

EXAMINING UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD AS THE PRIMARY CONDITION OF THERAPEUTIC PERSONALITY CHANGE

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ABSTRACT. *This paper compares Rogers' early formulation of the theory of personality and behavior (Rogers, 1951), which has become known as "The Nineteen Propositions," with his main statement of personality theory (Rogers, 1959). The theoretical developments which took place during those few intervening years, particularly in relation to unconditional positive regard, throw some light on, and support, Jerold Bozarth's reconceptualization of unconditional positive regard as "the primary condition of therapeutic personality change" (Bozarth, 1996, p.44). In this paper I want to describe those changes and demonstrate their importance to the development of person-centered theory*

Rogers' Personality Theories

"A Theory of Personality and Behavior" appeared as Chapter 11 of *Client-centered Therapy* (Rogers, 1951, pp. 481-533) and was a reformulation of an earlier paper on the organization of personality (Rogers, 1947). The theory was presented as a series of propositions with a brief explanation of each, and has become commonly known as *The Nineteen Propositions*. However, Rogers considered this theoretical statement to be "tentative" (1951, p. 482) and presented it as a work in progress; some propositions are presented even "where it seems uncertain that they adequately account for all the phenomena" (1951, p. 482).

Some of these propositions must be regarded as assumptions, while the majority may be regarded as hypotheses subject to proof or disproof. Taken as a whole, the series of propositions presents a theory of behavior which attempts to account for the phenomena previously known, and also for the facts regarding personality and behavior which have more recently been observed in therapy (Rogers, 1951, p. 482).

The theory draws upon experience and research in client-centered therapy and incorporates the findings of many other workers in the field. A central idea in the theory is the relationship between the concept of the self and individual experience and its relevance to psychological adjustment:

This theory is basically phenomenological in character, and relies heavily upon the concept of the self as an explanatory construct. It pictures the end-point of personality development as being a basic congruence between the phenomenal field of experience and the conceptual structure of the self (Rogers, 1951, p. 532).

Rogers' later version of personality theory (1959) is part of a larger enterprise which defines forty theoretical constructs, and also covers a theory of therapy, a theory of interpersonal relationships and a theory of the fully functioning person, and which also includes implications for family life, education, group leadership and group conflict. In relation to the theory of personality, Rogers maintains that its purpose is to provide "a tentative understanding of the human organism and the developing dynamics - an attempt to make sense of this person who comes to us in therapy" (Rogers, 1959, p. 192). Although, as we can see, the emphasis is again on a "tentative understanding," Rogers notes that "the initial propositions of this theory are those which are furthest from the matrix of our experience and hence are most suspect" (1959, pp. 221-222). As we shall see later in this paper, there is a high level of certainty and confidence expressed in those sections dealing with the nature and conditions of therapeutic change, and a general attempt to present ideas and concepts more rigorously.

In particular, the long section covering the definitions of key constructs (Rogers, 1959, pp. 194-212) reflects this higher level of confidence and a new concern for rigor. Rogers states that an understanding of these definitions is crucial to understanding the new theory:

In the development of our theories various systematic constructs have emerged, gradually acquiring sharper and more specific meaning. Also terms in common usage have gradually acquired somewhat specialized meanings in our theoretical statements. These definitions supply the means by which the theory may be more accurately understood (Rogers, 1959, p. 194).

Each of the main concepts is introduced and discussed in some detail in the section titled *Definitions of constructs*, and whenever these terms are used in the subsequent theories they are italicized to refer the reader back to "this section for the exact meaning of each such term" (Rogers, 1959, p. 194).

It may be worth making a slight digression at this stage to emphasize the importance of these definitions for understanding the new theory of personality. In its original form, this paper appeared as a chapter in a book *Psychology: A Study of a Science, Volume 3: Formulations of the Person and the Social Context* (Rogers, 1959) which presented a very diverse range of topics by a number of distinguished authors. This book has been out of print and hard to acquire for some time. The most accessible source of this paper is now *The Carl Rogers Reader* (Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1990). However, it is curious that in this form it does not include the section on the definitions of constructs and yet still retains the italicized words in the main text which refer to that section. Furthermore, it does not contain the detailed commentaries and discussions which Rogers provides throughout this paper, comments which elaborate on and help to explain the significance of the points being made and their relation to the whole theory. By missing out these parts of the original paper, much of importance is lost. It is most unfortunate that this is the source that is most commonly referred to in the current literature.

The *Definition of constructs* is organized into eleven main “clusters of concepts”, each with a focal concept. The eighth and ninth clusters on Unconditional positive regard and Conditions of worth are both attributed to Standal (1954), and Rogers notes: “The concepts in the group of definitions which follow have all been developed and formulated by Standal, and have taken the place of a number of less satisfactory and less rigorously defined constructs” (Rogers, 1959, p. 207).

These concepts form the basis of all of the new ideas in the new theory of personality, and the concept of *Conditions of worth* replaces the earlier notion of *introjects*. The theory is presented as a series of propositions and commentaries as before (although I have never heard it referred to as “The Thirty-One Propositions”) but this time they are broken up into sections A through J, with some sections having up to six propositions and some propositions having additional subsections to provide elaboration and discussion. The sections are presented as a developmental sequence as follows:

- A. Postulated Characteristics of the Human Infant
- B. The Development of the Self
- C. The Need for Positive Regard
- D. The Development of the Need for Self-Regard
- E. The Development of Conditions of Worth
- F. The Development of Incongruence between Self and Experience
- G. The Development of Discrepancies in Behavior
- H. The Experience of Threat and the Process of Defense
- I. The Process of Breakdown and Disorganization
- J. The Process of Reintegration

This developmental sequence is a clear improvement on the previous theory in several important ways. First, it introduces and elaborates on the new constructs of positive regard (Section C), self-regard (Section D) and conditions of worth (Section E) which are all derived from the work of Standal mentioned above, and which were only hinted at in *The Nineteen Propositions* (most notably in the long discussion to propositions IX and X; Rogers, 1951, pp. 498-503). These new constructs have an important place in the new theory in explaining the process of distorting or denying aspects of experience (Section F). There are also further and more detailed discussions of the experience of threat and the process of defense (Section H), and a new section (Section I) on the process of breakdown and disorganization (which is covered briefly in the original discussion to proposition XVI; Rogers, 1951, pp. 515-517). There is also a much clearer statement on the importance of unconditional positive regard in the process of personality integration (Section J). The following notes outline these new developments in some detail.

New Developments In The 1959 Theory

The new theory provides much more detail on the development of conditions of worth and the significance of this to the processes of symbolizing experience. Rogers shows how conditions of worth derive from the need for positive regard and the need for self-regard. First of all, after briefly discussing the development of the self (where the reader is directed to the section of definitions for a more detailed account), positive regard is introduced and described as a universal need in human beings which is “pervasive and persistent,” (Rogers,

1959, p. 223) and closely linked to self awareness. Rogers notes that positive regard is reciprocal as it is rewarding both to experience the satisfaction of one's own need *by* another and to satisfy the need *in* another. The need for positive regard is such a potent need that "the expression of positive regard by a significant social other can become more compelling than the organismic valuing process" (Rogers, 1959, p.224).

In other words, the positive regard of significant others can become more important to the individual than those *experiences* which are of positive value in actualizing the organism. Here is the first hint of the idea that is developed later that some experiences can become distorted or denied. However, at this stage, it is the experience of positive regard that is the important factor, and one which meets a strong need closely linked to the emergence of self awareness.

This experience of positive regard in an individual develops into a need for *self-regard* in the following way. The individual associates some self-experiences with the satisfaction of the need for positive regard and some self-experiences with the frustration of that need, depending upon his interactions with significant others. In other words, the self-experiences themselves become associated with the satisfaction or frustration of this need. The individual knows that some transactions will satisfy the need for positive regard and others will not. "The individual thus comes to experience positive regard or loss of positive regard independently of transactions with any social other. He becomes in a sense his own significant other" (Rogers, 1959, p. 224).

When self-experiences of the individual are discriminated by significant others as being more or less worthy of positive regard then self-regard becomes similarly selective. This was referred to in the 1951 theory in proposition X (Rogers, 1951, p. 498) in terms of values which are *introjected* or taken over from others. The new formulation is that when a self-experience is sought or avoided solely because it is more or less worthy of self-regard, the individual has acquired conditions of worth (Rogers, 1959, p. 224).

This discussion of the need for positive regard and its development into self-regard and conditions of worth provides a missing link in terms of explaining the development of incongruence between self and experience. This incongruence was originally explained in the discussion of proposition XI (Rogers, 1951, pp. 504-505) in terms of experiences being *consistent* or *inconsistent* with the self-structure. In the present elaboration, conditions of worth become the basis of the explanation as follows. Those experiences which are in accord with the conditions of worth are perceived and symbolized accurately. Experiences which run contrary to conditions of worth are perceived selectively and distortedly as if in accord with the conditions of worth, or are in part or whole denied to awareness. The state of incongruence between self and experience is still seen as the basis of psychological maladjustment as before, but now the nature of this incongruence is explained more fully in terms of conditions of worth.

After two further sections (Rogers, 1959, pp. 227-230) which present new material on 1) the experience of threat and the process of defense and 2) the process of breakdown and disorganization, Rogers goes on to consider the process of reintegration (Rogers, 1959, p. 230-231) in the final section of the theory. It is here that significant differences exist between the two formulations of the theory which are relevant to the present discussion. Bozarth focuses his attention on this section in his own paper as it "further clarifies unconditional

positive regard as being the fundamental component for personality change in the theory” (1996, p. 47).

Empathic Unconditional Positive Regard

In the original formulation of the theory, proposition XVII “endeavors to state the way in which change may come about” (Rogers, 1951, p. 517). At this stage in the development of person-centered theory, many years before the publication of the necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic personality change (Rogers, 1957), the main condition was formulated as the complete absence of threat to the self-structure: “Under certain conditions, involving primarily complete absence of any threat to the self-structure, experiences which are inconsistent with it may be perceived, and examined, and the structure of self revised to assimilate and include such experiences” (Rogers, 1951, p. 517).

Rogers then goes on to point out the importance of acceptance in the therapeutic relationship as a way of providing this condition of complete absence of threat to the self-structure: “In therapy of a client-centered form, by means of the relationship and the counselor’s handling of it, the client is gradually assured that he is accepted as he is, and that each new facet of himself which is revealed is also accepted” (Rogers, 1951, p. 517).

In a climate of complete acceptance, the client is able to explore previously denied experience through “the self-initiated apprehension of the new material” (Rogers, 1951, p. 518):

Exploration of experience is made possible by the counselor, and since the self is accepted at every step of its exploration and in any change it may exhibit, it seems possible gradually to explore areas at a “safe” rate, and hitherto denied experiences are slowly and tentatively accepted just as a small child slowly and tentatively becomes acquainted with a frightening object (Rogers, 1951, p. 518).

Rogers also suggests that another factor may be the client’s introjection of the counselor’s attitude of acceptance. However, this second factor is identified as only “a temporary or partial step toward the client’s experiencing of himself as acceptable” (Rogers, 1951, p. 518).

So, to summarize, the primary condition for therapeutic personality change in 1951 was seen as the complete absence of threat to the self-structure. This condition may be achieved through secondary conditions which are 1) that the client feels fully accepted and received in the therapeutic relationship, 2) that the client temporarily introjects the counselor’s attitude of acceptance, and 3) that the client is able to perceive on his own initiative and without any promptings by the counselor new material which was previously distorted or denied to awareness. This early formulation of the conditions for therapeutic change developed into the well known “necessary and sufficient conditions” (Rogers, 1957), and perhaps Rogers’ own dissatisfaction with this particular part of his 1951 theory is reflected in the following comment:

It is clear that a more refined analysis is needed of the exact conditions which are necessary to permit a reorganization of the self-concept and the

assimilation of contradictory experiences. We know one way in which this reorganization may be brought about, but the conditions which are crucial for this type of experience are not sufficiently known (Rogers, 1951, p. 519).

In the 1959 version of the theory, the central importance of acceptance as outlined in *The Nineteen Propositions* remains the key to therapeutic personality change. However, this central concept has now been considerably enriched and elaborated through the important constructs of positive regard, self-regard and conditions of worth. Because of this, Rogers prefers the now familiar term “unconditional positive regard.”

Here is one of the key constructs of the theory, which may be defined in these terms: if the self-experiences of another are perceived by me in such a way that no self-experience can be discriminated as more or less worthy of positive regard than any other, then I am experiencing unconditional positive regard for this individual ... Acceptance is another term which has been frequently used to convey this meaning, but it perhaps carries more misleading connotations than the phrase which Standal has coined. In general, however, acceptance and prizing are synonymous with unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1959, p. 208).

In *The Nineteen Propositions*, Rogers also identified the importance of empathy in the process of therapeutic change. For example, in his discussion of propositions VII and XVIII he states that viewing behavior from the client’s frame of reference “minimizes any need for defensiveness” (Rogers, 1951, p. 496), and that an “atmosphere of understanding and acceptance is the very climate most likely to create a therapeutic experience and consequent self-acceptance in the person who is exposed to it” (Rogers, 1951, p. 522).

We can now see that in his new theory, Rogers’ discussion of “understanding and acceptance” in the above quote has developed into a conceptualization of the crucial link between unconditional positive regard and empathy:

Empathic understanding is always necessary if unconditional positive regard is to be fully communicated. If I know little or nothing of you, and experience an unconditional positive regard for you, this means little because further knowledge of you may reveal aspects which I cannot so regard. But if I know you thoroughly, knowing and empathically understanding a wide variety of your feelings and behaviors, and still experience an unconditional positive regard, this is very meaningful. It comes close to being fully known and accepted (Rogers, 1959, p. 231).

Summary

As we have seen, the new theory builds on the old by incorporating Standal’s concepts relating to unconditional positive regard. The importance of these concepts is particularly clear in two key sections of the theory. In Section F, the development of incongruence between self and experience is described as the “basic estrangement in man” (Rogers, 1959, p. 226) *which arises from the need for positive regard*. Firstly, Rogers elaborates on the nature of this estrangement in a powerful passage which summarizes this process most effectively:

This, as we see it, is the basic estrangement in man. He has not been true to himself, to his own natural organismic valuing experience, but *for the sake of preserving the positive regard of others* has now come to falsify some of the values he experiences and to perceive them only in terms based upon their value to others. Yet this has not been a conscious choice, but a natural - and tragic - development in infancy (Rogers, 1959, p. 226; emphasis added).

He then goes on to describe the nature of therapeutic change, of undoing this basic estrangement, in terms of dissolving conditions of worth:

The path of development toward psychological maturity, the path of therapy, is the undoing of this estrangement in man's functioning, *the dissolving of conditions of worth*, the achievement of a self which is congruent with experience, and the restoration of a unified organismic valuing process as the regulator of behavior (Rogers, 1959, pp. 226-227; emphasis added).

In section J, this process of reintegration is described in more detail. It is here that we can find the certainty and confidence referred to earlier in this paper. There is no room for doubt here, and it is clear what *must* be the case for the process of reintegration to occur, a process which involves an increase in congruence between self and experience. Conditions of worth, self-regard and empathic unconditional positive regard are clearly stated as the very foundations of the process of reintegration.

In order for the process of defense to be reversed - for a customarily threatening experience to be accurately symbolized in awareness and assimilated into the self-structure, certain conditions *must* exist. There *must* be a decrease in the conditions of worth. There *must* be an increase in unconditional self-regard. The communicated unconditional positive regard of a significant other is one way of achieving these conditions. In order for the unconditional positive regard to be communicated, it *must* exist in a context of empathic understanding (Rogers, 1959, p. 230; emphasis added).

We can see that *The Nineteen Propositions* provides a firm basis for person-centered personality theory. Many of the formulations to be found there are still valid and many of the discussions are invaluable and throw light on important aspects of the theory. However, the new theory extends and elaborates on the basic ideas as well as introducing important new theoretical constructs. In summary, the new theory has the following characteristics which clearly distinguish it from *The Nineteen Propositions*.

The theory is much less tentative, demonstrating a higher degree of certainty, particularly in relation to the definition of key concepts and to the process of therapeutic personality change.

The theory is presented as a developmental sequence which explains the development of incongruence between self and experience, the "basic estrangement in man." This sequence then goes on to show how this incongruence can be reduced, and how this estrangement in man's functioning can be undone and lead to the process of reintegration.

New key concepts of the theory, derived from the work of Standal, explain the above sequence in terms of positive regard, the need for self-regard, and conditions of worth. These are important and central aspects of person-centered theory which help to elaborate on ideas which were only tentatively expressed in *The Nineteen Propositions*.

Two key concepts of the earlier theory, acceptance and understanding, have been more clearly and rigorously reformulated in terms of unconditional positive regard and empathy.

In *The Nineteen Propositions*, the primary condition for therapeutic personality change was complete absence of threat to the self-structure. This still holds, but the new theory has been able to elaborate on this idea and to demonstrate that empathic unconditional positive regard is the primary condition for therapeutic personality change to occur.

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