Carl Rogers (1902–1987) was one of the leading psychologists and psychotherapists of the 20th century. He developed the client-centered or person-centered approach to counseling and psychotherapy and was a pioneer and leader in the humanistic psychology movement of the later part of the century. He also was the first person to record and publish complete cases of psychotherapy and, at the time, did more scientific research on a therapeutic approach than had ever been done.

Growing up in a mid-Western American family, Rogers first learned the scientific method as a boy, conducting agricultural experiments on the family farm. He intended to be a modern farmer, but influenced by his religiously conservative family and a 6-month trip during college to Japan, the Philippines, and China, where he attended a World Youth Christian Federation conference, he decided instead to become a minister. When he moved with his new wife, Helen, to New York City in the 1920s to attend Union Theological Seminary, growing religious doubts and a fascination with psychology led him to transfer to Teachers College, Columbia University, where he earned a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. In his dissertation and clinical work, he learned to balance the testing and measurement, and the psychodynamic approaches that were a part of his training, coming to deeply value both the individual's subjective experience in therapy and the objective investigation of the process of psychotherapy.

He put both of these approaches into practice for the next 12 years, working in the child guidance field in Rochester, New York. As a clinical worker with children and families and as director of his department and then agency, he straddled the fields of social work and psychology, arranging for institutional and foster home placement, recommending changes in school programs, doing family counseling, and providing individual therapy for children and parents. Eclectic in his practice, his main focus was on “what works”—what approaches helped children to successfully adjust to life’s challenges. One therapeutic approach that particularly impressed and influenced him was the relationship therapy developed at the Philadelphia School of Social Work by students of Otto Rank. At the end of his time in Rochester, his first major book, Clinical Treatment of the Problem Child, summarized his learning about environmental and clinical treatment and led to a job offer at Ohio State University.

As professor of clinical psychology at Ohio State University, in what might have been the first university clinical practicum for psychologists in the country, rather than just summarize others’ approaches, he began to articulate his own views on effective therapeutic treatment of children and adults. Rogers’s initial “nondirective” counseling and psychotherapy was but one of what he called the “newer therapies” of the time. These approaches were a counterpoint to the widely applied directive methods in college counseling and the medical model of psychiatry with its expert diagnoses and treatment. In contrast, Rogers’s nondirective therapy placed a great deal of faith in the client's ability to know what hurts and to direct the conversation in therapy. The therapist’s role was not to offer advice, suggestions, interpretations, or probing questions but to rely exclusively on “acceptance” and “reflection of feelings,” which would allow clients to achieve their own insights, leading to their own positive actions.

Rogers’s 1941 book Counseling and Psychotherapy: Newer Concepts in Practice described the nondirective approach, provided numerous clinical examples, popularized the word client as the recipient of counseling, and included the first complete psychotherapy case ever published. It became an instant best seller. It appealed widely to psychologists, social workers, counselors, ministers, health care professionals, and others and thus helped spread counseling and psychotherapy to many different fields. His being elected president of the American Academy of Psychotherapists, the American Association of Applied Psychology, and the American Psychology Association evidenced Rogers’s growing influence.

The recording and transcribing of actual sessions revolutionized both training and research in counseling and psychotherapy and led Rogers to move to the University of Chicago (1945–1957), where he developed one of the major centers in the world for training and research in the field. There, his nondirective approach gradually evolved into the “client-centered” approach to counseling and psychotherapy. Rogers argued and demonstrated through personal example and extensive research that certain conditions were both “necessary and sufficient” for psychotherapeutic change in clients. Among these were the three “core conditions” of therapist empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence. Empathy was the deep and sensitive understanding of the client’s thoughts, feelings, and meanings, which was primarily achieved through the kind of active listening that Rogers came to embody through widely distributed audio and video recordings. Unconditional positive regard was the therapist’s complete acceptance of the client as he or she is, without judgment or imposing “conditions of worth” on the client. Congruence was the therapists’ genuineness and authenticity in the relationship—coming across as a real and caring person rather than playing a professional role. Rogers argued that when these conditions in the therapeutic relationship were present and clients perceived them, then therapeutic progress was inevitable.

For the voluminous research that Rogers and his associates did to demonstrate these propositions, he received the first of the
Following his tenure in Chicago, Rogers spent another 6 years at the University of Wisconsin before leaving academia in 1963. Rather than rest on his laurels, he spent the next quarter-century applying what he came to call the “person-centered approach” to an ever-widening circle of applications in other fields. In Freedom to Learn, with examples and case studies, he showed how teachers could adapt the three core conditions of (1) empathy (understanding), (2) unconditional positive regard (trust), and (3) congruence (genuineness) to become “facilitators of learning,” unleashing students’ intrinsic motivation, productivity, and creativity. In Becoming Partners: Marriage and Its Alternatives, again through examples and case studies, he explored how realness and open communication could help couples enrich their relationships, whether traditional or unconventional. In Man and the Science of Man, including transcript excerpts from a conference Rogers and colleagues held on the topic, he applied the principles of humanistic psychology to the study of the behavioral sciences.

One of the major applications of the person-centered approach that Rogers helped develop and disseminate was the intensive small-group experience known as the “encounter group.” In these groups, facilitated by a leader embodying the core conditions of empathy, positive regard, and congruence, participants learn to lower their facades and defenses and communicate more deeply and authentically with others. Rogers conducted scores of encounter groups with diverse populations, from business executives to educators. He and his colleagues then went on to produce similar results in person-centered communities with much larger numbers of participants. Although the process was more volatile in the larger groups, with more emotion, conflict, and leadership struggles, the benefits of the egalitarian person-centered approach were consistently reaffirmed.

The person-centered approach has sometimes been criticized as individualistic; less relevant to non-Western, collectivist cultures; and neutral to, or even dismissive of, the client's social and political context. These critics are usually unfamiliar with the past 20 years of Rogers's career, in which, not content with personal growth as an outcome of encounter groups or person-centered communities, Rogers worked extensively with non-Western audiences in traditional societies and applied the person-centered approach to cross-cultural communication, intergroup conflict resolution, and even international peacekeeping. He and his team went around the world conducting successful small and large groups, for example, with Catholics and Protestants from strife-torn Northern Ireland, blacks and whites in South Africa under apartheid, and the protagonists in the Central American war between the Contras and Sandinistas. For this work, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize a month before his death. Arguably, no other theory of counseling and psychotherapy has been applied so explicitly in the community and the wider world.

Rogers's theory and practice have also been criticized as naive, superficial, and unworkable with populations with serious mental health diagnoses. Apart from Rogers and colleagues’ own research to the contrary, ironically the latest generation of process and outcome research on a wide variety of therapy approaches appears to be validating much of Rogers's theory regarding the centrality of the therapeutic relationship to successful counseling and psychotherapy.

Further Readings


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