

Rogers and Csikszentmihalyi on Creativity

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Abstract

This article examines the similarities and differences between the theories of Carl Rogers and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi regarding creativity and creative transformation. Both theorists emphasize the importance of the relationship between the individual and the environment, Rogers focusing on the therapeutic relationship and the role of creativity in personal transformation and self-actualization, and Csikszentmihalyi examining the role of the community system in supporting novel and transformational ideas. Both see creativity as a quality that can emerge given the right circumstances, and this invites us to consider the role we play as therapists in bringing about the creativity of our clients and community members.

Keywords: Creativity, Carl Rogers, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

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*It has been found that when the individual is open to all of his
experience, then his behavior will be creative*

–Carl Rogers

To be human means to be creative

–Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Rogers on Therapeutic Personality Change

In 1954, Carl Rogers published “Towards a Theory of Creativity”, and in 1957, Rogers defined the necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. Thirty years later, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi determined the conditions necessary for creativity and the state of flow. There is significant overlap in Rogers and Csikszentmihalyi’s theories, and this invites us to consider creativity as being both deeply human and deeply transformative. While Rogers approached creativity as part of an individual’s process of therapeutic transformation and self-actualization, Csikszentmihalyi sees creativity as a phenomenon bringing about transformation of a system, placing emphasis on the importance of the relationship between the individual and the system. Despite Rogers’ and Csikszentmihalyi’s differing beliefs regarding the location and purpose of the transformation resulting from creativity, both see creativity as resulting from the individual’s relationships, and not occurring solely within the individual.

Rogers (1957) listed the following as the necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic personality change:

1. Two persons are in psychological contact.
2. The first person, referred to as the client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable or anxious.
3. The second person, referred to as the therapist, is congruent or integrated in the relationship.
4. The therapist experiences unconditional positive regard for the client.

5. The therapist experiences an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and endeavors to communicate this experience to the client.
6. The communication to the client of the therapist's empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved (p.96).

These conditions are essential, since according to Rogers, the therapist's attitude is more critical to the success of therapy than any specific technique (1946, p.420).

Congruence is the quality of the therapist to be "freely and deeply himself, with his experience accurately represented by his awareness of himself" (Rogers, 1957, p.97). Kolden and Klein (2011) refer to this quality as being "mindfully genuine," requiring of the therapist a "capacity to communicate his or her experience with the client to the client," not "hiding behind a professional role" (p.65). Congruence seeks to balance power between the therapist and the client, allowing them to work as partners and "co-experiencers" of the therapeutic event.

Unconditional positive regard can be defined as "nonpossessive warmth" (Farber, 2011, p.58) where "What was curative was not neutrality, abstinence, or interpretations of resistance, but a more open and supportive relationship, interpretations that fit their unique experiences, empathy, praise, and the feelings that they were liked by their analyst" (Farber, 2011, p.58). Rogers describes unconditional positive regard as "experiencing a warm acceptance of each part of the client's experience as being a part of that client" (1957, p.98), where the therapist cares about the client in way that honors the client's unique and separate identity.

Empathy is the quality of the therapist assuming the "internal frame of reference of the client" (Bozarth, 2002, p.150), where the therapist clarifies the client's feelings, and emphasizes a broader understanding of the way in which the client views the world" (p. 150). Empathy lets clients know that the therapist is with them, clearly witnessing their subjective experience, without judgment, and without adding anything extra. Rogers explains that the quality of empathy

refers to the ability “to sense the client’s world as if it were your own”, without your own emotions “getting bound up in it” (1957, p. 99).

Rogers outlines the three characteristics of a “person after therapy.” The first is “that the person is open to his experience” (1963, p.18). Rogers explains that this is the “polar opposite of defensiveness,” where the client is able to experience any internal or external stimulus without distortion resulting from defense mechanisms (1963, p. 18). The second characteristic is “that this person would live in an existential fashion” (Rogers, 1963, p.19). Rogers explains this to mean that a person is open to her immediate experience without defensiveness; the self emerges from this direct experience, and not from a distortion of experience based on a contrived self-identity. One is relating to and observing raw experience, and not attempting to control or shape it.

The third characteristic is that “this person would find his organism a trustworthy means of arriving at the most satisfying behavior in each existential situation” (Rogers, 1963, p.19). Once able to trust his own sense of what is “right” in a given moment, he can use this sense to guide his behavior. From a place of acceptance of one’s experience, actions become informed, intentional, and authentic.

Rogers and Csikszentmihalyi on Creativity

We see similar themes in Rogers’ theories of creativity. Rogers (1954) points out, “The mainspring of creativity appears to be the same tendency which we discover so deeply as the curative force in psychotherapy—man’s tendency to actualize himself, to become his potentialities” (p. 251). Rogers sees a strong connection between what happens during the therapeutic process, and what happens during the creative process, and from this we can surmise that the necessary and sufficient conditions for personality change may also bring about creativity.

For Rogers, creativity is defined broadly: Creativity is not, in my judgment, restricted to some particular content. I am assuming that there is no fundamental difference in the creative process as it is evidenced in painting a picture, composing a symphony...or creating new formings of one’s own personality as in psychotherapy (1954, p. 250).

Rogers clearly sees that when a therapeutic relationship supports free expression, authentic creativity can emerge. Rogers believed strongly in the potential of all human beings to creatively express themselves, and to creatively bring about their own personality change, pointing out, “Intimate knowledge of the way in which the individual remolds himself in the therapeutic relationship with originality and effective skill, gives one confidence in the creative potential of all individuals” (1954, p.251).

Rogers lists the conditions that foster creativity, first explaining, creativity must be permitted to emerge, and cannot be forced. For this to occur, psychological safety and the individual’s unconditional worth must be established. This will allow the client to let go of rigidity and to “actualize himself in new and spontaneous ways” (1954, p.257).

Rogers draws a parallel between therapy and creativity; “My experience in psychotherapy leads me to believe that by setting up conditions of psychological safety and freedom, we maximize the likelihood of an emergence of constructive creativity” (1954, p. 256). Rogers stresses that creativity *emerges*, implying that the potential of its expression always exists, but may not be expressed until a receptive environment is made available. Rogers believes that all humans have the potential for creativity and therapeutic change, and it is not the therapist’s role or responsibility to control or activate this process.

Rogers identifies openness to experience as being a necessary condition for creativity, as well as a characteristic of a fully functioning person. He describes a fully functioning, and therefore, creative person, as experiencing psychological freedom, spontaneity, tolerance for ambiguity, and acceptance of the moment, undistorted by defensiveness, rigidity, and inhibition. This profound openness and availability of direct experience, reinforces the idea that Rogers saw therapeutic personality change and creativity as deeply intertwined. Rogers explains, “With his sensitive openness to his world, his trust of his own ability to form new relationships to his environment, he would be the type of person from whom creative products and creative living emerge” (1963, p. 22).

The second condition for creativity is creating an environment without external judgment, and the third is the therapist understanding the client empathically. Rogers explains, “When we cease to form

judgments of the other individual from our own locus of evaluation, we are fostering creativity” (1954, p. 257). The therapist strives to understand things in the way that the client experiences the world. According to Rogers, evaluation can cause defensiveness, which compromises the client’s complete openness to experience. Seeing from the client’s point of view, and avoiding interpretation or evaluation based on criteria other than that of the client, creativity can safely emerge. Rogers explains further:

If I understand you empathically, see you and what you are feeling and doing from your point of view, enter your private world and see it as it appears to you- and still accept you- then this is safety indeed. In this climate you can permit your real self to emerge, and to express itself in varied and novel formings as it relates to the world (1954, p. 258).

The fourth condition is psychological freedom, which allows the individual the flexibility to be true to her authentic innermost self. From this place, openness, spontaneity, and the “juggling of precepts, concepts, and meanings, which is a part of creativity” (1954, p. 258) can emerge. If the previous conditions of psychological safety, unconditional worth of the client, empathic understanding, and a lack of external evaluation are present, then psychological freedom can emerge.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s theories of creativity parallel Rogers’s theories in many ways. Csikszentmihalyi lists the conditions that foster creativity, and explains, “Creativity is more likely in places where new ideas require less effort to be perceived” (1996, p. 9). This parallels with Rogers’s emphasis on empathy, where the therapist aims to take on the “internal frame of reference of the client” (Bozarth, 2002, p.150), and to have “broad understanding of the way in which the client views the world” (p. 150). Further, Csikszentmihalyi warns, “If too few opportunities for curiosity are available, if too many obstacles are placed in the way of risk and exploration, the motivation to engage in creative behavior is easily extinguished” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p.11). In order for creativity to emerge, the environment must support novel expression and offer the psychological safety Rogers describes.

Csikszentmihalyi takes the importance of a supportive environment one step further, emphasizing, “creativity does not happen inside people’s heads, but in the interaction between a person’s thoughts and sociocultural context. It is a systemic rather than individual phenomenon” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p.23). This is a critical distinction to make, and challenges the myth of the “creative genius” by placing the responsibility for the creative “magic” on the community, surroundings, and relationships of the creator.

Csikszentmihalyi explains further, “It is easier to enhance creativity by changing conditions in the environment than by trying to make people think more creatively” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p.1). This parallels with Rogers’s belief in the creative potential of all individuals. According to both Rogers and Csikszentmihalyi, the more the environment aims to understand and support creative expression, the more creative expression will emerge.

Rogers (1954) lists the “concomitants of creativity,” which one could imagine are concomitants of entering therapy. Rogers talks about the “anxiety of separateness,” explaining:

I do not feel that many significantly creative products are formed without the feeling, “I am alone. No one has ever done just this before. I have ventured into territory where no one has been. Perhaps I am foolish, or wrong, or lost, or abnormal” (p.256).

Rogers adds to this the desire to communicate with “a group which will understand him, even if he must imagine such a group” (p. 256). This motivation to find “someone who understands” may be a result of the “constructive forces” Rogers describes as residing “inside of the client,” forces whose “strength and uniformity have been entirely unrecognized or grossly underestimated” (1946, p. 418). The hope and intention behind self-expression, whether creative, cathartic, or narrative, is to reach someone who can understand without judgment.

The creative process mirrors the process of therapeutic change in that it begins with some sort of struggle. Rogers would call this struggle incongruence, where part of the client is distorted or unacceptable to her in some way. Csikszentmihalyi describes this as a conflict or tension, theorizing, “the creative process starts with a sense that there is a puzzle somewhere, or a task to be accomplished.

Perhaps something is not right, somewhere there is a conflict, a tension, a need to be satisfied” (1996, p. 95).

Csikszentmihalyi defines one of the critical initial stages of creativity as one of *incubation*, where “the process of creativity usually goes underground for a while” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 98). This could be compared to the process of therapy, where important aspects and details move into conscious awareness as the client becomes ready to work with them. Csikszentmihalyi talks about this initial stage of pre-conscious creativity as critical, because “the content of the conscious line of thought is taken up by the subconscious, and there, out of reach of the censorship of awareness, the abstract scientific problem has a chance to reveal itself for what it is- an attempt to come to terms with a very personal conflict” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 100). In addition to the psychological safety provided by the environment, additional safety can be provided by the subconscious.

Csikszentmihalyi on Flow

Csikszentmihalyi describes the state of *flow*, the “optimal experience” of an “almost automatic effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 110). Csikszentmihalyi believes that this optimal experience is more likely to occur when obstacles or threats to the self are removed, in “situations in which attention can be freely invested to achieve a person’s goals, because there is no disorder to straighten out, no threat for the self to defend against” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 40). Although an initial conflict or struggle may bring someone into relationship with their creativity, Csikszentmihalyi believes that in order for creativity to flourish, the self needs to be supported, and threats to the self need to be minimized. Although Csikszentmihalyi believes that creative individuals are resilient, explaining, “Creative individuals are remarkable for their ability to adapt to almost any situation and to make do with whatever is at hand to reach their goals” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 57), for creative expression to thrive and reach a state of flow, a supportive environment without threats to the self is necessary. Rogers would agree, and again tells us “My experience in psychotherapy leads me to believe that by setting up

conditions of psychological safety and freedom, we maximize the likelihood of an emergence of constructive creativity” (1954, p. 256).

Csikszentmihalyi describes creative individuals as being able to engage in “divergent thinking,” which “leads to no agreed upon solution. It involves fluency, or the ability to generate a great quantity of ideas; flexibility, or the ability to switch from one perspective to another; and originality in picking unusual associations of ideas” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 60). This is similar to Rogers’s description of “openness to experience” which he lists as a condition for creativity. As mentioned previously, Rogers describes a “lack of rigidity and permeability of boundaries in concepts, beliefs, perceptions, and hypotheses. It means a tolerance for ambiguity where ambiguity exists. It means the ability to receive as much conflicting information without forcing closure upon the situation” (1954, p. 254).

Perhaps the portion of Csikszentmihalyi’s writing that most strongly echoes Rogers’s view on the role of the therapist in creating an environment supportive of creativity is the chapter on Jonas Salk, the medical researcher and virologist who developed the polio vaccine. Salk’s description of the power of collaboration strongly parallels Rogers’s view of the role of the therapist as being a partner in the client’s process of self-actualization. Salk tells us “minds have to harmonize. There’s something of a think-alike quality, openness, a receptivity, a positive rather than a negative attitude” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p.284).

In this way, the goal is that the therapist and the client will reach a shared state of flow. As Bohart and Byock discovered in their 2005 ethnographic investigation, “An unexpected finding was how interwoven the therapy encounter seemed, suggesting it may be more meaningful to talk about therapist and client co-thinking and co-experiencing” (p. 187). Rogers described this experience of the therapist as living in the “immediacy of the relationship” (Bohart and Byock, 2005, p.187), and Bohart and Byock describe it as a “dance like quality...thinking together, getting lost together, and finding our way out together” (2005, p. 195).

Differences Between Rogers’s and Csikszentmihalyi’s Theories of Creativity

Although there are clearly many strong parallels between Rogers and Csikszentmihalyi's beliefs about how to foster creativity, there are some differences to note. Although Csikszentmihalyi tells us "To be human means to be creative," he defines creativity as "to bring into existence something genuinely new that is valued enough to be added to the culture" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p.25), and "any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain, or that transforms an existing domain into a new one" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p.28). The title "creative" is given to expression seen as novel in relation to the surrounding culture, domain, or community, and that is novel enough to create change within that culture, domain, or community.

Rogers (1954) defines the creative process as "the emergence in action of a novel relational product, growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand, and the materials, events, people, or circumstances on the other" (p. 251). Rogers points out, "the very essence of the creative is its novelty, and hence we have no standard by which to judge it" (p.252). Rogers leaves room in the definition of creativity for the creator to define whether the expression is indeed novel, going as far to say that anyone other than the creator cannot be a valid or accurate judge. This is in contrast to Csikszentmihalyi's emphasis on the creative expression serving to transform the culture or the domain. For Rogers, as long as it serves the process of transforming the creator, it is seen as a valid and useful act of creativity. For Rogers, the "primary motivation" for creativity is for the "organism" to "form new relationships to the environment in its endeavor most fully to be itself" (p.252).

This is not a surprise considering Rogers' take on the subjectivity of reality. Rogers explains:

The only reality I can possibly know is the world as I perceive and experience it at this moment. The only reality you can possibly know is the world as you perceive and experience it at this moment. And the only certainty is that those perceived realities are different (Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1989, p. 422).

When applied to creativity, we can see how Rogers values creative expression as both a function and a result of the process of

self-actualization, and thus, objective judgment or evaluation is unnecessary, irrelevant, and counter-productive.

Conclusion

Both Rogers and Csikszentmihalyi have brought profound awareness to the power and vital importance of creativity to transform individuals, their relationships, and their surrounding environments. Although Rogers emphasizes creativity in service of self-actualization, and Csikszentmihalyi emphasizes creativity as a way to actualize the potential of a community, both see the potency in this authentically human process.

Rogers and Csikszentmihalyi both emphasize the potential of an individual's relationships to foster creativity, and this invites us to examine whether our approach with our clients, and our relationship with members of our communities, is truly supportive of their creativity and therapeutic growth. While it may be tempting to focus our efforts on a specific outcome or intervention, focusing instead on providing an environment that supports creativity may bring about more profound change.

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