



Humanistic psychology: Carl Rogers

This activity will help you to...

- Understand the main ideas of Carl Rogers' humanistic psychology
- Understand the key concepts in Roger's person centred view
- Understand the general ideas behind Rogerian person-centred counselling

Why is everyone so unhappy?

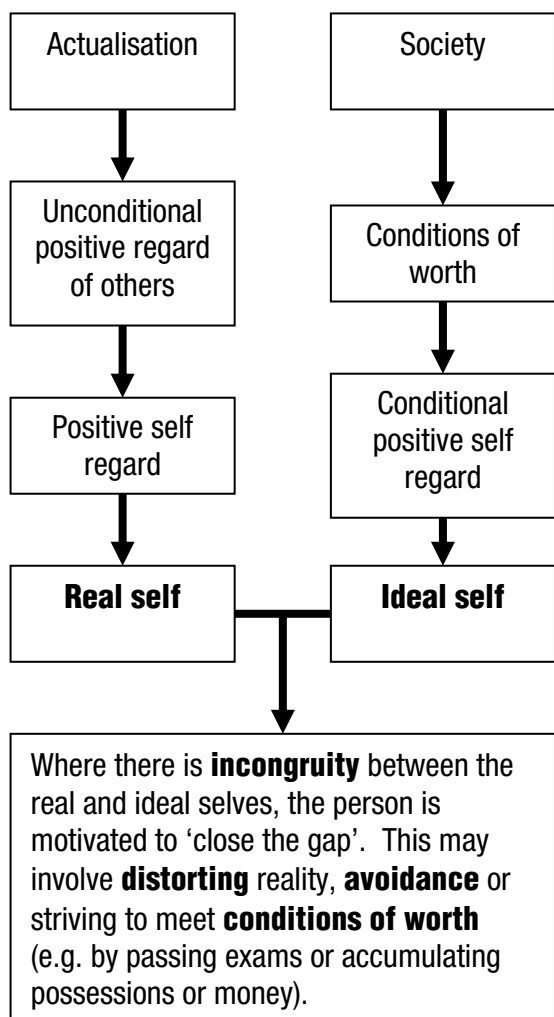
Carl Rogers, alongside some other important theorists (particularly Abraham Maslow and George Kelly) was responsible for formulating the main ideas of Humanistic psychology. He shared with other humanists the general assumptions of humanistic psychology: that people are basically good, that they are driven to fulfill their potential and that people have the capacity to choose their own behaviour. He also assumed that each of us perceives the world in our own unique way and that, in order to understand what someone does, you have to try and see the world as they see it.

One particular question that Rogers invites us to ask is why, when we live in a society that is in so many respects immeasurably rich, so many of us are so unhappy. The answer, in Rogers' view, is at least partly that the things to which we attach value are not the things that are necessarily good for our psychological well-being.

Carl Rogers' main ideas

Main Idea	What's this?
The actualising tendency	Everything that is alive is driven to fulfill its potential. This tendency can be seen in all living systems, from the flower that forces its way between the paving stones to the forest ecosystem that tries to spread as far as it can. In humans it is manifested as the tendency to try to be all we can be.
Organismic valuing	The idea that every organism has an innate idea of what's good or bad for it. Even the simplest animal or plant tends to avoid things that damage it. A baby will spit out food that tastes bad. People will generally move away from situations or things that threaten them or are causing them harm.
Unconditional positive regard	We need to be loved, valued and respected by others. It's a precondition to our development. A child that is fed and cleaned but not loved and nurtured may survive, but it won't develop and thrive. We need the unconditional positive regard of others in order to have positive self regard.
Positive self-regard	A sense of self-worth or self-esteem. If we lack this, then the way to achieving our potential becomes blocked. Look at how much disruptive behaviour and academic failure at school comes about because some children don't believe they are 'good enough'.
Conditions of worth	The positive regard of others should not have strings attached, but often it does. Over time, this may result in conditional self regard, where we believe we are only worth something if we meet the conditions that others have imposed on us. For example, 'I failed my exams, so I'm useless', or 'I must be rich to be happy'.
Incongruity	The gap between what you are and could become (the 'real self'), and what you think you should be (the 'ideal self'). The bigger the gap becomes, the more unhappy we feel. Conditions of worth are part of the ideal self, so if we are only ever valued for achieving the goals others set for us, we are set up for a life of unhappiness.
Defences	The things we do to cope with the feelings of anxiety associated with incongruity. One form of defence is denial. For example, the student who never turns up for an exam never has to face poor grades. Another defence is distortion. For example, a student who blames poor teaching or an unfair test for their poor grades.

What determines whether someone is happy?



The problem is that our society can interfere with our actualising tendency. The things that society (through our parents, teachers, friends, employers) tells us are important are not necessarily the things that are actually good for our development as people. As a consequence, we labour continually to fulfill conditions of worth that may be unrealistic or unhelpful as personal goals. Because we perceive that the regard of others is conditional, we only value ourselves in relation to the conditions imposed on us. A gap opens up between the ideal self and the real self, and the wider that gap becomes, the more unhappy we are.

To try to deal with this incongruity, we start to distort our perceptions of the world or perhaps to deny aspects of it completely. Now we are out of touch with aspects of reality, and if we don't perceive the world and our place within it accurately, how will we ever fulfill our potential – the only thing that will actually give us a more contented life.

So we continually pursue the goals that others have set for us, always believing that the next achievement, the next promotion, the next qualification, the next pay rise, the next sexual partner, the next pair of shoes will be the thing that finally makes up happy. Unfortunately, it never is.

The fully functioning person

Roger's didn't use the word 'happy' when describing psychologically healthy people, even if that is what he basically meant. Instead, he used the term 'fully functioning person'. This is someone whose mental set-up is such that they are in a position to fulfill their human potential. Fully functional people are:

- Open to experience – they don't distort the world to protect themselves.
- Living in the here-and-now – they don't tend to dwell on the past or worry much about the future.
- Doing what's good for them – they trust organismic valuing to guide their choices.
- Experientially free – they feel as if they are in control of their lives, rather than being constrained.
- Creative – they contribute to the actualization of others through art, science, parenting or their job.

Can we make people happy (or fully functioning)?

No, we can't. If we go around trying to change people or telling them how they ought to think we end up imposing yet another set of conditions of worth and that's adding to the problem, not providing a solution. That is not the same as saying that people can't change. Rather, the point is this: *the only change that counts comes from within the person themselves.*

All we can do is help to create the conditions under which the person can start to make their own authentic choices, and support them through the changes they decide to make. Rogers compared it to learning to ride a bicycle. You can't tell the person how to do it, they will only learn through trying. You can help by supporting them as they learn but if you never let go of them, they will never do it independently. Rogers developed his own set of therapeutic techniques to help people move towards fulfilling their potential. These techniques are variously called non-directive therapy, client-centred therapy, or more often, Rogerian Counselling.

Rogers' believed that the success of therapy or counselling has less to with the techniques used by the therapist as with the relationship that the therapist develops with the client. If you develop the right sort of relationship, then that gives the client room to examine their own problems, sources of unhappiness and ways of seeing the world. They can then decide what they want to change and take the steps to change it. According to Rogers, the counselor must have three important qualities in their relationship with the client:

Quality	What's this?
Congruence	Honesty and genuineness. The therapist must relate to the client as one human being to another, not as a professional, like a doctor would.
Empathy	The client must be able to feel what the client feels because this is the only thing that will allow the client to feel as if they are genuinely understood.
Respect	The therapist must show acceptance and unconditional positive regard for the client, as the lack of this is usually at the root of the client's unhappiness

The main technique used in counselling is reflecting back to the client the things they say. This means more than just repeating what they say. It involves demonstrating to the client that they are really understood whilst at the same time helping them explore their perceptions and feelings to arrive at their own understandings.

Some questions to think about

- Do you feel as if you labour under conditions of worth? Do you think you impose conditions of worth on other people?
- Is there a gap between your ideal self and your true self? If so, is this really as much of a problem as Rogers claims?
- History is full of monsters, for example, Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and Saddam Hussein. Are we to believe that history might have been different if their parents and teachers had shown them more unconditional positive regard?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Gross, R.D. (1996): Psychology – The science of mind and behaviour. 3rd Edition. pp. 763-5; 837-8