THE PUBLIC EXPRESSION OF PRIVATE EXPERIENCE: A RELATIVELY UNEXPLORED DIMENSION OF PERSON-CENTERED PSYCHOLOGY

J. Guthrie Ford
Trinity University

ABSTRACT. *The congruence of psychological "pairs" is central to person-centered psychology. Two well-known pairs are the perceived self and ideal aspirations, and the perceived self and experiences of the organism. There is yet another pair that is relatively unexplored. One element of this pair is the private (covert) process; the other is the public (overt) process. Rogers has described the incongruence of these processes and the psychological consequences of this incongruence. My students and I have developed a way to measure public/private incongruence, documented the association between incongruence and maladjustment, and integrated public/private incongruence into person-centered theory. Should you read any further? Well, if you have ever said, "Let others know the real you," you may feel congruent and wise after reading this article.*

Three types of psychological congruence and, accordingly incongruence, are addressed by person-centered theory (Rogers, 1951, 1959, 1961, 1969). Two of these, the incongruence of self-perceptions and ideal aspirations and the incongruence of self-perceptions and experiences of the organism, have led to a number of confirmed hypotheses (e.g., Chodorkoff, 1954; Ford, 1991; Higgins, 1987; Rogers & Dymond, 1954). Overall, the more incongruent the self with ideals or organismic experiences, the more likely a person will report signs of maladjustment like depression and anxiety.

There is a third type of psychological incongruence which, to my knowledge, is unexplored, particularly in comparison to the types mentioned above. I am referring to the incongruence of a person's public (overt) behaviors with the person's private (covert) experiences. Instances of public/private congruence and incongruence appear in several of Rogers's writings.

> What do I mean by being real? I could give many examples from many different fields. But one meaning, one learning is that there is basically nothing

to be afraid of *when I present myself as I am* [emphasis added], when I can come forth nondefensively, without armor, just me. . . . So I enjoy life *much* more when I am not defensive, not hiding behind a facade, just trying to be and express the real me. (Rogers, 1969, p. 228)

Being real entails a number of psychological processes. One of these is expressing private experience through the public presentation of self. When this presentation is incongruent with--discrepant from--private experience, Rogers (1961) spoke of "the false fronts, or the masks, or the roles, with which [one faces] life" (p. 109). A young woman client described a public/private discrepancy that she experienced during social interactions.

I somehow developed a sort of knack, I guess, of--well--habit--of trying to make people feel at ease around me, or to make things go more smoothly. . . . At a small meeting, or a little party, or something--I could help things go along nicely and appear to be having a good time. And sometimes I'd surprise myself by arguing against what I really thought when I saw that the person in charge would be quite unhappy about it if I didn't. . . . I haven't been really honestly being myself, or actually knowing what my real self is, and I've been just playing a sort of false role. (Rogers, 1961, p. 109)

A sign of positive personality change is when a person, "instead of simply being a facade, as if it were himself, [comes] closer to being himself. . ." (Rogers, 1961, p. 167). In other words, people are psychologically more healthy and adaptive when they reduce the size of discrepancy between their public behaviors and private experiences.

As a client in group psychotherapy I have the opportunity to experience a lot about my (and other's) public/private discrepancies. The group teaches me how people often behave as though they were performing an earlier life script, which often describes some condition of worth. As the therapeutic process exposes and peels these conditions away it is commonplace to hear group members declare, "Wait. What you just saw from me is not what I was really feeling; let me express myself again."

Membership in the group has given me two gifts. First and foremost, I now feel more choice in the self that I show others. The group experience also peaked my person-centered interest in public/private incongruence and motivated me to research the descriptions from Rogers (1961, 1969) given above. This interest has led to a technique for measuring public/private incongruence which I think could be a useful research and clinical tool for person-centered students and professionals.

The Public/Private Congruence Technique (PPCT)

The PPCT is predominantly a visual experience. It employs five pictures drawn by a newspaper cartoon artist. Each picture depicts a central human figure, *the target*, who wears distinctive clothing so that the target can be easily seen within a picture. One of the PPCT pictures for women participants is shown in Figure 1.

The striped headband is the target's distinctive item, and she wears it in all of the PPCT pictures. There are also five PPCT pictures for men. The public/private incongruences in the men's and women's pictures are the same.

A person's *public presentations of self* are verbal and/or nonverbal behaviors which can be directly experienced by others. As the woman in the left part of Figure 1 can readily see, the target is smiling and maintaining the interaction--note the speech bubble pointing toward the target. The target's *simultaneous private experience* is described in the bubble connected to the target by little circles. (I freely admit lifting the bubble style from the daily comics.)

The public/private incongruences in the PPCT pictures entail social interactions in which the target's *sociable* public behaviors--smiling, eye contact, agreeability, and conversational exchange--are discrepant from private experiences that are clearly *less amicable.*[1] In the realm of social interaction, the PPCT target is dissimulating: "disguising or concealing true feelings or intentions under a feigned appearance" (*The American Heritage Dictionary, New College*

Figure 1. One of the Public/Private Congruence Technique pictures for women participants

Edition). Vernacularly speaking, the target is wearing a "sociability" facade much like that described by Rogers's (1961) client (see quotation in preceding section).

The women's PPCT instructions request the research participant "to imagine that YOU are the person wearing the striped headband and that *you are in the situation shown in the picture.*" (Cap is substituted for headband in the men's instructions.) The participant studies a PPCT picture at her own pace, and before going to the next picture she completes these two attached rating scales. Can you relate to--see yourself in--this type of situation? I relate to this situation: 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). This type of situation occurs for me: 1 (does not occur) to 5 (very often). (A score of 1 on the first scale does not excuse answering the second one.)

With the Public/Private Congruence Technique PICTURE 1 shown in Figure 1, the remaining four pictures are described below. I will be happy to send the reader a set of PPCT pictures, instructions, rating scales, and scoring procedure (specify male, female, or both sets).

__PICTURE 2. Half of the picture shows the target involved in a massive homework effort and listening on the telephone to a person (in the other half) who declares, "I've really got a problem. Can I come over and talk to you about it?" Targets says, "Sure. Come on over." Target's private experience is, *How will I ever finish this work if she (he) comes over now?*

__PICTURE 3. Upon leaving a social function the target declares to host, "Goodnight. I had a marvelous time at your party." Privately, *Wow. That party was a total bummer.*

__PICTURE 4. At a social function the target displays a big wide smile during a conversation. Privately, *I've had this smile glued on my face for two hours. How much longer can I keep it on?*

__PICTURE 5. The target is asked to join a group of three people; a group member calls out, "Hi! Haven't seen you around. Come say hello." Target answers, "O.K." Privately, *I'd really rather not.*

The relate to and frequency rating scores are strongly associated ($r = .71$, Ford, 1993). Therefore, these scores are added together within each of the five pictures, and these five numbers are then summed into one overall PPCT score. The larger the PPCT score, the greater is the participant's public/private incongruence in the sociability domain of behavior.

Prominent Features of the Public/Private Congruence Technique

My students and I have developed and used the PPCT in various projects involving several hundred college-age men and women who are predominantly European American. For example, the specific social situations depicted in the five PPCT pictures came from interviews with college students, and the correlations found in early studies were later replicated. Because detailed PPCT findings are available elsewhere (Ford, 1993; Ford & Hook, 1993; Ford, Lawson, & Hook, 1993), I will summarize only some of our major findings here.

The internal and test-retest reliabilities of the PPCT scores are quite reasonable, ranging from .76 to .87. The five PPCT scores (one per picture) are described by one factor analytic dimension, which justifies adding the separate picture scores into an overall incongruence score.

The public/private incongruence measured in the PPCT's sociability application has construct validity in that PPCT scores are significantly correlated with variables that conceptually make sense. For example, "It is better to be yourself than popular" (from the self-actualization scale in Jones & Crandall, 1986) is negatively correlated (-.28) with PPCT scores; and "I am concerned with making a good impression" (from the self-consciousness scale in Buss, 1980) is positively correlated (.30). On the other hand, the PPCT shows discriminant validity in that its scores are not reliably correlated with established personality factors like sociability, shyness, or social conformity/passivity. (The findings in this and the preceding paragraph are from Ford, 1993.)

The person-centered expectancy is that the greater an individual's public/private incongruence, the greater will be signs of maladjustment (Rogers, 1961, 1969). This expectancy is confirmed by significant correlations of the PPCT scores with scores from the Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis & Spencer, 1982). For example, correlations (corrected for unreliability of measurement) for PPCT and anxiety scores for women and men are, respectively, .51 and .37 (Ford, 1993). Significant correlations are also found for the BSI Interpersonal Sensitivity scale which measures "self-deprecation, feelings of uneasiness, and marked discomfort during interpersonal interactions" (Derogatis & Spencer, 1982, p. 12). The corrected PPCT-sensitivity *r*s for women and men are, respectively, .80 and .32 (Ford, 1993).[2]

Clearly, there are significant psychological costs associated with "hiding behind a facade" (Rogers, 1969).

The Perceived Social Image

Two person-centered psychologists, Cartwright and Graham (1984), recently expanded the interpersonal part of Rogers's definition of the self-concept. This part refers to "perceptions of the relationships of the 'I' or 'me' to others. . ." (Rogers, 1959, p. 200). Cartwright and Graham (1984) introduced a new theoretical construct, the perceived social image, which is how "the person perceives or has a conception of the way others see her" (p. 126).

The perceived social image dovetails nicely with the Public/Private Congruence Technique. Individuals with large PPCT scores perceive that others experience them as highly sociable

people. Simultaneously though, this image of the public (social) self is incongruent with less amicable private self-perceptions.

Although Cartwright and Graham (1984) did not explore the consequences of public/private incongruence on psychological adjustment, they certainly foretold the maladjustment-incongruence correlations that we have found. Cartwright and Graham (1984, p. 126) discussed adjustment in terms of confidence and certainty: "The confidence that one's inner sameness is matched by the sameness of meaning for others [an Eriksonian concept] can now be expressed as a feeling of certainty that one's self-concept is matched... [is congruent with] one's perceived social image." The greater the mismatch of self and perceived social image--the larger the PPCT incongruence score--the less is one's confidence and the greater is one's stress and tension.

Important conceptual questions about public/private congruence remain to be explored. For instance, Desmond Cartwright (of Cartwright & Graham, 1984) has wondered about the psychological adjustment of diplomats whose public behaviors are frequently discrepant from their private experiences. He speculates, and I agree, that the impact of public/private discrepancy on adjustment may be minimal when an individual has full awareness of playing a role and the reasons for doing so, as would the diplomat (personal communication with Desmond Cartwright, November, 1993).

If, on the other hand, public behavior is directed by a condition of self-worth, one should be less aware of the role playing nature of public behavior. Under a condition like, "It is crucial that others see me as warm and friendly," the incongruence of public and private processes may assume a character very much like the incongruence of the self with the experience of the organism (Rogers, 1959). Under this circumstance, one would expect public/private incongruence to have a negative impact on psychological adjustment, as our PPCT findings suggest (Ford, 1993; Ford & Hook, 1993; Ford et al., 1993).

Evaluation of the Public/Private Congruence Technique

The PPCT is simple to give and score. The five pictures are arranged in a booklet which also contains two neutral pictures designed to disrupt any response set the participant may have. The booklet can be completed in a few minutes, and the overall PPCT score is computed by adding-up small whole numbers.

I think it is important to recognize that while the Public/Private Congruence Technique measures a psychological discrepancy, it does so without using a *literal* discrepancy (difference) score. The psychological discrepancy is explicitly illustrated in the PPCT picture (see Figure 1) which the participant views and responds to on the frequency-of- occurrence and relate-to rating scales. Measurement of discrepancy by the PPCT saves one from computing discrepancy scores (for what is involved there see Rogers & Dymond, 1954). Also, literal discrepancy scores (e.g., measure X minus measure Y) can be statistically tricky in terms of reliability rates and correlational analyses; so tricky that some quantitative researchers have counseled against using discrepancy scores altogether (see Cronbach & Furby, 1970; Johns, 1981).

As an engaging visual task with simply worded rating scales, I think a child's version of the PPCT would be an effective way to study the development of public/private incongruence, although I have not yet done so. Nor have I used the technique in a client-centered context, but I do feel the PPCT pictures provide a relatively easy and nonthreatening way for people to begin symbolizing and talking about some of their psychological incongruences. (The members of my psychotherapy group thought the pictures were pretty valid.) A clinical study showing a significant difference between pre- and post-therapy PPCT scores would certainly add to the construct and concurrent validity of the technique.

A weakness in the current version of the Public/Private Congruence Technique is that it employs only the theme of overt sociability being discrepant from less sociable private experiences; that is, the dissimulation of sociability. I was swayed toward this theme by the client's

description of the sociability facade in Rogers (1961), Hochschild's (1983) field research on flight attendants who are required to behave sociably, Ford's (1991) congruency research on the temperamental (organismic) aspects of sociability.

Nevertheless, there are certainly other ways for public behavior to be incongruent with private experience. For instance, it might be useful to create PPCT pictures in which the target's public presentation of self is one of calm collectedness, while the simultaneous private experience is one of high emotional arousal (e.g., fear, anger, or joy). It is easy to imagine "stiff upperlip" people identifying strongly with public/private incongruence in various affective situations.

Perhaps a future version of the Public/Private Congruence Technique could employ pictures which illustrate the congruence of public behavior and private experience in a number of psychological domains. I would enjoy working with another person-centered person on such an endeavor.

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FOOTNOTES

1 Some reviewers of our PPCT papers have been puzzled about the public expression of a low-sociable private experience. For instance, what is the individual in Figure 1 to do? Actualize her private experience by telling the other person that she wants to split because she is bored or disinterested in the social exchange? While such forthrightness is certainly a congruence of the public and private processes, it would no doubt reduce one's social attractiveness, which could lead to social isolation.

My answer is that the person in Figure 1 is indeed "stuck" and will see the interaction to its natural conclusion or end it gracefully (e.g., "Gotta run--late for class"). However, people who acknowledge on the Public/Private Congruence Technique that incongruent social interactions happen frequently for them, may in real life *set themselves up for*

incongruent experiences. Were they not strongly invested in appearing warm and sociable to others, an investment most likely tied to a condition of worth, they would create fewer social situations in which public/private incongruences (like that in Figure 1) could occur.

2 Women's correlations of Private/Public Congruence Technique scores and maladjustent criteria are typically larger than the men's correlations. I speculate this is because women have more salient conditions of worth regarding sociability; that is, a woman's need for positive self-regard is more contingent on presenting herself publicly as sociable and supportive, even though she is not feeling that way privately. While this explanation is admittedly after the fact, there is evidence that women are socialized to be more "socially involved" than are men (see the review of sociability and gender in Ochse, 1991).

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