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## Conditions of Worth (Rogers)

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### Synonyms

[Approval/disapproval circumstances](#); [Conditional positive regard](#); [Introjected value](#)

### Definition

Conditions of worth are circumstances when “*self-experience* is avoided (or sought) solely because it is less (or more) worthy of *self-regard*” (Rogers 1959, p. 224). A *condition of worth* is acquired when the *conditional regard* of a significant other has been assimilated into one’s own self-regard complex, such that self-experience is valued positively or negatively solely because these conditions of worth have been taken over from others and not because the experience enhances or fails to enhance ones’ organism (Rogers 1959, see p. 209).

### Introduction

Rogers (1959) constructed a theory of the development of personality and the dynamics of

behavior in relation to the perception of an individual as they appear in therapy. According to Rogers’ client-centered framework (reprinted with permission from “The Rogerian fully functioning person: A positive psychology perspective” by Proctor, C., Tweed, R., and Morris D. (2016). *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 56(5), 503–529. Copyright 2015, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.), humans have an inherent tendency toward growth, development, and autonomy, which he referred to as the *actualizing tendency*:

This is the inherent tendency of the organism to develop all its capacities in ways which serve to maintain or enhance the organism. It involves not only the tendency to meet what Maslow (1954) terms “deficiency needs” for air, food, water, and the like, but also more generalized activities. It involves development toward the differentiation of organs and of functions, expansion in terms of growth, expansion of effectiveness through the use of tools, expansion and enhancement through reproduction. It is development toward autonomy and away from heteronomy, or control by external forces. (p. 196)

That is, individuals engage in an *organismic valuing process* (OVP), whereby they evaluate experiences with the actualizing tendency as the criterion. Experiences that are perceived as organismically enhancing are valued positively, whereas those that are perceived as not organismically enhancing are valued negatively. From this perspective, humans have an innate ability to know what they need and what is essential for

a fulfilling life (Joseph and Linley 2004). However, according to Rogers (1959), the OVP can be disturbed in a social environment characterized by *conditional positive regard*:

A condition of worth arises when the positive regard of a significant other is conditional, when the individual feels that in some respects he is prized and in others not. Gradually, this same attitude is assimilated into his own self-regard complex, and he values an experience positively or negatively solely because of these conditions of worth which he has taken over from others, not because the experience enhances or fails to enhance his organism. (p. 209)

Therefore, in a social environment characterized by conditional positive regard, individuals do not *self-actualize* in a direction consistent with their actualizing tendency but in a direction consistent with their *conditions of worth* (Joseph and Linley 2004). Psychological disorder and distress develop through the assimilation of worth conditions into an individual's own identity. In contrast, in a social environment characterized by *unconditional positive regard*, "To perceive oneself as receiving unconditional positive regard is to perceive that of one's self-experiences none can be discriminated by the other individual as more or less worthy of positive regard" (p. 208), individuals self-actualize in a direction consistent with their actualizing tendency toward becoming what Rogers (1959) referred to as a *fully functioning person*:

It should be evident that the term "the fully functioning person" is synonymous with optimal psychological adjustment, optimal psychological maturity, complete congruence, complete openness to experience, complete extensionality... Since some of these terms sound somewhat static, as though such a person "had arrived," it should be pointed out that all the characteristics of such a person are *process* characteristics. The fully functioning person would be a person-in-process, a person continually changing. (p. 235)

Thus, the fully functioning person is a term that describes the ideal condition in which actualization of the self is congruent with an individual's organismic experiences (see Proctor et al. 2016; Rogers 1961).

### Development of Conditions of Worth

Rogers (1959) theory postulates a set of characteristics that are present for all individuals during their period of infancy:

1. Experience is perceived as reality, creating an individual frame of reference.
2. Inherent tendency toward actualizing one's organism.
3. Interaction with reality in terms of one's basic actualizing tendency – to satisfy the experienced needs for actualization in the reality as perceived.
4. Behavior as an organized whole – gestalt.
5. Engagement in the organismic valuing process.
6. Aversion toward positively valued experiences and avoidance toward negatively valued experiences. (see p. 222)

From Roger's perspective:

[T]he human infant is seen as having an inherent motivational system (which he shares in common with all living things) and a regulatory system (the valuing process) which by its "feedback" keeps the organism "on the beam" of satisfying his motivational needs. He lives in an environment which for theoretical purposes may be said to exist only in him, or to be of his own creation. (p. 222)

Accordingly, the theory suggests that one's environment is constituted by their perception of it, regardless of how it relates to reality. Therefore, an infant's perception of a situation is what determines the resultant behavior, not the reality of whether a stimulus was strange or frightening, for example. Rogers is clear in acknowledging the transactional relationship between individuals and their environment. He notes that when experiences continually contradict initial perception, overall perception changes. However, "the effective reality which influences behavior is at all times the perceived reality" (p. 223).

From birth, an infant learns to need love and develops a gestalt as to how it is regarded. Each new experience of love or rejection changes the whole gestalt, such that disapproval of a specific behavior is perceived as disapproval in general. Thus, an infant begins to adjust behavior not as a

result of that which maintains or enhances their organism but by the likelihood of receiving positive regard or love from their caregiver. Over time, the developing child begins to assimilate conditions of worth imposed by others into their own self-regard complex – resulting in some behaviors *unsatisfying* to their organism being regarded *positively* and others *satisfying* to their organism being regarded *negatively* – and begins to behave in accordance with the introjected values they have acquired. Throughout development and into adulthood, conditions of worth become more complex and form the basis of an individual's overall way of seeing the world. Eventually, regarding oneself positively (i.e., as having worth) relies upon living in accordance with experienced conditions of worth. Introjected values are adopted as one's own, without consideration or reference to one's true organismic values, resulting in *incongruence* with one's real self (cf. Worth and Proctor 2017, this volume). That is, a person begins to live in terms of introjected values or conditions of worth (see Rogers 1959, pp. 224–225).

#### Development of Incongruence

According to Rogers (1959), it is because of our need for self-regard that experiences are perceived selectively, as they relate to the conditions of worth which have come to exist within us. Therefore, the human organism tends to “*perceive* and *symbolize* accurately in awareness” experiences in accord with one's conditions of worth and *perceive* “selectively and distortedly as if in accord with the conditions of worth” experiences contrary to one's conditions of worth – denying those that run contrary, in part or whole, into awareness (p. 226). Consequently, some experiences now occur that are not recognized as one's own and therefore not assimilated accurately into an individual's self-structure – *incongruence* between self and experience has begun to develop. Thus, it is “because of the distorted perceptions arising from the conditions of worth that the individual departs from integration which characterizes his infant state” (p. 226). Therefore, from this point on, one's conception of self is made up of distorted perceptions that do not

accurately represent experience, and similarly experiences do not always represent the view one has of their self – incongruence between self and experience exists. As a result, one is no longer a “unified whole person” but made up of parts characteristic of various modes of functioning or ways of being that can be threatened by certain experiences (p. 226). From Rogers' perspective:

This, as we see it, is the basic estrangement in man – he has not been true to himself, to his own natural organismic valuing of experience, but for the sake of preserving the positive regard of others has now come to falsify some of the values he experiences and to perceive them only in terms based upon their value to others. Yet this has not been a conscious choice, but a natural – and tragic – development in infancy. The path of development towards psychological maturity, the path of therapy, is the undoing of this estrangement in man's functioning, the dissolving of conditions of worth, the achievement of a self which is congruent with experience and the restoration of a unified organismic valuing process as the regulator of behavior. (pp. 226–227)

Accordingly, Rogers suggests that from the very first selective perception in terms of conditions of worth beginning in infancy, that states of incongruence between self and experience begin, and that psychological maladjustment and vulnerability exist to some degree (cf. Worth and Proctor 2017, this volume).

## Conclusion

Rogers' (1959, 1961, 1980) theory of the development of personality and the dynamics of human behavior emerge from his belief that the human organism has inherent tendency toward growth, development, and autonomous functioning. His theory postulates that from infancy, we engage in an evaluation of our experiences in terms of whether or not they enhance our growth and development – our being. Accordingly, in an environment where regard of our being by significant others is conditional, we fail to actualize in a direction consistent with our actualizing tendency and instead begin to actualize in a direction consistent with our conditions of worth (Joseph and Linley 2004). Over time we begin to live in terms of assimilated/introjected values or conditions of

worth – adopting them as part of our own identity – causing psychological disorder and distress to develop. Through engaging with therapy, Rogers believed that conditions of worth and dysfunction could be undone, enabling individuals to *become* a self that is congruent with their experience. Importantly, Rogers believed that individuals embark on *becoming fully functioning* – a unified organismic valuing being whose experiences are congruent with their being – via the psychotherapeutic process emerging from the unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding experienced by engaging in a congruent relationship with a therapist.

### Cross-References

- ▶ [Congruence/Incongruence](#)
- ▶ [Person-Centered Therapy \(Client-Centered\)](#)
- ▶ [Personal Growth](#)

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