach to developing close interpersonal relationships.

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1961.

Formal statement of theory: Carl Rogers, "A Theory of Therapy, Personality and Interpersonal Relationships, as Developed in the Client-Centered Framework," in *Psychology: A Study of Science*, Vol. 3, *Formulation of the Person and the Social Context*, S. Koch (ed.), McGraw-Hill, New York, 1959.

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Intensive group experience: *Carl Rogers on Encounter Groups*, Harper & Row, New York, 1970.

Humanism versus behaviorism: Carl Rogers and B. F. Skinner, "Some Issues Concerning the Control of Human Behavior," *Science*, Vol. 124, 1956, pp. 1057–1065.

Critique: Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1977.

20 Carl Rogers, "This Is Me," in *On Becoming a Person*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1961, p. 24.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

22 Carl Rogers, "The Characteristics of a Helping Relationship," *On Becoming a Person*, p. 52.

23 Carl Rogers, "This Is Me," p. 20.

24 Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, Vol. 3, Oxford Univ., London, 1941, pp. 402–403.