
Congruence: An integrative five-dimension model

Jeffrey H. D. Cornelius-White
Missouri State University

Abstract. There have been numerous discussions of the concept of congruence. This paper presents a five-dimension model that brings different aspects together, clarifying their similarities and differences. It articulates various characteristics of congruence, including what it means to be a person, relationships with other person-centered and experiential theoretical concepts, historical and conceptual contexts, and appropriate synonyms inherent in these discussions. The paper explores the different dimensions separately with the understanding that congruence in practice is a unified experience.

Keywords: congruence, awareness, organismic integration, ecology, theory

Kongruenz: Ein integratives Modell mit fünf Dimensionen

Es gibt bis heute zahlreiche Diskussionen des Kongruenzkonzepts. Dieser Artikel stellt ein Modell mit fünf Dimensionen vor, das verschiedene Aspekte zusammenbringt und ihre Ähnlichkeiten und Unterschiede klärt. Er artikuliert verschiedene Charakteristika von Kongruenz, darin inbegriffen, was es heißt, eine Person zu sein, Beziehungen mit anderen personzentrierten und experienziellen theoretischen Konzepten, historische und konzeptionelle Kontexte und angemessene Synonyme, die diesen Diskussionen inhärent sind. Der Artikel untersucht die verschiedenen Dimensionen einzeln, wobei davon ausgegangen wird, dass in der Praxis Kongruenz eine einheitliche Erfahrung ist.

Congruencia: Un modelo integrativo de cinco dimensiones

Ha habido numerosas discusiones acerca del concepto de congruencia. Este escrito presenta un modelo de cinco dimensiones que aúna diferentes aspectos, clarifica sus similitudes y diferencias. Articula varias características de la congruencia, incluyendo lo que significa ser persona, las relaciones con otros conceptos teóricos centrados en la persona y experienciales, contextos históricos y conceptuales, y sinónimos apropiados inherentes a estas cuestiones. El escrito explora las diferentes dimensiones en forma separada pero entendiendo que en la práctica la congruencia es una experiencia unificada.

La Congruence : Un modèle intégratif en cinq dimensions

Le concept de congruence a été le sujet de nombreuses discussions. Cet article présente un modèle de

Author Note. The author may be contacted at Missouri State University, 901 S. National Ave., Springfield MO 65897. Email: <jcornelius-white@missouristate.edu>.

congruence à cinq dimensions qui en rapproche les différents aspects et en clarifie leurs similarités et leurs différences. Il articule différentes dimensions de la congruence, y compris : les caractéristiques d'une personne qui fonctionne à son plein potentiel ; les liens avec d'autres concepts théoriques centrés sur la personne et expérientiels ; les contextes historiques et conceptuels ; les synonymes appropriés inhérents à ces discussions. L'article explore les différentes dimensions séparément en tenant compte du fait que, dans la pratique de la congruence, il s'agit d'une expérience unifiée.

Congruência: Um modelo integrativo em cinco dimensões

O conceito de congruência tem suscitado inúmeros debates. Este artigo apresenta um modelo em cinco dimensões que colige diferentes aspectos, clarificando as suas semelhanças e diferenças. São articuladas várias características da congruência, incluindo o significado de ser-se pessoa, relações com outros conceitos teóricos centrados na pessoa e experienciáveis, contextos históricos e conceptuais e sinónimos adequados inerentes a estas discussões. O artigo explora as diferentes dimensões separadamente mas sob o entendimento de que a congruência é, na prática, um conceito unificado.

一致：統合的五側面モデルの提示

一致の概念に関しては、これまで様々な議論がなされて来た。本論文は、「五側面モデル」を提案する事で、一致に関するこれまでの研究の共通点や相違点を明らかにし、それらの知見を統合する事を目的とする。さらに本稿では、人間である事とはそもそも何を意味するのか、他のパーソンセンタードアプローチや体験過程理論の概念と比較して一致はどのような関係にあるのか、一致の歴史的・概念的背景、一致に関する類義語、といった一致に関する多様な特徴を明らかにする。また、一致はセラピーの実践では統合された体験である事を考慮しつつも、一致の5つの側面をそれぞれ別々に考察する。

Congruence is often asserted to be the most difficult to understand concept in person-centered and experiential psychotherapies. It is sometimes referred to as the most important construct, the hardest concept to measure, and as the aim of all PCE work. There have been numerous elaborations of the concept (e.g. Bozarth, 1998, 2001; Brodley, 1998/2001; Cornelius-White, 2002, 2006a, 2007b; Ellingham, 2001; Grafanaki, 2001; Greenberg & Geller, 2001; Haugh, 2001; Klein, Michels, Kolden, & Chrisolm-Stockard, 2001; Lietaer, 2001; Seeman, 2001; Schmid, 2001, 2005; Wyatt, 2001, 2004). Many of these elaborations use the same constructs to mean different things, and language itself appears to be fuzzy in defining the central idea. Cornelius-White (2007b) has formulated a synthesis of this variety with the definition: "Congruence refers to the internal, relational, and ecological integration of persons" (p. 168).

This paper offers a five-dimension model of congruence and is intended to better organize and clarify the diversity of descriptions. Table 1 gives a shorthand summary of the conceptual model. The paper offers a heuristic to explore the different dimensions separately with the understanding that congruence in practice is a unified experience and the dimensions and their descriptors are not mutually exclusive. While it may appear that certain concepts fit better with certain schools of thought within person-centered and experiential therapies, it is the author's view that, to a large extent, this is mainly an artifact of the angle at which congruence is viewed. The classic metaphor of persons feeling something in the dark and thereby yielding different perspectives of a unified construct (an elephant) comes to mind.

The schools of person-centered and experiential approaches acknowledge and describe most, if not all, aspects of the five-dimension model, albeit in different ways and with different emphases. Likewise, while the model begins with ideas of congruence in Dimensions 1 and 2 (below) that are perhaps the most well known, they are admittedly culturally grounded in a Western view of the individual self as the primary identity construct.

Table 1
Congruence: An integrative five-dimension model

Dimensions of Consistency	Consistency between	Relationship to PC Theory	Contexts	Synonyms	Identity Constructs
0	Pre-consistent, Post-consistent	UPR to experience	Experiential Non-directive	Flow	Process, Tao
1	Attitudes	Genuinely empathic and unconditional	Early CCT, Realness	Genuineness	Sincere Person, Not a role
2	Self & Experience	UPR to self	Classical PCT, Awareness	Symbolization	Actualizing, Agentic
3	Self, Experience and Communication (to Other)	Transparent, spontaneous self-disclosure	Encounter, Dialogical	Authentic	Relational, Other first
4	Experience, Self, Other World	“Being the Change”	Systemic Holonic	Organismic Integration	Formative, Extensional, Transpersonal

PC: person-centered

CCT: client-centered therapy

UPR: unconditional positive regard

PCT: person-centered therapy

DIMENSION 1: GENUINENESS

Rogers introduced the concept of congruence with several related words and phrases, which often stood as contrasts to other approaches. These included “understanding of self” (1939, p. 238), a “genuinely different goal” (1942, p. 28) and “acceptance of self” (1951, p. 138). While congruence would not be conceptualized formally as a central construct until later, many of its implications and several of the dimensions discussed in this article were already present in Rogers’ early writings. Nevertheless, it is from an early use of genuineness that perhaps the most basic and unified meaning of the concept comes.

Congruence as a Dimension-1 concept is being real. Real or genuine means not playing a role. It means sincerity free from pretense. While a person might be sincerely selfish or judgmental from a particular worldview, within the person-centered approach, sincerity hypothetically involves the integration of the therapeutic attitudes of empathy and unconditional positive regard in the therapist. Rogers described how “the counselor is deeply and genuinely able to adopt these attitudes” (1946, p. 421), and later more formally states, “The wholeness of the therapist in the relationship is primary, but a part of the congruence of the therapist must be the experience of unconditional positive regard and the experience of empathic understanding” (1959, p. 215). Dimension-1 congruence is an integration of the attitudes in a real person who is genuinely empathic and unconditional.

DIMENSION 2: SYMBOLIZATION

Rogers’ formal theory statements in his early writings define congruence in terms of the consistency between self and experience. A person is congruent when the differentiated part (or “I”) of the phenomenal field is congruent with their lived experience. Bozarth (1998/2001) defines congruence as unconditional self-regard. A classical person-centered view of congruence is this matching of self and experience in awareness and not typically in communication (Brodley, 1998/2001). This view is rooted in the client as an actualizing whole organism in which suffering occurs when conditions of worth contribute to the denial and distortion of experience, fragmenting the phenomenal field into “me” and “not-me.” As the person is actualizing, the target of empathy is the client’s proactive and reactive agency rather than the “facts” of a person’s experience (Brodley, 2005), a view also resonant with experiential approaches which emphasize empathizing with the “deeper,” more personal, affective and/or meaningful aspects of a person’s narrative.

Rogers (1959) uses additional terms to describe Dimension-2 congruence and writes of “Awareness, Symbolization, Consciousness. These three terms are defined as synonymous” (p. 198). Symbolizations, whether internal in an individual or formed through empathy, “have varying degrees of sharpness or vividness” (p. 198). It is this vividness that forms roots for the evocative and poignant functions of the therapist seen in experiential approaches. Rogers also describes Dimension-2 congruence with the terms *availability to awareness* and *accurate symbolization*, terms that are more consistent with

a classical view. Whether vivid or accurate, Dimension-2 congruence is the consistency between self and experience.

DIMENSION 3: AUTHENTICITY

Wyatt (2001), Ellingham (2001) and others talk about the three-dimension model of congruence where there is a matching, not just between self and experience, but also with communication. Lietaer (2001) calls this Dimension-3 congruence *transparency*, referring to the use of self or self-disclosure of the symbolized experience. Classical theorists (e.g. Brodley, Raskin) assert that congruence is an internal concept, but that a therapist might nevertheless disclose in certain circumstances. Brodley (1998/2001) writes, such “responses are spontaneous, unsystematic, and emotionally expressive” (p. 71) and that disclosure “takes care and discipline and self-control” (p. 75). Dimension-3 congruence is a consistency between experience, self and communicativeness.

There is another implication of Dimension-3 congruence. If congruence is communicated or communicative, then another person is always involved. Schmid (2001) has clearly and convincingly argued that there is “one [congruent or] fundamental way of being, relating and acting” or, as he terms it, “*the encounter condition*” (pp. 220–221). In this sense, congruence is dialogical or relational. One cannot feel except in relation. One does not have awareness except through past, present or future empathy or have self-acceptance except through past, present or future unconditional positive regard. Even in 1959, Rogers states, “all perception (and I would like to add, all awareness) is transactional in nature” (p. 198). For Schmid (2001), authenticity is the “two unrenounceable dimensions of human existence: the substantial or individual aspect of being a person and the relational or dialogical aspect of becoming a person” (p. 214). In a pleasant twist compared to the traditional Western understanding of the third dimension of congruence as communicative, Schmid has also asserted that congruence is primarily (meaning both originally and saliently) an Other-first phenomenon (Schmid, 2001, 2006). Self-experience emanates from the Other. In this sense, one only knows and expresses oneself after first interacting with another. One sees and listens to another before one infers self-knowledge. For example, persons first know their mothers (or caregivers) before knowing themselves. Likewise, in each new encounter, one learns from another before learning from one’s self. Whether one views self or the other as primary, Dimension-3 congruence is a relational, dialogical integration between self, experience, and communication or connection with another.

DIMENSION 4: ORGANISMIC INTEGRATION

Throughout his career, Seeman (1983) wrote and researched a parallel construct to congruence called *organismic integration* from a person-centered human systems paradigm. Seeman defines organismic integration as “the adaptive and self-enhancing interaction among the behavioral

subsystems of the person” (as cited in Seeman, 2001, p. 204). Organismic integration is different and broader than Dimension-3 congruence because it refers not just to people as relational persons, but as biochemical and ecological/political ones. Cornelius-White (2007b) summarizes:

Whereas Rogers referred to experience, awareness and communication, Seeman’s system’s approach extended this to multiple dimensions and processes: the biochemical, physiological, perceptual, precognitive, cognitive, interpersonal, and ecological. These multiple dimensions and processes are linked through “connection and communication”; the connection between the multiple dimensions and processes is the “structure” whilst the “communication” or “resulting flow of information” between the different dimensions is the function. As a result multiple dimensions of the system mutually influence each other” (2001: 204–6). (pp. 171–172)

With mutual influence and a broader conception of a person than sincere (Dimension 1), internally consistent (Dimension 2), or relationally communicative (Dimension 3), Dimension-4 congruence asserts that persons are interconnected from the cellular to the ecological.

Rogers’ later postulation of the formative tendency provides an additional foundation for Dimension-4 congruence. The formative tendency is a dialectical expansion of the actualizing tendency, which Rogers (1980) defines as “an evolutionary tendency toward greater order, greater complexity, greater interrelatedness” and “exhibits itself as the individual moves from ... knowing and sensing below the dimension of consciousness, to a conscious awareness of the organism and the external world, to a transcendent awareness of the harmony and unity of the cosmic system, including humankind” (Rogers, 1980, p. 133). Cornelius-White (in press) explains, “Rogers sees that a positively interdependent ecology rather than actualization of the individual is a deepening of the basis for the person-centered approach.” Kriz (2006) defined this systemic conceptualization of the person as “our personal experience and understanding of the world, including the individual, social, political, and environmental perspectives. These structures function in our everyday experience without being explicitly conscious or even an object of reflection” (p. 62). Whether in human ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) or environmentally ecological terms (Assumpção & Wood, 2001; Cornelius-White, 2006c), persons are persons because they are parts of a larger system.

Schmid asserts a similar position in viewing a congruent person as both “autonomy and interconnectedness” in experience and perspective (2005, p. 83), and stating,

The person lives in more than one relationship, with more than one ‘Other’. Thus the ‘We perspective’ is the truly and genuine dialogical perspective. Even in one-to-one therapy ‘the Third One’ (as the metaphor for all others, relationships, and the external world) is always present: be it the subject talked about, the persons and relationships talked about, the context of the therapy, or the world as such ... Authenticity is a challenge for solidarity and autonomy. (2001, pp. 224–226)

An implication of Dimension-4 congruence, or meta-congruence, is that the person-centered approach is not centrally an approach to individual therapy (Schmid, 2001; Cornelius-White,

2006b). The person-centered approach is a primarily a way of being and becoming congruent. Congruence is extensional (Cornelius-White, 2006c; Rogers, 1959), which means as defined by Webster's unabridged international dictionary, a "quality or state of stretching out or forth, a carrying forward" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1976, p. 805). Wyatt (2004) writes that she adds

the "whole beyond the facets" to Rogers' three-dimension model of experience, awareness and behaviour ... the unexplainable, the mysterious that enters and influences us if we are open to this possibility Thus congruence denotes the coherence when the integral self is up and running, holding and facilitating the connection and communication between [widening circles of ecological and holonic identity] ... At a societal and global dimension there is the hope that the structures and processes will gradually transform in response to the qualitative nature of relating characterised by heart-based respect, understanding and caring. (pp. 6–11)

Similarly, Cornelius-White (2006b, 2006c, 2007b, 2007c) follows Gandhi in writing that congruence is *being the change you want to see in the world* or becoming inherently facilitative and encountering the world ecologically and politically, and Schmid (2001) makes a call to "authentically implement the essence of it [the approach] into all fields of life" (p. 226). Rogers (Rogers & Russell, 2002; Rogers, Cornelius-White, & Cornelius-White, 2005) himself seemed to move in this direction in the venues in which he applied the approach. Dimension-4 congruence is the extensional, systemic, and/or formative consistency between experience, self, other, and the world.

DIMENSION 0: FLOW

If Dimension-1 congruence is sincere consistency between one's therapeutic attitudes, Dimension 2 is consistency between self and experience, Dimension 3 is dialogical consistency and Dimension 4 ecological consistency, then Dimension-0 congruence is a quality beyond consistency between two or more aspects. It is the unity of being and doing. Dimension-0 congruence is less conceptual and more experiential; it is sometimes captured by descriptions of a nondirective attitude that trusts the process (Brodley, 2005). Dimension-0 congruence is following the Tao, or path, of unconditionality towards raw experience.

Dimension-0 congruence is perhaps best described with the word *flow*. Csikszentmihalyi (1998) popularized and extensively described the concept of flow. Using Csikszentmihalyi's characteristics, Cornelius-White (2007b) synthesizes several person-centered writings on congruence as flow:

Flow is characterized by clear preparation of goals. Greenberg and Geller (2001) term this aspect of congruence preparing the ground or bracketing irrelevant experiences. Flow also includes a sense of concentration. Grafanaki (2001) describes the practice of congruence as being entirely focused upon the shared relational experience. Flow involves a loss of self-consciousness. Wyatt (2001, p. 92) discusses

how self-consciousness fades in the transcendent congruent encounter experience. Bozarth (2001) terms the lack of self-consciousness of congruence as unconditional positive self-regard. Flow is feeling alive and feeling that experience as intrinsically rewarding. Greenberg and Geller (2001) portray the practice of congruence as being attuned to that which is most poignant. Finally, flow involves a transcendence of space–time boundaries. Rogers addresses space–time in his concept of extensionality while Greenberg and Geller (2001) discuss the melding yet separate experience. (pp. 13–14)

Dimension-0 congruence is a “receptivity and intimacy with the moment” (Greenberg & Geller, 2001, p. 146) and a “harmonized and undistorted rhythm of integration” (Seeman, 2001, p. 209).

DIFFERENTIATING AND INTEGRATING BETWEEN THE FIVE DIMENSIONS

This five-dimension conceptual model aims primarily to gather, clarify, and organize the wide variety of definitions of congruence. However, secondarily it aims to move towards an appreciation for the balance between subtle and specific differentiation and broad-based integration. As discussed in the introduction, people have described congruence differently based on the specific perspectives from which they viewed the phenomena, which in turn highlighted different aspects of congruence. When viewed together as a five-dimension model, one can see better how these perspectives are related. The dimensions are neither mutually exclusive nor necessarily co-existent. One dimension can exist with another or not. In other ways, the dimensions may offer a richer understanding for each individual idea by consideration of the other dimensional ideas.

For example, one can be a real, genuinely empathic and unconditional person (Dimension 1) and simultaneously aware and owning of one’s experience (Dimension 2), transparently self-disclosing (Dimension 3), organismically connected from the biological to the ecological (Dimension 4), and experiencing flow (Dimension 0) when one says, “I feel so excited with you I could jump for joy.” Likewise, one can experience flow (Dimension 0) with little consistency of attitudes, experience, self or other (Dimensions 1–4), only absorption in a task, such as when painting, knitting, planting, or washing the dishes. Likewise, some dimensions are more likely to occur when other dimensions are present. For example, realness of unconditional empathy for others (Dimension 1) is often an outcome of having awareness of and positive regard towards one’s own self and vice versa. Similarly, some dimensions of congruence may subsume or assume other levels as is the case with Dimension 3, where the phenomena of Dimension 2 are traditionally assumed to be present (e.g., Lietzer, 2001). One needs to have consistency between one’s self and one’s experience in order to transparently self-disclose that consistency. Similarly, one might conceptualize that Dimensions 3 and 4, which assert that a communicative element is always present, help explain how Dimensions

1 and 2 function by seeing that attitudinal or self-experience consistencies are also communicative processes (e.g., Seeman, 2001).

In other words, this model appreciates how the universal is found in the specific and the specific in the universal, while simultaneously acknowledging that the specific is unique and the universal is not inevitably relevant for the specific. The dimensions can be utilized to help explain each other while at the same time remaining singular conceptualizations. The overall human struggle to maintain and enhance has elements that include both differentiation and integration (Wexler & Rice, 1974) though congruence is nevertheless most frequently perceived or subceived as a unified experience.

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