

An Study of Carl Rogers' Theory of Personality

Introduction

Actualizing Tendency

Rogers (1959) maintains that the human "organism" has an underlying "actualizing tendency", which aims to develop all capacities in ways that maintain or enhance the organism and move it toward autonomy. This tendency is directional, constructive and present in all living things. The actualizing tendency can be suppressed but can never be destroyed without the destruction of the organism (Rogers, 1977). The concept of the actualizing tendency is the only motive force in the theory. It encompasses all motivations; tension, need, or drive reductions; and creative as well as pleasure-seeking tendencies (Rogers, 1959). Only the organism as a whole has this tendency, parts of it (such as the self) do not. Maddi (1996) describes it as a "biological pressure to fulfill the genetic blueprint". Each person thus has a fundamental mandate to fulfill their potential.

Self

The human organism's "phenomenal field" includes all experiences available at a given moment, both conscious and unconscious (Rogers, 1959). As development occurs, a portion of this field becomes differentiated and this becomes the person's "self" (Hall & Lindzey, 1985; Rogers, 1959). The "self" is a central construct in this theory. It develops through interactions with others and involves awareness of being and functioning. The self-concept is "the organized set of characteristics that the individual perceives as peculiar to himself/herself" (Ryckman, 1993, p.106). It is based largely on the social evaluations he/she has experienced.

Self-Actualizing Tendency

A distinctly psychological form of the actualizing tendency related to this "self" is the "self-actualizing tendency". It involves the actualization of that portion of experience symbolized in the self (Rogers, 1959). It can be seen as a push to experience oneself in a way that is consistent with one's conscious view of what one is (Maddi, 1996). Connected to the development of the self-concept and self-actualization are secondary needs (assumed to likely be learned in childhood): the "need for positive regard from others" and "the need for positive self-regard", an internalized version of the

previous. These lead to the favoring of behavior that is consistent with the person's self-concept (Maddi, 1996).

Organismic Valuing and Conditions of Worth

When significant others in the person's world (usually parents) provide positive regard that is conditional, rather than unconditional, the person introjects the desired values, making them his/her own, and acquires "conditions of worth" (Rogers, 1959). The self-concept then becomes based on these standards of value rather than on organismic evaluation. These conditions of worth disturb the "organismic valuing process", which is a fluid, ongoing process whereby experiences are accurately symbolized and valued according to optimal enhancement of the organism and self (Rogers, 1959). The need for positive self-regard leads to a selective perception of experience in terms of the conditions of worth that now exist. Those experiences in accordance with these conditions are perceived and symbolized accurately in awareness, while those that are not are distorted or denied into awareness. This leads to an "incongruence" between the self as perceived and the actual experience of the organism, resulting in possible confusion, tension, and maladaptive behavior (Rogers, 1959). Such estrangement is the common human condition. Experiences can be perceived as threatening without conscious awareness via "subception", a form of discrimination without awareness that can result in anxiety.

Fully Functioning Person and the Self

Theoretically, an individual may develop optimally and avoid the previously described outcomes if they experience only "unconditional positive regard" and no conditions of worth develop. The needs for positive regard from others and positive self-regard would match organismic evaluation and there would be congruence between self and experience, with full psychological adjustment as a result (Rogers, 1959). This ideal human condition is embodied in the "fully functioning person" who is open to experience able to live existentially, is trusting in his/her own organism, expresses feelings freely, acts independently, is creative and lives a richer life; "the good life" (Rogers, 1961). It should be noted that; "The good life is a process not a state of being. It is a direction, not a destination (Rogers, 1961, p.186)". For the vast majority of persons who do not have an optimal childhood there is hope for change and development toward psychological maturity via therapy, in which the aim is to dissolve the conditions of worth, achieve a self congruent

with experience and restore the organismic valuing process (Rogers, 1959).

In Rogers' view (1959, 1961, 1977) personality change is certainly possible and is further a necessary part of growth. However, he notes that self-acceptance is a prerequisite (1961). Rogers originally failed to recognize the importance of "self". When he began his work he had the "settled notion that the "self" was a vague, ambiguous, scientifically meaningless term which had gone out of the psychologist's vocabulary with the departure of the introspectionists" (Rogers, 1959, p.200). However, through his work with clients he came to appreciate the importance of self. The "self" is described as the organized, consistent, conceptual gestalt composed of perceptions of the characteristics of the "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. (Rogers, 1959, p.200)

This gestalt is a fluid and changing process, available to awareness. By using the term "gestalt", Rogers points to the possibility of change describing it as "a configuration in which the alteration of one minor aspect could possibly alter the whole picture" (Rogers p.201). Rogers' conception of self is rather broad. He does describe a variation of self: the "ideal self" which denotes the self-concept the individual would most like to possess (Rogers, 1959), but other explicit variations are not offered. Similarly, specific concepts related to identity and identity development are missing, although the self image is certainly revisable and undergoes change over the lifespan. Exactly when the differentiation of phenomenal field into self occurs is also not specified. Rogers concept of self - actualization is specifically related to the self and is thus different from Goldstein's use of the term (which matches the actualizing tendency) and also different from Maslow's which appears to incorporate both tendencies in one (Maddi, 1996).

The actualizing tendency is fundamental to this theory. Rogers considers it "the most profound truth about man" (1965, p.21). He finds strong biological support for this tendency in many varied organisms. Rogers' conception of an active forward thrust is a huge departure from the beliefs of Freud and others who posit an aim for tension reduction, equilibrium, or homeostasis (Krebs & Blackman,

1988; Maddi, 1996). Rogers (1977) notes that sensory deprivation studies support this concept as the absence of external stimuli leads to a flood of internal stimuli, not equilibrium.

While the idea of an actualizing tendency makes sense, Rogers never specifies what some of the inherent capacities that maintain and enhance life might be. Perhaps it is because doing so might violate Rogers' "intuitive sense of human freedom" (Maddi, 1996, p.104). Maddi further suggests that the belief in inherent potentialities may lie in this theory's position as an offshoot of psychotherapy where it is useful for both client and therapist to have a belief in unlimited possibilities. However, applying this idea to all human beings in a theory of personality sets up the logical requirement of precision regarding what the potentialities might be (Maddi, 1996). The inherent potentialities of the actualizing tendency can suffer distorted expression when maladjustment occurs, resulting in behavior destructive to oneself and others. The actualization and self-actualization tendencies can be at cross purposes with each other when alienation from the true self occurs, so there is organismic movement in one direction and conscious struggle in another. Rogers (1977) revised his previous thinking concerning this incongruence, stating that while he earlier saw the rift between self and experience as natural, while unfortunate, he now believes society, (particularly Western culture), cultural conditions, rewards and reinforces behaviors that are "perversions of the unitary actualizing tendency (p.248)." We do not come into the world estranged from ourselves, socialization is behind this alienation. Rogers (1961) finds the human infant to actually be a model of congruence. He/she is seen as completely genuine and integrated, unified in experience, awareness and communication. Distorted perceptions from conditions of worth cause our departure from this integration.

There is some empirical support for the hypothesis that congruence between self and experience leads to better personality adjustment and less defensiveness (Chodorkoff, 1954; cited in Rogers, 1959). Some research has also tended to support the idea of changes in self-concept occurring as a result of therapy (Butler & Haigh, 1954; cited in Rogers, 1954). However, Maddi (1996) raises an interesting point regarding such studies. While it has been found that self-descriptions move toward ideals after counseling and one would assume the closer a person is to full functioning the smaller the

discrepancy would be, statements of ideals may be operational representations of conditions of worth, which are socially imposed. Conditions of worth are to be dissolved rather than moved toward for full functioning in this theory!

While Rogers sees the common human condition as one of incongruence between self and experience, this does not minimize his ultimate belief in the autonomy of human beings. Rogers (1977, p15) sees the human being as: "capable of evaluating the outer and inner situation, understanding herself in its context, making constructive choices as to the next steps in life, and acting on those choices". This illustrates a belief in agency and free will. While humans behave rationally, Rogers (1961, p.195) maintains that: "The tragedy for most of us is that our defenses keep us from being aware of this rationality so that we are consciously moving in one direction, while organismically we are moving in another." Unlike Freud, Rogers did not see conflict as inevitable and humans as basically destructive. It is only when "man is less than fully man", not functioning freely, that he is to be feared (1961, p.105). The human capacity for awareness and the ability to symbolize gives us enormous power, but this awareness is a double-edged phenomenon : undistorted awareness can lead to full functioning and a rich life, while distortions in awareness lead to maladjustment and a multitude of destructive behaviors (Rogers, 1965).

The "maladjusted person" is the polar opposite of the fully functioning individual (who was introduced early in this essay). The maladjusted individual is defensive, maintains rather than enhances his/her life, lives according to a preconceived plan, feels manipulated rather than free, and is common and conforming rather than creative (Maddi, 1996). The fully functioning person, in contrast, is completely defense-free, open to experience, creative and able to live "the good life". Empirical support for the fully functioning person is somewhat mixed. The openness to experience characteristic has been supported (Coan, 1972; cited in Maddi, 1996). However, some studies have found that openness to experience and organismic trusting did not intercorrelate, contrary to expectations (Pearson, 1969, 1974; cited in Maddi, 1996). Ryckmann (1993) notes that some studies have found non-defensive people are more accepting of others and Maddi (1996) cites numerous studies that indicate self-accepting people also appear to be more accepting of others.

It is somewhat puzzling given his humanistic emphasis on individuality, that Rogers describes only two extremes of people. Maddi (1996) suggests these extreme characterizations of only two types may be due to this personality theory being secondary to a theory of therapy. It is appropriate for a theory of psychotherapy to concern itself with the two extremes of fullest functioning and maladjustment. However, when theorizing about all people, two types are insufficient.

Carl Rogers was most interested in improving the human condition and applying his ideas. His person-centered therapy may well be his most influential contribution to psychology. Rogers' pervasive interest in therapy is what clearly differentiates him from Maslow, despite some similarities in their ideas. The person-centered approach has had impact on domains outside of therapy such as family life, education, leadership, conflict resolution, politics and community health (Krebs & Blackman, 1988). In my opinion, Rogers greatest contribution may lie in his encouraging a humane and ethical treatment of persons, approaching psychology as a human science rather than a natural science.

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