

# A THEORETICAL RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS FOR THERAPEUTIC PERSONALITY CHANGE

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**ABSTRACT.** *In this paper, Unconditional Positive Regard is presented as the primary condition of therapeutic personality change. Genuineness and Empathic Understanding are viewed as two contextual attitudes. The concept of the necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic personality change is reconceptualized in a way consistent with this view. The reconceptualization entails (a) genuineness being viewed as a therapist state of readiness that enables the therapist to better experience the client with empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and to experience unconditional positive regard towards the client; (b) empathic understanding being viewed as the action state of the therapist in which the client is accepted as he or she is at any given moment. The understanding of the client's internal frame of reference by the therapist is viewed as the most optimal way for the client to experience unconditional positive regard; and (c) unconditional positive regard being viewed as the primary change agent in which the client's needs for positive regard and positive self regard are met and the actualizing tendency of the individual is promoted.*

In this paper, I suggest a reconceptualization of Rogers's hypothesis of the necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic personality change. A conceptual model entailing the relationship of the three conditions of therapist genuineness, empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard to each other is proposed. It is suggested that these conditions continue to be necessary and sufficient but that their relationship can be reconceptualized in a way that will emphasize their unique conceptual contributions. *Genuineness and Empathic Understanding are viewed as two contextual attitudes for the primary condition of change, i.e., Unconditional Positive Regard.* My conclusions come primarily from a re-examination of Rogers's (1957;1959) two major theoretical statements. The first of these statements in 1957 has been the one most frequently examined by theoreticians and researchers and has been the primary hypothesis that generated a wealth of research in the realm of psychotherapy. Elsewhere, we (Bozarth & Stubbs, 1996) have concluded that this is an integrative statement. The theoretical statement of Rogers in 1959 is the most disciplined statement of his theory of psychotherapy, personality and interpersonal relationships. It is the 1959 statement that provides the basis for the view that unconditional positive regard is the primary change agent in client-centered therapy.

## REVIEW OF CLIENT-CENTERED THEORY

The foundation block of Client-Centered Therapy (to be labeled Person-Centered Therapy in the remainder of this paper) is the concept of the actualizing tendency. The implications of this concept is that the therapist can trust the tendency of the client and, hence, the therapist is liberated to concentrate on the role of creating an interpersonal climate that promotes the individual's actualizing tendency (Bozarth & Brodley, 1986). The rationale for person-centered theory in interpersonal relationships rests on the actualizing construct in the following ways (Bozarth & Brodley, 1991):

(1) The actualizing tendency is the basic and sole motivation of persons. (2) The actualizing tendency is constructively directional, aiming toward increasing differentiation and complexity and resulting in growth, development and fulfillment of potentialities. (3) The effects of this sole motivational tendency on the person's experience and behavior can be distorted or stunted by interaction with unfavorable, inadequate or destructive environmental circumstances. (4) These distorted or stunted realizations of the person create the need for psychotherapy. (5) Person-Centered Therapy is an attempt to create an optimal psychological climate for the person by means of the therapist providing a special kind of relationship that involves certain attitudinal qualities of the therapist. (6) This relationship fosters the person's natural actualizing tendency to function in ways that overcome the effects on his/her organism of unfavorable or destructive circumstances. (7) The result of therapy is that the person's experience and behavior become more purely constructive and more powerfully developmental and enhancing. Using the same logic, the promotion of a person's constructive growth tendency was extended beyond psychotherapy to include any interpersonal relationship where one individual can create a climate that promotes the other individual's actualizing tendency. (pp. 264-265)

The actualizing tendency, then, is " . . . the inherent tendency of the organism to develop all its capacities in ways which serve to maintain or enhance the organism" (Van Belle, 1980, p. 163). The climate which promotes the actualizing tendency was stated by Rogers (1959) in hypothesis form in the following manner. It is hypothesized:

1. That two persons are in contact.
2. That the first person, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of *incongruence*, being *vulnerable or anxious*.
3. That the second person, whom we shall call the therapist, is *congruent in the relationship*.
4. That the therapist is experiencing *unconditional positive regard* toward the client.
5. That the therapist is experiencing an *empathic* understanding of the client's *internal frame of reference*.
6. That the client *perceives*, at least to a minimal degree, Conditions 4 and 5, the *unconditional positive regard* of the therapist for him, and the *empathic* understanding of the therapist. (238-239)

The definitions for the attitudinal qualities provided in the integration statement (Rogers, 1957) are the following:

*Congruence*:" . . . discrepancy between the actual experience of the organism and the self picture of the individual insofar as it represents that experience." *For the therapist*: "It means that within the relationship he (or she) is freely and deeply him (her) self, with his (or her) actual experience accurately represented by his/her awareness of him/herself." (p. 98-99)

*Unconditional Positive Regard:* "To the extent that the therapist finds him (or her) self experiencing a warm acceptance of each aspect of the client's experience as being a part of that client, he (or she) is experiencing unconditional positive regard." (p. 100)

*Empathy:* "To sense the client's private world as if it were your own, but without ever losing the 'as if' quality." (p.101)

In addition, Rogers hypothesizes about the Client's perception of the therapist to be that "... the client perceives, to a minimal degree, the acceptance and empathy which the therapist experiences for him (or her)." (p. 102) Rogers's statement concerning the necessary and sufficient conditions changed in several ways between 1957 integrative statement and 1959 theoretical statement. First, The 1959 statement hypothesized that: "Two persons are in contact." It is no longer noted as "psychological contact." Second, Rogers uses the term that the "... therapist is experiencing" (rather than the therapist experiences) unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference. Third, the 1959 statement no longer hypothesizes that the therapist endeavors to communicate the experiencing of empathic understanding to the client. Fourth, Rogers notes that the client must minimally perceive the therapist's experience of empathy and unconditional positive regard. He no longer notes the therapist communication of empathy and unconditional positive regard to the client as part of the hypothesis. These changes may or may not be important. However, I believe that Rogers's intent in 1959 to delineate his most rigorous statement of the theory and his personal diligent discipline to such matters suggest that the changes were not happenstance. Examination of his 1959 theoretical statement becomes revealing when the attitudinal qualities of the therapist are related to the basic theory.

#### IF-THEN DELINEATION

Rogers's (1959) most disciplined and rigorous presentation of his theory is an "if-then" format. That is, he posits that if certain conditions exist, a certain process in the client will follow, and if that process occurs in therapy, then there are certain outcomes in personality and behavior. It is important, however, to note this is not an instruction but an observation of what happens and a hypothesis of the process. Thus, there is not an intent "to make" such processes occur. Among other things, the process includes certain occurrences in the client. These occurrences include the following:

1. that the client is more free in expressing feelings;
2. that the client has more reference to the self rather than non-self.
3. that the client is more differentiation & discrimination of feelings & perceptions, experiences are more accurately symbolized;
4. that the client has increasingly more reference to incongruity between certain experiences and concept of self;
5. that the client is more able to experience the threat of incongruence;
6. that the client experiences in awareness feelings which have been denied or distorted in the past;
7. that the client has the concept of self reorganized to include previously distorted or denied experiences;
8. that the client has the concept of self becoming congruent with experiences; including those which would have been too threatening in the past;
9. that the client becomes able to accept without threat the unconditional positive regard of the therapist;

10. that the client feels an unconditional positive self regard;
11. that the client experiences self as locus of evaluation;
12. that the client reacts to experience less in conditions of worth and more in terms of the organismic valuing process.

The *outcomes* of therapy include the client being:

1. more congruent and open to one's experience;
2. more realistic and objective in perceptions;
3. more effective in problem solving; and having more:
  - a). psychological adjustment;
  - b). increased degree of positive self regard;
  - c). perception of the locus of evaluation and choice as residing in self;
  - d). acceptance of others;
  - e). behavior being perceived as more social and mature by others;
  - f). awareness that ". . . behavior is more creative, more uniquely adaptive to each new situation, and each new problem, more fully expressive of his own purposes and values."

Rogers's statement concerning the person's capacity to experience the threat of incongruence (point 5) is especially appropriate. He quite specifically states: "*The experience of threat is possible only because of the continued Unconditional Positive Regard of the therapist, which is extended to incongruence as much as to congruence, to anxiety as much as to absence of anxiety.*" Point 12 is also especially apropos to this paper; i.e., *that the individual reacts to experience less in conditions of worth and more in terms of the organismic valuing process.* This occurs as the individual experiences unconditional positive regard. In short, the increasing experience of worth (or unconditional positive regard) promotes the organismic valuing process (i.e., the actualizing tendency).

### THE THEORETICAL STATEMENT OF ANXIETY

Rogers's theoretical statement of anxiety further clarifies unconditional positive regard as being the fundamental component for personality change in the theory. He states that anxiety exists because of ". . . the *threat* that if the *experience were accurately symbolized in awareness, the self-concept* would no longer be a consistent gestalt, the *conditions of worth* would be violated, and the *need for self-regard* would be frustrated." (p. 247) The crux of Rogers's theory is summarized in his statement on the process of integration of an individual moving in the direction of congruence between self and experience:

*For threatening experiences to be accurately symbolized in awareness and assimilated into the self structure, there must be a decrease in conditions of worth and an increase in unconditional SELF regard. The communication of Unconditional Positive Regard by a significant other is one way to achieve the above conditions. In order for Unconditional Positive Regard to be communicated, it must exist in a context of empathic understanding. When the individual perceives such Unconditional Positive Regard, conditions of worth are weakened and Unconditional Positive SELF REGARD is strengthened. (p. 249)*

The consequences of threatening experiences being assimilated into the self-structure *and unconditional positive regard being perceived:*

are that the individual is less likely to encounter threatening *experiences*; the process of *defense* is less frequent and its consequences reduced; *self* and *experience* are more *congruent*; *self-regard* is increased; *positive regard* for others is increased; *psychological adjustment* is increased; the *organismic valuing process* becomes increasingly the basis of regulating behavior; the individual becomes nearly fully functioning. (249)

Rogers is also explicit about the role of unconditional positive regard when discussing his ultimate hypothetical actualized person. In essence, he says that the individual has two tendencies which are (1) an inherent tendency toward actualizing his or her organism and (2) the capacity and tendency to symbolize experiences accurately in awareness; or, in other words, to keep the self-concept congruent with one's experience. The individual needs positive regard and positive self-regard. The first two tendencies are most fully realized when the second two needs are met. Rogers further states that the first two tendencies tend to be most fully realized when:

1. The individual *experiences unconditional positive regard* from significant others.
2. The persuasiveness of this *unconditional positive regard* is made evident through relationships marked by a complete and communicated *empathic* understanding of the individual's *frame of reference*.

It is significant that although Rogers's (1951;1980;1986) writings about Empathic Understanding included reference to the importance of understanding and clarification of meaning of the person's frame of reference that these writings always included reference to unconditional positive regard or acceptance in one way or another (Bozarth, in press); and that in his formal theoretical statement, Unconditional Positive Regard is the fundamental concept affecting change. Although some individuals (Van Balen, 1990; Van Belle, 1980) discuss changes in Rogers's view of therapy, the fundamental base of the theory remains in the 1959 statement.

### THEORETICAL RELATIONSHIP OF THE ATTITUDINAL CONDITIONS

Given that unconditional positive regard is the attitudinal condition that is the primary change agent, the attitudes of genuineness and empathic understanding are integrally interrelated to unconditional positive regard. I (Bozarth, 1996) believe that, ultimately, they are one condition. However, the focus on unconditional positive regard as the primary change agent suggests to me that, if they are to be perceived with some separateness, the theoretical relationship of the three necessary and sufficient attitudinal qualities can be viewed in a different way. It is, thus, that the following reconceptualization is proposed:

*Genuineness* is a therapist trait that must exist in order for the therapist to be capable of experiencing the other two conditions toward the client. It is contextual; that is, this condition is an attitudinal development that enables the therapist to be more able to achieve the ongoing **experiencing** of empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard towards the client. It is, for the therapist, a way to prepare him or her self as a maximally receptive therapist. In both the 1957 and 1959 hypothesis statements, congruence (or genuineness) is stated by Rogers as a therapist quality in the relationship but, *unlike the other two attitudinal qualities, it is neither related directly to the therapist's experiencing toward the client nor viewed as an attitude to be perceived by the client.*

*Empathy* is also contextual. Empathy is the vessel by which the therapist communicates unconditional positive regard in the most pure way. It appears that this is the only pure way that Rogers believed unconditional positive regard could be perceived by the client. Empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference is one of the two attitudinal qualities which needs to be perceived by the client. It is, however, the only attitudinal behavioral action

on the part of the therapist. The action of understanding the momentary frame of reference of the client is an ultimate confirmation of the person by the therapist; hence, representing the purity of the therapist's experience of unconditional positive regard towards the client.

*Unconditional Positive Regard* is the primary theoretical condition of client change in Person-Centered Therapy. Although there may be other ways that unconditional positive regard is communicated and/or perceived by the client, the underlying premise of the theory is unconditional positive regard in which therapist congruence and empathic understanding of the client's frame of reference is embedded. This attitudinal quality is the unconditional acceptance of the person's momentary frame of reference and all that entails (e.g., conceptualizations, feelings, perceptions).

In summary, this reconceptualization of the necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic personality change entails (a) *genuineness* being viewed as a therapist state of readiness that enables the therapist to better experience the client with empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and experience unconditional positive regard towards the client; (b) *Empathic understanding* being viewed as the action state of the therapist in which the client is accepted as he or she is at any given moment. This is the most optimal way for the client to experience unconditional positive regard; and (c) *Unconditional positive regard* being viewed as the primary change agent in which the client's needs for positive regard and positive self regard are being met; hence, resulting in congruence between his or her experience and self concept, thus promoting the actualizing tendency.

### PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The attitudinal conditions of genuineness, empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard have been considered as skills (Truax & Mitchell, 1971) or as preconditions for other actions (Gendlin, 1990; Tausch, 1990) as well as attitudinal qualities (Bozarth & Temaner, 1986; 1991; Heppner, P. P., Rogers, M. E., & Lee, L. A., 1984; Rogers, 1951; 1957, 1959, 1980, 1986). They have rarely (if ever) been viewed in logical theoretical relationship to each other or to the general theory of personality and behavior change posited by Rogers. An examination of these conceptualizations in relation to each other and to Rogers's theory of psychotherapy, personality and interpersonal relationships suggest that the quality of **genuineness** is a therapist preparatory attitude which enables the therapist to be more apt to experience empathic understanding of the client's frame of reference along with unconditional positive regard toward the client. Rogers (Baldwin, 1987; Rogers, 1986) in latter discussions and writings commented that "Genuineness" was, perhaps, the most important of the conditions. This would have to be true for therapist practitioners since the other conditions could not be experienced by the therapist if the condition of genuineness (congruence) did not occur.

This view of the concept of genuineness suggests that therapists participate in activities that help them to become more genuine or more able to be more "... freely and deeply him (her) self, with his (or her) actual experience accurately represented by his awareness of himself" (Rogers, 1957). Such activities as individual therapy, encounter groups, person-centered community groups might be some ways in which therapist's can develop this attitudinal quality. Empathic understanding of the client's frame of reference is, thus, more aptly experienced by the therapist in a natural way. The view that the attitudinal quality of empathic understanding is the vessel for maximizing the probability of the therapist's experiencing of unconditional positive regard towards the client and for the client to perceive unconditional positive regard of the therapist has several pragmatic implications. First, the idea that *understanding* by the client of his or her world view is of utmost importance for change is a questionable assumption. The therapist can concentrate on the therapist's intention to understand and not be concerned about whether or not the client understands. Second, this could suggest that the intention of the therapist

to understand might be as potent as the understanding in and of itself. Third, Rogers's (Baldwin, 1987) references to his presence as a person in therapy and the use of self as a therapist being, perhaps, more important than providing the attitudinal conditions might be explained within the framework of this reconceptualization. That is, the presence of total attending to another individual is apt to be perceived by clients as unconditional positive regard.

*Unconditional positive regard* as the fundamental change agent may have greater significance for the focus on "being" person-centered versus "doing" person-centered communication. This has implications that give even more credence to the theory being contradictory to such concepts as "intervening," "directing," "controlling" and "confronting" the client's own process. This conceptualization renews the importance of non-directivity in the framework of person-centered theory. When the client perceives that ". . . the therapist is experiencing a positive, non-judgmental, accepting attitude toward whatever the client is at that moment, therapeutic change is more likely (Rogers, 1986, p.198). Thus involving ". . . the therapist's willingness for the client to be whatever immediate feeling is going on – confusion, resentment, fear, anger, courage, love, or pride" (p.198). Unconditional positive regard of the therapist for the client is the acceptance of the client's frame of reference at any given moment. As Van Belle (1980) states:

. . . we are only actualized by others and ourselves at the regard level, if/when the regard that others show us and which consequently we show ourselves, is unconditionally positive, that is, if/when it is such that personality development can be interpersonally assimilated. (p. 90)

The following comments from an interview with a participant in a person-centered community workshop exemplifies the meaning of unconditional positive regard (Stubbs, 1992):

And in a moment . . . there was a pressure on me to speak more about something . . . the whole group made a pressure on me. Speak, speak, and I was in a tension. And in that moment the facilitator said "Well you know, if you don't want to speak, it's perfectly okay." And it was the very first moment which made me good, made me feel well. And it made me feel safer. That was very, very fine . . . and the change in me was that (begins to cry) the great point of that change was that I felt my mother (the facilitator) accepts me with all my mistakes, all my wrong qualities . . . Because I was not accepted by my own mother, long ago in my childhood . . . "that moment or when that change had a big influence on my work or in my job, and I don't know why, because I was very happy or very satisfied with that experience, and I uh tried very hard to be a member of this community. I wanted to go on to continue in this process but in my counseling work, in my job, I uh uh became a little bit more directive (laughs) or maybe freer to be directive after that experience, which is a paradox. (p.115)

Although this statement is not necessarily one of empathic understanding, the impact of the perceived unconditional positive regard is clear. A metaphor exemplifies the importance of the acceptance of individuals at all phases including their struggles (Stubbs, 1992):

A butterfly was struggling to free itself from its cocoon. A passerby, finding the cocoon and seeing that the butterfly was struggling to emerge, took a razor and gently cut the cocoon open in order to help the butterfly emerge into life. The butterfly emerged from the cocoon into the world, attempted to fly, but was unable to fly because it had not developed the natural strength to fly as it

would have had its birth in struggling occurred. Lacking this strength, the butterfly died. In trying to make its genesis easier, the individual had denied the butterfly its struggling, which would have inherently provided the butterfly with life and the strength to fly in life. The struggle towards freedom gives life. (p. 210)

This metaphor emphasizes to me the importance in person-centered theory of the acceptance of an individual's struggle and the ultimate in unconditional positive regard of respecting the right of that struggle. My reconceptualization of the necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic personality change is, perhaps, reflected in a statement that I heard Rogers make several times more to himself than to others (and later cited in some of his writings). He stated: "If I can be all that I am, then that is good enough." I would add: *If the individual can be affirmed in being who he or she is at the moment, then that is good enough.*

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