

# The Positive Regard of Carl Rogers

Carl R. Rogers, the American psychotherapist, is the originator of 'client-centred therapy' and 'personal encounter groups'. Once an agricultural student turned student of religion, he still retains an earthy egalitarianism and mission to grass-roots psychology. In his work over the last three decades, he has proved a major force in the de-mystification of psychotherapy, and by returning to ordinary people some sovereignty over their own experience he has fought the colonizers of common sense. Those who complain that his conceptions are oversimple might pause to consider whether a psychology which seeks to emancipate lay persons can afford to intimidate them. He has broken with the first law of psychology-on-the-make, 'Demolish the comprehension of the non-professional'. The relationships Rogers describes are as fundamental for lovers, families, friends and co-workers as for professional psychotherapists.

Rogers conceives of the total personality as two overlapping circles, one of *self-structure* and one of *experience*: when self-structure includes experience, the person and what he or she says are *congruent*, when self-structure excludes experience, *incongruence* results. That part of self-structure which is outside experience (see area A on map) remains distorted and rigid, while experience that is denied and not incorporated by the self-structure (see C) remains alien and threatening. As a result, when highly incongruent persons communicate they are not 'present' in what they say; since their experience is unassimilated and unowned, they are unlikely to find understanding for a self that does not understand and a vicious circle results.

Rogesian counselling and communication aims to allow the personality at the bottom of the map to change itself to that at the top, from incongruent to congruent functioning. The person moves from feelings that are unowned, unrecognized and unexpressed, to feelings that are experienced with immediacy and spontaneously communicated. The self-structure moves from rigidly held judgements, nailed down by 'facts' and external evaluations, which ache with contradictions, owing to the segregation of self from experience, to a sense of integrity, wholeness, reconciliation, relief from tension, and a trust in one's own organism. As the point of evaluation shifts to within the self, a sense of positive worth, personal direction and a capacity to take risks develop. To foster this change and the growth of the congruent personality involves: an increasingly self-awareness of one's entire field of experience; the realization of one's ideals; a greater independence from social pressures to conform, combined with a capacity to understand other people's frames of reference; an increasing acceptance of one's self and others; and the expansion of consciousness into richer and more complex fields of meaning.

The 'simple' process of mutual understanding is, for Rogers, a vital but rare, near-heroic feat. 'Can I care', he asks, 'while still allowing the other to be separate? Can I leave the comfortable, familiar structures of my own self and enter the unfamiliar territory of another, knowing that I may never be the same, that from another viewpoint I could appear wholly deficient? Have I the strength not to be destroyed by his anger, frightened by his anguish, engulfed by his dependence, while accepting the integrity of both our points of view? Can I tread, sensitively and intelligently on the precious mental 'furniture' of another?'

Rogesian counselling insists that nothing is more doomed to frustration than assuming that we can change or direct a person from outside his own field of perception, by evaluations anchored exclusively in our own. If we could but accept the world he sees, then the barriers between him and the world we insist upon would crumble of their own accord, his congruence would grow, his personality mature.

*Carl R. Rogers uses two overlapping circles to map the human personality, one of self-structure and one of experience. Personalities vary in terms of their congruence, the extent to which their self-structures are in touch with their experience; such congruence (or lack) is reflected in their communication with others. In this map the lower diagram shows low congruence and the upper high congruence. A change from the first condition to the second is the purpose of Rogerian counselling and represents growth in personality and communicative capacity.*

*Undeveloped, troubled and incongruent persons have large areas of self-structure (designated A) which remain untested and uncommitted to contemporary experience. Where early influences have persuaded persons that they are incompetent, sinful, dirty or repellent, such painful evaluations will be kept out of conscious awareness and not communicated to others. Time further rigidifies and distorts these structures until such persons become loaded down with archaic, introjected attributions. At the same time a large body of new potential experience (area B) is either denied outright or not permitted to conflict with that narrowed structure of self (area B) of which incongruent persons remain aware. At the top of the map the principles of Rogerian communication have greatly reduced incongruence along with distortion (A) and denial (C). Congruence, integrity and the level of experience (B) have all risen.*

## MAP REFERENCES

Congruence, 35–6, 51; Personal encounter, see also T-groups, 35–6; Personality development, 5, 9–11, 13, 16, 28, 33, 36–8, 42, 51, 58–60; Wholeness, integrity, 35, 37, 42–3, 47, 51–3, 55, 58–60.