8.2: Carl Rogers and Humanistic Psychology

Carl Rogers is the psychologist many people associate first with humanistic psychology, but he did not establish the field in the way that Freud established psychoanalysis. A few years older than Abraham Maslow, and having moved into clinical practice more directly, Rogers felt a need to develop a new theoretical perspective that fit with his clinical observations and personal beliefs. Thus, he was proposing a humanistic approach to psychology and, more specifically, psychotherapy before Maslow. It was Maslow, however, who used the term humanistic psychology as a direct contrast to behaviorism and psychoanalysis. And it was Maslow who contacted some friends, in 1954, in order to begin meetings that led to the creation of the American Association for Humanistic Psychology. Rogers was included in that group, but so were Erich Fromm and Karen Horney, both of whom had distinctly humanistic elements in their own theories, elements that shared a common connection to Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology (Stagner, 1988). In addition, the spiritual aspects of humanistic psychology, such as peak experiences and transcendence, have roots in the work of Carl Jung and William James, and go even further back in time to ancient philosophies of Yoga and Buddhism.

In at least one important way, Rogers’ career was similar to that of Sigmund Freud. As he began his clinical career, he found that the techniques he had been taught were not very effective. So, he began experimenting with his own ideas, and developing his own therapeutic approach. As that approach developed, so did a unique theory of personality that aimed at explaining the effectiveness of the therapy. Rogers found it difficult to explain what he had learned, but he felt quite passionately about it:

…the real meaning of a word can never be expressed in words, because the real meaning would be the thing itself. If one wishes to give such a real meaning he should put his hand over his mouth and point. This is what I should most like to do. I would willingly throw away all the words of this manuscript if I could, somehow, effectively point to the experience which is therapy. It is a process, a thing-in-itself, an experience, a relationship, a dynamic… (pp. ix; Rogers, 1951)
Brief Biography of Carl Rogers

Carl Ransom Rogers was born on January 8, 1902, in Chicago, Illinois. His parents were well-educated, and his father was a successful civil engineer. His parents loved their six children, of whom Rogers was the fourth, but they exerted a distinct control over them. They were fundamentalist Christians, who emphasized a close-knit family and constant, productive work, but approved of little else. The Rogers household expected standards of behavior appropriate for the ‘elect’ of God: there was no drinking of alcohol, no dancing, no visits to the theater, no card games, and little social life at all (DeCarvalho, 1991; Thorne, 2003).

Rogers was not the healthiest of children, and his family considered him to be overly sensitive. The more his family teased him, the more he retreated into a lonely world of fantasy. He sought consolation by reading books, and he was well above his grade level for reading when he began school. In 1914 the family moved to a large farm west of Chicago, a move motivated primarily by a desire to keep the children away from the temptations of suburban city life. The result was even more isolation for Rogers, who lamented that he’d only had two dates by the end of high school. He continued to learn, however, becoming something of an expert on the large moths that lived in the area. In addition, his father encouraged the children to develop their own ventures, and Rogers and his brothers raised a variety of livestock. Given these interests, and in keeping with family tradition, Rogers enrolled in the University of Wisconsin-Madison to study scientific agriculture (DeCarvalho, 1991; Thorne, 2003).

During his first year of college, Rogers attended a Sunday morning group of students led by Professor George Humphrey. Professor Humphrey was a facilitative leader, who refused to be conventional and who encouraged the students to make their own decisions. Rogers found the intellectual freedom very stimulating, and he also began to make close friends. This increased intellectual and emotional energy led Rogers to re-examine his commitment to Christianity. Given his strong religious faith, he decided to change his major to history, in anticipation of a career as a Christian minister. He was fortunate to be chosen as one of only twelve students from America to attend a World Student Christian Federation conference in Peking, China. He traveled throughout China (also visiting Korea, Hong Kong, Japan, the Philippines, and Hawaii) for 6 months, surrounded by other intelligent and creative young people. He kept a detailed journal, and wrote lengthy letters to his family and Helen Elliott, a childhood friend whom he considered to be his “sweetheart.” His mind was stretched in all directions by this profound cross-cultural experience, and the intellectual and spiritual freedom he was embracing blinded him to the fact that his fundamentalist family was deeply disturbed by what he had to say. However, by the time Rogers was aware of his family’s disapproval, he had been changed, and he believed that people of very different cultures and faiths can all be sincere and honest (Kirschenbaum, 1995; Thorne, 2003). As a curious side note, Rogers’ roommate on the trip was a Black seminary professor. Rogers was vaguely aware that it was strange at that time for a Black man and a White man to room together, but he was particularly surprised at the stares they received from the Chinese people they met, who had never seen a Black person before (Rogers & Russell, 2002). After his return from China, Rogers graduated from college, and 2 months later he married Helen. Again his family disapproved, believing that the young couple should be more established first. But Rogers had been accepted to the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and both he and Helen wanted to be together. His family may have wanted them to wait because Union Theological Seminary was, perhaps, the most liberal seminary in America at the time (DeCarvalho, 1991; Rogers & Russell, 2002; Thorne, 2003).

Rogers spent 2 years at the seminary, including a summer assignment as the pastor of a small church in Vermont. However, his desire not to impose his own beliefs on others, made it difficult for him to preach. He began taking courses...
at nearby Teachers’ College of Columbia University, where he learned about clinical and educational psychology, as well as working with disturbed children. He then transferred to Teachers’ College, and after writing a dissertation in which he developed a test for measuring personality adjustment in children, he earned his Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology. Then, in 1928, he began working at the Rochester Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (DeCarvalho, 1991; Thorne, 2003).

Rogers was immersed in his work in Rochester for 12 years. He found that even the most elaborate theories made little sense when dealing with children who had suffered severe psychological damage after traveling through the courts and the social work systems. So Rogers developed his own approach, and did his best to help them. Many of his colleagues, including the director, had no particular therapeutic orientation:

When I would try to see what I could do to alter their behavior, sometimes they would refuse to see me the next time. I’d have a hard time getting them to come from the detention home to my office, and that would cause me to think, “What is it that I did that offended the child?” Well, usually it was overinterpretation, or getting too smart in analyzing the causes of behavior…So we approached every situation with much more of a question of “What can we do to help?” rather than “What is the mysterious cause of this behavior?” or “What theory does the child fit into?” It was a very good place for learning in that it was easy to be open to experience, and there was certainly no pressure to fit into any particular pattern of thought. (pg. 108; Rogers & Russell, 2002)

Eventually Rogers wrote a book outlining his work with children, *The Clinical Treatment of the Problem Child* (Rogers, 1939), which received excellent reviews. He was offered a professorship at Ohio State University. Beginning as a full professor gave Rogers a great deal of freedom, and he was frequently invited to give talks. It has been suggested that one such talk, in December 1940, at the University of Minnesota, entitled “Newer Concepts in Psychotherapy,” was the official birthday of client-centered therapy. Very popular with his students, Rogers was not so welcome amongst his colleagues. Rogers believed that his work was particularly threatening to those colleagues who believed that only their own expertise could make psychotherapy effective. After only 4 years, during which he published *Counseling and Psychotherapy* (Rogers, 1942), Rogers moved on to the University of Chicago, where he established the counseling center, wrote *Client-Centered Therapy* (Rogers, 1951) and contributed several chapters to *Psychotherapy and Personality Change* (Rogers & Dymond, 1954), and in 1956 received a *Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award* from the American Psychological Association. Then, in 1957, he accepted a joint appointment in psychiatry and psychology at the University of Wisconsin to study psychotic individuals. Rogers had serious doubts about leaving Chicago, but felt that the joint appointment would allow him to make a dramatic contribution to psychotherapy. It was a serious mistake. He did not get along with his colleagues in the psychology department, whom he considered to be antagonistic, outdated, “rat-oriented,” and distrustful of clinical psychology, and so he resigned. He kept his appointment in the psychiatry department, however, and in 1961 published perhaps his most influential book, *On Becoming a Person* (Rogers, 1961).

In 1963, Rogers moved to California to join the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute, at the invitation of one of his former students, Richard Farson. This was a non-profit institute dedicated to the study of humanistically-oriented interpersonal relations. Rogers was leery of making another major move, but eventually agreed. He became very active in research on encounter groups and educational theory. Five years later, when Farson left the institute, there was a change in its direction. Rogers was unhappy with the changes, so he joined some colleagues in leaving and establishing the Center for Studies of the Person, where he remained until his death. In his later years, Rogers wrote books on topics such as personal power and marriage (Rogers, 1972, 1977). In 1980, he published *A Way of Being* (Rogers, 1980), in
which he changed the terminology of his perspective from “client-centered” to “person-centered.” With the assistance of
his daughter Natalie, who had studied with Abraham Maslow, he held many group workshops on life, family, business,
education, and world peace. He traveled to regions where tension and danger were high, including Poland, Russia,
South Africa, and Northern Ireland. In 1985 he brought together influential leaders of seventeen Central American
countries for a peace conference in Austria. The day he died, February 4, 1987, without knowing it, he had just been
ominated for the Nobel Peace Prize (DeCarvalho, 1991; Kirschenbaum, 1995; Thorne, 2003).

Placing Rogers in Context: A Psychology 2,600 Years in the Making

Carl Rogers was an extraordinary individual whose approach to psychology emphasized individuality. Raised with
a strong Christian faith, exposed to Eastern culture and spirituality in college, and then employed as a therapist for
children, he came to value and respect each person he met. Because of that respect for the ability of each person to
grow, and the belief that we are innately driven toward actualization, Rogers began the distinctly humanistic approach to
psychotherapy that became known as client-centered therapy.

Taken together, client-centered therapy and self-actualization offer a far more positive approach to fostering the growth
of each person than most other disciplines in psychology. Unlike the existing approaches of psychoanalysis, which
aimed to uncover problems from the past, or behavior therapies, which aimed to identify problem behaviors and control
or “fix” them, client-centered therapy grew out of Rogers’ simple desire to help his clients move forward in their lives.
Indeed, he had been trained as a psychoanalyst, but Rogers found the techniques unsatisfying, both in their goals and
their ability to help the children he was working with at the time. The seemingly hands-off approach of client-centered
therapy fit well with a Taoist perspective, something Rogers had studied, discussed, and debated during his trip to
China. In A Way of Being, Rogers (1980) quotes what he says is perhaps his favorite saying, one which sums up many
of his deeper beliefs:

If I keep from meddling with people, they take care of themselves,

If I keep from commanding people, they behave themselves,

If I keep from preaching at people, they improve themselves,

If I keep from imposing on people, they become themselves.

Lao Tsu, c600 B.C.; Note: This translation differs somewhat from the one
cited in the References. I have included the translation Rogers quoted,

since the difference likely influenced his impression of this saying.

Rogers, like Maslow, wanted to see psychology contribute far more to society than merely helping individuals with
psychological distress. He extended his sincere desire to help people learn to really communicate, with empathic
understanding, to efforts aimed at bringing peace to the world. On the day he died, he had just been nominated for the
Nobel Peace Prize. Since a Nobel Prize cannot be awarded to someone who has died, he was not eligible to be
ominated again. If he had lived a few more years, he may well have received that award. His later years were certainly
committed to peace in a way that deserved such recognition.
Basic Concepts

Rogers believed that each of us lives in a constantly changing private world, which he called the **experiential field**. Everyone exists at the center of their own experiential field, and that field can only be fully understood from the perspective of the individual. This concept has a number of important implications. The individual’s behavior must be understood as a reaction to their experience and perception of the field. They react to it as an organized whole, and it is their reality. The problem this presents for the therapist is that only the individual can really understand their experiential field. This is quite different than the Freudian perspective, in which only the trained and objective psychoanalyst can break through the defense mechanisms and understand the basis of the patient’s unconscious impulses. One’s perception of the experiential field is limited, however. Rogers believed that certain impulses, or sensations, can only enter into the conscious field of experience under certain circumstances. Thus, the experiential field is not a true reality, but rather an individual’s potential reality (Rogers, 1951).

The one basic tendency and striving of the individual is to actualize, maintain, and enhance the experiencing of the individual or, in other words, an **actualizing tendency**. Rogers borrowed the term **self-actualization**, a term first used by Kurt Goldstein, to describe this basic striving.

The tendency of normal life is toward activity and progress. For the sick, the only form of self-actualization that remains is the maintenance of the existent state. That, however, is not the tendency of the normal…Under adequate conditions the normal organism seeks further activity. (pp. 162-163; Goldstein, 1934/1995).

For Rogers, self-actualization was a tendency to move forward, toward greater maturity and independence, or self-responsibility. This development occurs throughout life, both biologically (the differentiation of a fertilized egg into the many organ systems of the body) and psychologically (self-government, self-regulation, socialization, even to the point of choosing life goals). A key factor in understanding self-actualization is the experiential field. A person’s needs are defined, as well as limited, by their own potential for experience. Part of this experiential field is an individual’s emotions, feelings, and attitudes. Therefore, who the individual is, their actual **self**, is critical in determining the nature and course of their self-actualization (Rogers, 1951). We will examine Maslow’s work on self-actualization in more detail below.

What then, is the self? In Rogers’ (1951) initial description of his theory of personality, the experiential field is described in four points, the self-actualizing tendency in three points, and the remaining eleven points attempt to define the self. First and foremost, the self is a differentiated portion of the experiential field. In other words, the self is that part of our private world that we identify as “me,” “myself,” or “I.” Beyond that, the self remains somewhat puzzling. Can the self exist in isolation, outside of relationships that provide some context for the self? Must the self be synonymous with the physical body? As Rogers’ pointed out, when our foot “goes to sleep” from a lack of circulation, we view it as an object, not as a part of our self! Despite these challenging questions, Rogers tried to define and describe the self.

Rogers believed the self is formed in relation to others; it is an organized, fluid, yet consistent conceptual pattern of our experiential interactions with the environment and the values attached to those experiences. These experiences are symbolized and incorporated into the structure of the self, and our behavior is guided largely by how well new experiences fit within that structure. We may behave in ways inconsistent with the structure of our self, but when we do we will not “own” that behavior. When experiences are so inconsistent that we cannot symbolize them, or fit them into the structure of our self, the potential for psychological distress arises. On the other hand, when our concept of self is mature enough to incorporate all of our perceptions and experiences, and we can assimilate those experiences
symbolically into our self, our psychological adjustment will be quite healthy. Individuals who find it difficult to assimilate new and different experiences, those experiences that threaten the structure of the self, will develop an increasingly rigid self-structure. Healthy individuals, in contrast, will assimilate new experiences, their self-structure will change and continue to grow, and they will become more capable of understanding and accepting others as individuals (Rogers, 1951).

The ability of individuals to make the choices necessary for actualizing their self-structure and to then fulfill those choices is what Rogers called personal power (Rogers, 1977). He believed there are many self-actualized individuals revolutionizing the world by trusting their own power, without feeling a need to have “power over” others. They are also willing to foster the latent actualizing tendency in others. We can easily see the influence of Alfred Adler here, both in terms of the creative power of the individual and seeking superiority within a healthy context of social interest. Client-centered therapy was based on making the context of personal power a clear strategy in the therapeutic relationship:

…the client-centered approach is a conscious renunciation and avoidance by the therapist of all control over, or decision-making for, the client. It is the facilitation of self-ownership by the client and the strategies by which this can be achieved…based on the premise that the human being is basically a trustworthy organism, capable of…making constructive choices as to the next steps in life, and acting on those choices. (pp. 14-15; Rogers, 1977)

**Discussion Question:** Rogers claimed that no one can really understand your experiential field. Would you agree, or do you sometimes find that close friends or family members seem to understand you better than you understand yourself? Are these relationships congruent?

### Personality Development

Although Rogers described personality within the therapist-client relationship, the focus of his therapeutic approach was based on how he believed the person had arrived at a point in their life where they were suffering from psychological distress. Therefore, the same issues apply to personality development as in therapy. A very important aspect of personality development, according to Rogers, is the parent-child relationship. The nature of that relationship, and whether it fosters self-actualization or impedes personal growth, determines the nature of the individual’s personality and, consequently, their self-structure and psychological adjustment.

A child begins life with an actualizing tendency. As they experience life, and perceive the world around them, they may be supported in all things by those who care for them, or they may only be supported under certain conditions (e.g., if their behavior complies with strict rules). As the child becomes self-aware, it develops a need for positive regard. When the parents offer the child unconditional positive regard, the child continues moving forward in concert with its actualizing tendency. So, when there is no discrepancy between the child’s self-regard and its positive regard (from the parents), the child will grow up psychologically healthy and well-adjusted. However, if the parents offer only conditional positive regard, if they only support the child according the desires and rules of the parents, the child will develop conditions of worth. As a result of these conditions of worth, the child will begin to perceive their world selectively; they will avoid those experiences that do not fit with its goal of obtaining positive regard. The child will begin to live the life of those who set the conditions of worth, rather than living its own life.

As the child grows older, and more aware of its own condition in the world, their behavior will either fit within their own self-structure or not. If they have received unconditional positive regard, such that their self-regard and positive regard
are closely matched, they will experience **congruence**. In other words, their sense of self and their experiences in life will fit together, and the child will be relatively happy and well-adjusted. But, if their sense of self and their ability to obtain positive regard do not match, the child will develop **incongruence**. Consider, for example, children playing sports. That alone tells us that parents have established guidelines within which the children are expected to “play.” Then we have some children who are naturally athletic, and other children who are more awkward and/or clumsy. They may become quite athletic later in life, or not, but during childhood there are many different levels of ability as they grow. If a parent expects their child to be the best player on the team, but the child simply isn’t athletic, how does the parent react? Do they support the child and encourage them to have fun, or do they pressure the child to perform better and belittle them when they can’t? Children are very good at recognizing who the better athletes are, and they know their place in the hierarchy of athletics, i.e., their athletic self-structure. So if a parent demands dominance from a child who knows they just aren’t that good, the child will develop incongruence. Rogers believed, quite understandably, that such conditions are threatening to a child, and will activate defense mechanisms. Over time, however, excessive or sudden and dramatic incongruence can lead to the breakdown and disorganization of the self-structure. As a result, the individual is likely to experience psychological distress that will continue throughout life (Rogers, 1959/1989).

**Discussion Question:** Conditions of worth are typically first established in childhood, based on the relationship between a child and his or her parents. Think about your relationship with your own parents and, if you have children, think about how you treat them. Are most of the examples that come to mind unconditional positive regard, or conditional positive regard? How has that affected your relationship with your parents and/or your own children?

Sometimes parents create conditions of worth by overemphasizing the importance of competition. Even a trip to the pumpkin patch can be a challenge to get the biggest, best pumpkin.

Another way in which Rogers approached the idea of congruence and incongruence was based on an individual’s dual concept of self. There is, of course, the actual self-structure, or **real self**. In addition, there is also an **ideal self**, much like the fictional finalism described by Adler or the idealized self-image described by Horney. Incongruence develops when the real self falls far short of the accomplishment expected of the ideal self, when experience does not match the expectations of the self-structure (Rogers, 1951, 1959/1989). Once again, the relationship between parents and their children plays an important role in this development. If parents expect too much, such as all A’s every marking period in school, but the child just isn’t academically talented, or if the parents expect their child to be the football team’s quarterback, but the child isn’t a good athlete, then the ideal self will remain out of reach. Perhaps even worse, is when a child is physically or emotionally abused. Such a child’s ideal self may remain at a relatively low standard, but the real self may be so utterly depressed that incongruence is still the result. An important aspect of therapy will be to provide a relationship in which a person in this unfortunate condition can experience the unconditional positive regard necessary to begin reintegrating the self-structure, such that the gap between the real self and the ideal self can begin to close, allowing the person to experience congruence in their life.

What about individuals who have developed congruence, having received unconditional positive regard throughout
development or having experienced successful client-centered therapy? They become, according to Rogers (1961), a **fully functioning person**. He also said they lead a good life. The good life is a process, not a state of being, and a direction, not a destination. It requires psychological freedom, and is the natural consequence of being psychologically free to begin with. Whether or not it develops naturally, thanks to a healthy and supportive environment in the home, or comes about as a result of successful therapy, there are certain characteristics of this process. The fully functioning person is increasingly open to new experiences, they live fully in each moment, and they trust themselves more and more. They become more able and more willing to experience all of their feelings, they are creative, they trust human nature, and they experience the richness of life. The fully functioning person is not simply content, or happy, they are **alive**:

I believe it will become evident why, for me, adjectives such as happy, contented, blissful, enjoyable, do not seem quite appropriate to any general description of this process I have called the good life, even though the person in this process would experience each one of these feelings at appropriate times. But the adjectives which seem more generally fitting are adjectives such as enriching, exciting, rewarding, challenging, meaningful. This process…involves the courage to be. …the deeply exciting thing about human beings is that when the individual is inwardly free, he chooses as the good life this process of becoming. (pp. 195-196; Rogers, 1961)

**Discussion Question:** Rogers described self-actualized people as fully functioning persons who are living a good life. Do you know anyone who seems to be a fully functioning person? Are there aspects of their personality that you aspire to for yourself? Does it seem difficult to be fully functioning, or does it seem to make life both easier and more enjoyable?

connections across cultures

**Self-Realization as the Path to Being a Fully Functioning Person**

Rogers described an innate drive toward self-actualization, he talked about an ideal self, and he said that a fully functioning person lived a good life. But what does this actually mean? In the Western world we look for specific, tangible answers to such questions. We want to know what the self-actualization drive is, we want to know which ideals, or virtues, are best or right, and we want to define a “good life.” All too often, we define a good life in terms of money, power, and possessions. The Eastern world has, for thousands of years, emphasized a very different perspective. They believe there is a natural order to life, and it is important that we let go of our need to explain the universe, and it is especially important that we let go of our need to own pieces of the universe. In the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tsu (c. 600 B.C./1989) writes:

Something mysteriously formed,

Born before heaven and earth.

In the silence and the void,

Standing alone and unchanging,

Ever present and in motion.
Perhaps it is the mother of ten thousand things.

I do not know its name,

Call it Tao.

For lack of a better word, I call it great…

The greatest Virtue is to follow Tao and Tao alone…

Tao follows what is natural.

At about the same time, some 2,600 years ago, the *Bhagavad Gita* was also written down (Mitchell, 2000). In the second chapter one finds:

When a man gives up all desires

That emerge from the mind, and rests

Contented in the Self by the Self,

He is called a man of firm wisdom…

In the night of all beings, the wise man

Sees only the radiance of the Self;

But the sense-world where all beings wake,

For him is as dark as night.

In each of these sacred books, we are taught that there is something deeper than ourselves that permeates the universe, but it is beyond our comprehension. It is only when we stop attempting to explain it, our way of trying to control it, and be content to just be ourselves, that we can actually attain that goal. To achieve this goal seems to require the absence of conditions of worth. If someone has been given unconditional positive regard throughout their life, they will be content to live that life as it is. Rogers was well aware of this challenge, and he described the good life as a process, not something that you could actually get, but something that you had to “Be.” Still, is it possible that a fully functioning person might have the insight necessary to understand the essence of the universe? Not according to Swami Sri Yukteswar:

Man possesses eternal faith and believes intuitively in the existence of a Substance, of which the objects of sense - sound, touch, sight, taste, and smell, the component parts of this visible world - are but properties. As man identifies himself with his material body, composed of the aforesaid properties, he is able to comprehend by these imperfect organs these properties only, and not the Substance to which these properties belong. The eternal Father, God, the only Substance in the universe, is therefore not comprehensible by man of this material world, unless he becomes divine by lifting his self above this creation of Darkness or *Maya*. See Hebrews 11:1 and John 8:28.
“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

“Then said Jesus unto them, When ye have lifted up the son of man, then shall ye know that I am he.”

Jnanavatar Swami Sri Yukteswar Giri, 1894/1990

So whether we believe in God, Tao, an eternal Self, a mortal Self, or merely an actualizing tendency, for thousands of years there has been the belief, amongst many people, that our lives are about more than just being alive for a limited period of time. And it is in the recognition and acceptance, indeed the embracing, of that something more, even if we can’t conceive it in our conscious mind, that we find and live a good life. When Paramahansa Yogananda, a direct disciple of Swami Yukteswar, came to the United States in 1920 to establish a permanent Yoga society, it was suggested that he name his society God-Realization. However, since he believed life is about realizing (or actualizing, in psychological terms) our selves, he established his organization as the Self-Realization Fellowship (Yogananda, 1946).

Self-realization, in the context of Yoga, refers to becoming aware of one’s connection to the spark of divinity that exists within us, which may well be the source of our actualizing tendency. It is not the same as the sense of “I” or “me” that we normally think of. After all, are we our body or our mind? Consider the body. Is it the body we were born with, or the body we have now? Is our mind what we are thinking now, or what we were thinking 2 years ago? Both the body and the mind are transient, but the Self continues. It is that Self that Yogis, Buddhists, and Taoists seek to realize, and it may well be that Self which seeks its own actualization (separate from the consciousness created by the brain underlying our mind; see Feuerstein, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). This is also the Self of Being and transcendence, as described by Maslow.

Social Relationships and Marriage

Social and personal relationships were very important to Rogers, both in therapy and in everyday life. During each moment, we have our awareness (or consciousness), our experience (our perception of what is happening), and our communication (our relational behavior). For the fully functioning person, there is congruence between each of these phenomena. Unfortunately, we tend to be a poor judge of our own congruence. For example, if someone becomes angry with another person at a meeting or in a therapy group, they may remain unaware of their anger, even though it may be quite obvious to everyone else in the room. Thus, our relationship with others can reflect the true nature of our own personality, and the degree to which we are congruent. If others are congruent, and therefore are willing to talk to us openly and honestly, it will encourage us to become more congruent and, consequently, more psychologically healthy (Rogers, 1961, 1980). Curiously, the reason this became so important to Rogers was the lack of such meaningful relationships in his own life. Because his family followed strict, fundamentalist rules, they discouraged relationships with people outside their family. The consequences were rather disturbing for Rogers:

…the attitudes toward persons outside our large family can be summed up schematically in this way: “Other persons behave in dubious ways which we do not approve in our family. Many of them play cards, go to movies, smoke, dance, drink, and engage in other activities, some unmentionable. So the best thing to do is to be tolerant of them, since they may not know better, but to keep away from any close communication with them and to live your life within the family…”

I could sum up these boyhood years by saying that anything I would today regard as a close and communicative interpersonal relationship with another was completely lacking during that period…I was peculiar, a loner, with very little
place or opportunity for a place in the world of persons. I was socially incompetent in any but superficial contacts. My fantasies during this period were definitely bizarre, and probably would be classed as schizoid by a diagnostician, but fortunately I never came in contact with a psychologist. (pp. 28-30; Rogers, 1980)

As noted above, the development of healthy relationships takes place whenever one person in the relationship is congruent. Their congruence encourages the other person to be more congruent, which supports the continued open communication on behalf of the first person. This interplay goes back and forth, encouraging continued and growing congruence in the relationship. As we will see below, this is basically the therapeutic situation, in which the therapist is expected to be congruent. However, it certainly does not require a trained therapist, since it occurs naturally in any situation in which one person is congruent from the beginning of the relationship.

One of the most important, and hopefully meaningful, relationships in anyone’s life is marriage. Rogers was married for 55 years, and as the end of his wife’s life approached he poured out his love to her with a depth that astonished him (Rogers, 1980). As relationships became more and more meaningful to him, he wanted to study the extraordinary relationships that become more than temporary. Although this is not necessarily synonymous with marriage, it most typically is. So he conducted a series of informal interviews with people who were, or had been, in lengthy relationships (at least 3 years). In comparing the relationships that seemed successful, as compared to those that were unhappy or had already come to an end, Rogers identified four factors that he believed were most important for long-term, healthy relationships: dedication or commitment, communication, the dissolution of roles, and becoming a separate self (Rogers, 1972).

Dedication, Commitment: Marriage is challenging: love seems to fade, vows are forgotten or set aside, religious rules are ignored (e.g., “What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder.”; Matthew 19:6; Holy Bible, 1962). Rogers believed that in order for a relationship to last, each person must be dedicated to their partnership. They must commit themselves to working together throughout the changing process of their relationship, which is enriching their love and their life.

Communication: Communication encompasses much of human behavior, and it can be both subtle and complex. Communication itself is not a good thing, since many negative and hurtful things can be communicated. However, Rogers believed that we need to communicate persistent feeling, whether positive or negative, so that they don’t overwhelm us and come out in inappropriate ways. It is always important to express such communication in terms of your own thoughts and feelings, rather than projecting those feelings onto others (especially in angry and/or accusatory ways). This process involves risk, but one must be willing to risk the end of a relationship in order to allow it to grow.

Dissolution of Roles: Culture provides many expectations for the nature of relationships, whether it be dating or something more permanent like marriage. According to Rogers, obeying the cultural rules seems to contradict the idea of a growing and maturing relationship, a relationship that is moving forward (toward actualization). However, when individuals make an intentional choice to fulfill cultural expectations, because they want to, then the relationship can certainly be actualizing for them.

Becoming a Separate Self: Rogers believed that “a living partnership is composed of two people, each of whom owns, respect, and develop his or her own selfhood” (pg. 206; Rogers, 1972). While it may seem contradictory that becoming an individual should enhance a relationship, as each person becomes more real and more open they can bring these qualities into the relationship. As a result, the relationship can contribute to the continued growth of each person.
Discussion Question: Consider Rogers’ criteria for a successful marriage, which begins with commitment to the marriage. Given the divorce rate (which studies now place at over 60%), and ongoing political debates about what marriage is or is not, what is your opinion of the status of marriage in society today?

Client-Centered and Person-Centered Therapy

Central to Rogers’ view of psychotherapy is the relationship between the therapist and the client, and we must again emphasize the distinction between a client and a patient. This involves shifting the emphasis in therapy from a psychologist/psychiatrist who can “fix” the patient to the client themselves, since only the client can truly understand their own experiential field. The therapist must provide a warm, safe environment in which the client feels free to express whatever attitude they experience in the same way that they perceive it. At the same time, the client experiences the therapist as someone temporarily divested of their own self, in their complete desire to understand the client. The therapist can then accurately and objectively reflect the thoughts, feelings, perceptions, confusions, ambivalences, etc., of the client back to the client. In this open, congruent, and supportive environment, the client is able to begin the process of reorganizing and reintegrating their self-structure, and living congruently within that self-structure (Rogers, 1951).

In 1957, Rogers published an article entitled The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change (Rogers, 1957/1989). The list is fairly short and straightforward:

1. The client and the therapist must be in psychological contact.
2. The client must be in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable or anxious.
3. The therapist must be congruent in the relationship.
4. The therapist must experience unconditional positive regard for the client.
5. The therapist must experience empathic understanding of the client’s frame of reference and endeavor to communicate this experience to the client.
6. The client must perceive, at least to a minimal degree, the therapist’s empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard.

According to Rogers, there is nothing else that is required; if these conditions are met over a period of time, there will be constructive personality change. What Rogers considered more remarkable are those factors that do not seem necessary for positive therapeutic change. For example, these conditions do not apply to one type of client, but to all clients, and they are not unique to client-centered therapy, but apply in all types of therapy. The relationship between the therapist and client is also not unique, these factors hold true in any interpersonal relationship. And most surprisingly, these conditions do not require any special training on the part of therapist, or even an accurate diagnosis of the client’s psychological problems! Any program designed for the purpose of encouraging constructive change in the personality structure and behavior of individuals, whether educational, military, correctional, or industrial, can benefit from these conditions and use them as a measure of the effectiveness of the program (Rogers, 1957).

Can any one of these conditions be considered more important than the others? Although they are all necessary, Rogers came to believe that the critical factor may be the therapist’s empathic understanding of the client (Rogers, 1980). The Dalai Lama (2001) has said that empathy is an essential first step toward a compassionate heart. It brings us closer to others, and allows us to recognize the depth of their pain. According to Rogers, empathy refers to entering the
private world of the client, and moving about within it without making any judgments. It is essential to set aside one's own views and values, so that the other person's world may be entered without prejudice. Not just anyone can accomplish this successfully:

In some sense it means that you lay aside your self; this can only be done by persons who are secure enough in themselves that they know they will not get lost in what may turn out to be the strange or bizarre world of the other, and that they can comfortably return to their own world when they wish. (pg. 143; Rogers, 1980)

Finally, let us consider group therapy situations. Within a group, all of the factors described above hold true. Rogers, who late in his career was becoming more and more interested in the growth of all people, including those reasonably well-adjusted and mature to begin with, became particularly interested in T-groups and encounter groups. These groups were developed following the proposition by Kurt Lewin that modern society was overlooking the importance of training in human relations skills (the “T” in T-group stands for “training”). Encounter groups were quite similar to T-groups, except that there was a greater emphasis on personal growth and improved interpersonal communication through an experiential process. Each group has a leader, or facilitator, who fosters and encourages open communication. The group serves as a reflection of the congruence, or lack thereof, in the communication of whoever is currently expressing themselves. As a result, the group hopefully moves toward congruence, and the subsequent personal growth and actualization of the each individual (Rogers, 1970).

Given the usefulness of T-groups and encounter in a variety of settings, as well as the importance of continued personal growth and actualization for the well-adjusted as well as those suffering psychological distress, Rogers shifted his focus from simply client-centered therapy to a more universal person-centered approach, which encompasses client-centered therapy, student-centered teaching, and group-centered leadership (Rogers, 1980; see also Rogers & Roethlisberger, 1952/1993). Rogers believed that all people have within them vast resources for self-understanding and for changing their self-concepts, attitudes, and behaviors. In all relationships, whether therapist-client, parent-child, teacher-student, leader-group, employer-employee, etc., there are three elements that can foster personal growth: genuineness or congruence, acceptance or caring, and empathic understanding. When these elements are fostered in any setting, “there is greater freedom to be the true, whole person.” The implications go far beyond individual relationships. We live in what seems to be an increasingly dangerous world. Globalism has brought with it global tension and conflict. However, Rogers argued that a person-centered approach would help to ease intercultural tension, by helping each of us to learn to appreciate and understand others. Whether the cultural differences are political, racial, ethnic, economic, whatever, as more leaders become person-centered there is the possibility for future growth of intercultural understanding and cooperation (Rogers, 1977).