

2221 Theory & Practice 1: Lecture 10

CARL ROGERS (1902-1987)

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Everything you see or hear or experience in any way at all is specific to you. You create a universe by perceiving it, so everything in the universe you perceive is specific to you.

Douglas Adams¹

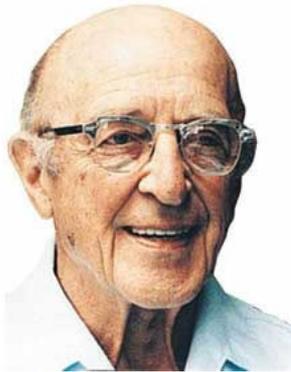
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INTRODUCTION

Carl Ransom Rogers was born the fourth of six children, five of whom were boys, into a fundamentalist²-leaning (rather than liberal) Christian household. His parents

¹ Adams, D. (1992). *Mostly harmless*. London: Heinemann. Adams is a humorist with serious ideas and intent. He wrote the famous, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. The accompanying book is the fifth book in the series.

² Fundamentalism was originally a movement designed to resist the inroads of liberalism in the church. The 'fundamentals' were a number of basic doctrines such as the virgin birth, the inerrancy of



were loving he recalls but controlling (Van Belle³, 1980: 8).

The family did not smoke, drink, gamble, dance, swear, go to theatres, or play cards. All these activities were considered ‘worldly’.⁴

Rogers remembers his mother’s two favourite sayings as, ‘Come ye out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord’, and ‘All our righteousness is as filthy rags in your sight, O Lord’. The above prohibitions and the separatist ideology of the Rogers’ family is in sharp contrast to Carl Rogers’ later life,¹²⁰ which is dominated by the importance of communication and of listening to those whom we may not agree with or do not have much sympathy for.

Hard work and discipline were the hallmarks of the Rogers’ household. Carl, on the other hand, was a dreamy soul, a loner, who loved to bury himself in books. His mother regarded books as a leisure activity, only to be indulged in after work had been done (Van Belle, 1980: 9).

The father was successful in his business as a civil engineer to the point where he was able to purchase a hobby farm; so, when Carl was 12, the family moved out of the suburbs of Chicago to the countryside. The father used all the latest scientific discoveries to better his farming output; this context also suited Carl who developed a strong interest in the growth of living things and in the experimental methods of science. The process of growth and the methods of science were later to play an important role in Rogers’ work.

He first studied agriculture and then decided to study for the church ministry. He went to Beijing with the *World Student Christian Federation Conference*. His new

scripture, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the vicarious suffering of Christ, and his pre-millennial return. However, fundamentalism also became more than a set of beliefs; it became an attitude towards other Christians who may have differed in any respect or were believed to differ in some respect with the fundamentalists.

³ He wrote his PhD thesis on Carl Rogers’ theories.

⁴ A common attitude held by many evangelical and Pentecostal denominations. Brethren Assemblies, open, closed and ‘exclusive’ were also separatist. The holiness movements of the 19th century were probably behind this development. Now seems to be almost extinct in the wider church.

experiences caused him to question his faith (somewhat like Bob Hawke!). He married a Helen Elliott – his parents disapproved -- moved to New York and began attending Union Theological Seminary, a well-know liberal institution. He became frustrated even with the progressivism of Union and asked to set up his own seminar, for credit, where the agenda would consist of student questions alone (The Norwich Centre, n. d: n. p).

This request was granted but a junior instructor was required to be present to observe. However, Rogers concluded that he could not stay in a profession that *required* him to believe specific doctrines. One of the subjects that had been discussed by students was, ‘Why am I entering the ministry?’ Most students, Rogers observed, ‘thought their way right out of religious work’ (Rogers, cited in Boeree, 1998: n. p.). Finally, Rogers moved across the road to Columbia Teacher’s College where he began a career in clinical psychology.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

According to Van Belle (1980: 30), Rogers must be understood within his U. S. context. Rogers was a North American. The U. S. was founded as a refuge from ecclesiastical domination in England, as a bastion of freedom⁵. The Puritan fathers sought to set up a federation in which individuals could choose, according to conscience, which Christian church⁶ they wished to worship in. Van Belle comments that two mighty cultural forces, derived from these fathers, vied for supremacy, particularly in the 19th century, namely Puritanism and Wesleyanism. The Puritans were strong Calvinists and therefore, believed that humankind lived under and were subject to the revealed will of God. The Wesleyans believed that God’s will could be thwarted by the free-will of humankind. This notion of freedom triumphed and, in time, became embedded into all areas of US life⁷.

Freedom from external constraint is a major concern for Rogers.

⁵ Its Statue of Liberty given to the state of NY, by the French government, illustrates this point.

⁶ These churches were essentially Protestant in character.

⁷ The reason that democracy is championed as the best system of political life is that it provides a nation’s citizens with freedom (to choose their own government). In Australia, we have the strange system whereby we are compelled! to present at a polling booth in order to freely elect our representatives. In this respect, Australia is unique among the democracies in the world.

Rogers was also influenced by 19th century Romanticism, being part of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's tradition which focussed on feeling being central to the meaning of being human. In addition, Rousseau also taught that the individual needs to be freed from society's constraints. [Rousseau's ideas have had a large affect on schooling and on our society in general.]

The general belief in Western societies is that individuals should be free to decide private matters for themselves but be prepared to submit to majority opinion in public matters⁸ (Van Bell, 1980: 30). Rogers was not happy with this state of affairs because the individual was always being constrained by society's wishes for him to conform. Furthermore, the prospects of actual societal change were bleak with such an outlook dictating. Whereas those before Rogers had talked about the individual being called to free society by his actions, Rogers called for a greater radicalism that asked for 'the society to free the individual' (Van Belle, 1980: 31). In emphasising the individual's choices, Rogers was doing no more than stressing what had been dominant within the U. S. culture from the beginning.

These two themes of feeling and individual freedom are central to Rogers' worldview as expressed in his theory and therapy.

SIMILARITIES TO FREUD

It might be surprising to think that Rogers' beliefs and work bear similarities to those of Freud's. Both became **humanists** after being brought up in devout Christian or Jewish homes. Humanism asserts that there is no reality beyond that of the human world, no supernatural God.

Yet interestingly, Carl Rogers, in an interview three years before his death, spoke of himself as being 'too religious to be religious' (Center for the Person, n. d: n. p). Rogers did not want to be associated with institutionalised religion⁹ but claimed that

⁸ Many problems exist in such a view, not the least being, trying to draw boundaries between public and private. Many Christians and Moslems find the notion of keeping God out of public matters inconsistent with the revelation they take to be authoritative for their faith.

⁹ So many of the educated elites are taking this position today.

‘spirituality’ was part of being human. Five years before his death he wrote, ‘All these accounts [of other people’s experiences] indicate that a vast and mysterious universe – perhaps an inner reality, or perhaps a spirit world of which we are all unknowingly a part – *seems to exist*’ (Rogers, cited in Wood, 1997, emphasis in original). Freud appeared to be a thorough-going atheist all his life yet Paul Vitz in *Sigmund Freud’s Christian Unconscious* has shown that he could not leave the question of God alone and kept writing about it into his old age. One of Freud’s closest friends into old age was a Protestant minister, Oscar Pfister!

Both these researchers were **scientists** who tried to verify their ideas through the employment of scientific methods. Indeed, Freud regarded himself as primarily a scientist who had discovered psychoanalysis, a scientific method for exploring the human psyche. Rogers’s work is dominated by the need to gain scientific support for his approach.

Both Freud and Rogers had their **issues with one or other of their parents**. For Freud, his father was weak, according to him, being unwilling to stand up for his rights as a Jew. Sigmund found this distressingly cowardly. Moreover, Freud’s image of the Oedipal conflict is an accurate portrayal of his own¹⁰ conflict with his parents. Rogers had an on-going fight with his mother who, he seemed to believe, refused to allow him to think for himself or be himself. Rogers’ therapy can be understood as a method designed to avoid authoritarianism¹¹ which was demanded if you believed that the individual was contaminated by sinful wilfulness.

Freud and Rogers together believed that **something within people drove their lives forward**. They understood this force differently but Freud understands humans to be driven by primal instincts; for Rogers they are powered by the actualisation process.

Society’s misconnection with the individual affects the consciousness of both. Freud understands that society curbs the urges of the *id* but he realises that society would not survive if this constraint did not happen. Hence, the drives of the *id* are

¹⁰ As numbers of commentators have pointed out, Freud generalised too readily from a small number of cases.

¹¹ Unfortunately, Rogers did not seem to be able to distinguish between authority and authoritarian.

sublimated and that produces civilising culture. Unlike Freud, Rogers has a more benign view of human nature and wants society to liberate the individual. One could even say that Rogers regards the id as benign and the superego as being responsible for our troubles. Nevertheless, both believe an opposition exists between society and individual.

Finally, both accept the idea of a **hidden self** (Prevos, 2005: n. p). According to Freud, the largest part of the mind is unconscious and therefore, hidden. And for Rogers, two selves exist, the hidden or real self (related to the actualisation tendency) and the ideal self (manufactured by the demands of society = Freud's superego).

MAIN IDEAS

1. *Human experiencing*

Wood (1997: n. p) has wisely counselled against relating Rogers' ideas to other philosophies such as existentialism and phenomenology. Rogers did encounter these standpoints¹² as he also discovered Martin Buber's *I and Thou* but he only accepted what accorded *with his own experience*. This phrase is fundamental to an understanding of Carl Rogers' work. Carl Rogers has said,

It is to [my] experience that I must return again and again; to discover a closer approximation to the truth as it is in the process of becoming in me. 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 (Rogers, cited in Jones and Butman, 1991: 257).

On this understanding, one's own experience is one's ultimate authority. He observes his clients and by using his own experience decides what he believes to be his truth about fundamental questions of good and evil.

Rogers' emphasis upon 'experience' is significant.

¹² Little doubt exists that Rogers is part of the humanistic movement which is associated with existentialism. However, the former is far more optimistic because of its belief that humanity has a nature that can be actualised. (Existentialists do not [usually] believe that we have a nature at all; all we have is naked choice with nothing to tell us how to decide!)

Some early psychologists (e.g., Wundt, Titchener, Dilthey) (Hurding, 1985: 40, 107), believed experience to be the subject matter of psychology itself. Van Belle (1980: 163), in a painstaking study of Rogers' work, defines experience as including 'all that is going on within the envelope of the organism at any given movement which is potentially available to awareness'.

Rogers' views are hard to understand if we fail to appreciate that for him, persons do not have inner structures, unless those structures are in process. Persons are dynamic processes. Rogers' great wish was for clients and others to become their experience, not to simply observe it. You don't merely accept that [specific] experience for what it is but 'you are to *become* the experience that you *are*' (Van Belle, 1980: 49, italics in original). Van Belle (1980: 49) further says that,

you become experience-centered. The self, as the thinker about, or the tinkerer with experience, must in effect die, or at least drastically reduce in importance for the growth forces of the experiential organism to bear their fruit.

2. View of the person

Humankind is not evil; humankind is good and positive at its core. Wars and other violence do not lie at the core of humanity but are contaminants of society, even though society is not intrinsically evil. However, authoritarianism is evil because it justifies its actions by believing humankind's core to be negative. The imposition of control upon others is based on mistrust in the goodness of others. Rogers is highly optimistic about the positive nature of humankind.

a) Actualising tendency

Both Boeree (1998: n. p.) and Pescitelli (1996: n. p.) understand the actualising tendency to lie at the centre of Rogers' theory. This tendency is akin to Freud's *eros* and is a life-force, not just for survival but also for making the best of an organism's¹³ existence (Boeree, 1998).

¹³ Unlike Maslow, Rogers applied the term to all living beings!

b) Organismic valuing

According to Rogers, organisms know what is good for them. Evolution has aided us to know what tastes good and bad. He called this ability, organismic valuing. Among the things that we value is *positive regard*, which includes ‘love, affection, attention, nurturance’ (Boeree, 1998). We also value *positive self-regard*, ‘that is, self-esteem, self-worth, a positive self-image’ (Boeree, 1998).

However, the idyllic picture of positive regard and positive self-regard is subverted by the society who imposes on us *conditions of worth*. If you are ‘worthy’ then you will get what you need. We get a sweet when we finish our vegetables; we get affection when we behave.

From this training under a regime of conditions of worth, the realities of *conditional positive regard* and *conditional positive self-regard* take shape. In the former, we ignore our organismic valuing process in order to receive the positive regard of our caregivers¹⁴. In the latter, we adopt the same attitude as our society and only like ourselves if we meet external societal standards. Our own organismic needs which would lead to our self-actualisation are not given a place. We have very little sense of self-worth because that is determined by conforming to an external standard.

3. Therapy

a) Therapeutic movement

Eugene Gendlin¹⁵, an important associate of Rogers, reported that Rogers was impressed by a statement of Otto Rank’s in which he said that he (Rank) did not interpret until ‘the patient stood in the very experience being interpreted’ (Rank, cited in Gendlin, 2003: n. p.). However, Rogers took this procedure a significant step further and, in line with his basic presuppositions, he refused to interpret others’ experience altogether.

¹⁴ Rogers struggled with the same issue that Freud did. Freud found a more positive place for society in the superego. Rogers sides completely with the id and regards it as benign. Freud, I think, was far more realistic.

¹⁵ Gendlin was a philosopher who wanted to help people. His *Foreword* presents some interesting points about Rogers whom he describes as ‘the quiet revolutionary’. Rogers was not a great ‘feeler’ and rarely showed anger. He cared about individuals but not about institutions. Nor did he have much time for status or authority.

Rogers did not seek to **interpret** accurately. He sought to understand what others were saying by saying aloud what he thought the patient was trying to say. [If this sounds obvious or commonplace, we have to remember that, until Rogers, no one had done this before.]

It might take a number of attempts to get this understanding right, to have the client say, 'Yes, that's right! That's how I feel!'

When this state was reached, 'a characteristic silence' would ensure. 'During such a silence, after something was fully received, the next thing comes within' (Gendlin, 2003).

Rogers understands talk to be doing something quite different from Freud (even if both shared a belief in the power of talk therapy). Rogerian talk therapy, if well done, promotes a 'self-propelled process' inside the client; it makes for 'new space inside', a deepening of experience that evolves, unfolds and self-corrects (Gendlin, 2003).

Therefore, Rogerian therapy can not be taught through learning various techniques. It is learnt through years of 'practice, supervision, and consultation, but academic education does not help' (Gendlin, 2003).

b) Therapeutic qualities

Certain qualities or attitudes are important for the counsellor to have. These conditions are **genuineness** or realness, **unconditional positive regard** and **accurate empathic understanding**.

i) genuineness or transparency

Genuineness means that I am real with the client and I share what I am experiencing with the client. I don't do this in a way that evaluates them or judges them but informs them about what I am experiencing. Genuineness may be contrasted to the psychoanalyst who hides his identity behind the mask of neutral observer.

ii) unconditional positive regard

Unconditional positive regard means that I do not place conditions on whether I will choose to take a positive stance towards this person. I do not say, 'You must conform to my expectations or my beliefs before I will accept you'. Some Christians believe that Rogers is giving us a secular version of agape love. (One notices his parental issue with the conditionality of his mother's regard for him being expressed.)

iii) accurate empathic understanding

Accurate empathic understanding is the therapist's endeavour to try to hear accurately what the client is saying and to, as much as possible, 'walk in her shoes'. Empathy is not sympathy. Sympathy means I feel what the client is feeling. Empathy is a more of a putting into language what the client is feeling as I sense it.

Rogers believed that if these conditions were provided to the client then positive change would occur. He judged them **necessary and sufficient conditions for 'effective' counselling**. Others have concluded that they might be necessary but they are not sufficient. Albert Ellis' Rational-Emotive-Behaviour Therapy would judge them also unnecessary.

These conditions cannot be learned as skills (or 'microskills'¹⁶). All we have is our ability to listen to the implicit affective level in the client's talk. This affective level seems to show up in such terms as 'felt sense' (Gendlin, 2003) where the counsellor tries to grasp the 'felt sense' of what the person with her is saying. Rogers (cited in Adams, 1970: 87) says that, 'the counsellor . . . must be prepared to respond not to the intellectual content of what the person is saying, but to the feeling which underlies it'. This quote comes from one of his earlier books of 1942.

4. Spiritualism

Another aspect of his later life is that he visited mediums with his wife who was 'a great sceptic about psychic phenomena and immortality' (Wood, 1997). After her death – she became gravely ill in 1978 – his interest in a possible after-life became more intense. He reports numbers of encounters he had with spirits.

¹⁶ The micro-skill approach to counsellor training was developed by applying behaviourist procedures to the qualities Rogers had identified, a development that Rogers deplored.

Wood (1997) has even described his psychotherapy as ‘mediumistic’ because of his descriptions of the altered state of consciousness that he experienced when counselling others. Just as a medium experiences an altered state so Rogers also describes how he feels ‘all of a piece’, ‘all focussed’, with his memory of the session being very poor *after* the event, ‘timeless’, and ‘a sort of trance-like feeling in the relationship from which both the client and I emerge at the end of the hour, as if from deep well or tunnel’ (Wood, 1997).

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