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## Congruence/Incongruence (Rogers)

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### Synonyms

Balance/imbalance; Congruity/incongruity; Harmony/inharmonious; Integrated/dissimilarity; Unified/dissonant

### Definition

#### Congruence

Congruence is the term used to describe a condition in therapy when a therapist “is what he *is*” in the psychotherapeutic relationship (Rogers 1961, p. 61). That is, in the relationship with the client, a therapist “is genuine and without ‘front’ or façade, openly being the feelings and attitudes which at that moment are flowing *in* him” – “a unified, or integrated, or congruent person” (p. 61). Congruence occurs for the therapist when there is an “accurate matching of experience with awareness” (p. 282) – the therapist is at one with the feelings they are experiencing and able to communicate these genuinely to the client if appropriate.

Congruence, as it exists for the client, is a state of internal consistency arising from an individual “revising his concept of self to bring it into congruence with his experience” – “reorganizing the concept he hold of himself to include [those] characteristics, which would previously have been inconsistent with self” (Rogers 1959, p. 206). Congruence is a relatively permanent outcome of the therapeutic relationship for the client. They are observed outside of therapy, as becoming “more *congruent*, more *open to [his] experience*, [and] less *defensive*” (p. 218) and consequently more psychologically adjusted.

#### Incongruence

Incongruence is a discrepancy “between the self as perceived, and the actual experience of the organism” (Rogers 1959, p. 203). Incongruence occurs for the therapist, when there is an inaccurate matching of experience with awareness – the therapist is “playing a role, or saying something he doesn’t feel” (Rogers 1961, p. 61).

Incongruence, as it exists for the client, is a “state of internal confusion, since in some respects the individual’s behavior will be regulated by the actualizing tendency, and in other respects by the self-actualizing tendency, thus producing discordant or incomprehensible behaviors” (Rogers 1959, p. 203; cf. Proctor 2017, this volume).

## Introduction

Rogers' (1961) theory identifies the conditions in the psychotherapeutic relationship between a therapist and client that facilitate or bring about positive changes in the personality and behavior of a client, which are indicative of movement toward psychological maturity.

Rogers (1959) details six conditions of the therapeutic process:

1. That two persons are in *contact*.
2. That the first person, . . .the client, is in a state of *incongruence*. . .
3. That the second person, . . .the therapist, is *congruent* in the relationship.
4. That the second person, 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*, a 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. (p. 213)

According to Rogers, "the same conditions are regarded as sufficient for therapy, regardless of the particular characteristics of the client" (p. 213). Embodied in Rogers' theory of therapy and personality change is the knowledge "that for therapy to occur the wholeness of the therapist in the relationship is primary" (p. 215). Indeed, this wholeness, or "integration of the therapist in the relationship" is what Rogers defined as *congruence* (p. 214). He believed that "the most helpful and significant aspect of the experience" is the genuine relationship between the therapist and the client, both of whom are endeavoring to be him/herself in the relationship. Rogers postulated that congruence on the part of the therapist facilitates the psychological growth of the client. However, he specifies that a "part of the congruence of the therapist must be the experience of unconditional positive regard and the experience of empathic understanding" (p. 215).

## Conditions of the Therapeutic Process

Rogers (1961) summarizes three conditions in the therapeutic relationship which facilitate psychological growth in the client: *congruence*, *unconditional positive regard*, *empathic understanding* (i.e., conditions 3, 4, and 5 of the therapeutic process (see Rogers 1959, p. 213)). According to Rogers, it is these three conditions in the therapeutic relationship that bring about *therapy* – that is, they are the "ingredients" promoting personal growth and/or changes in the personality and behavior of the client, which are the outcomes of psychotherapy.

The section that follows will draw out a range of nuances and implications as described or implied by Rogers (1959, 1961, 1980).

### Conditions for Psychological Growth

Rogers (1980) proposed that congruence was key. Indeed, it may be inferred that the other two conditions (i.e., unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding) emerge from congruence – this personal state or ground of our being. Rogers (1961) believed that the more congruent we may be in a relationship, the higher the probability of change occurring in the client that we may be with.

These definitions of congruence imply that our feelings are available in our awareness and in turn that we are able to live and be them, communicating them if we choose (Rogers 1961, see p. 61). This experience has a quality of acceptance of what is going on within us, whatever the complexity and that we can do so without fear (1961, 1980).

Rogers (1959, 1961) proposed that if our awareness functioned in this way, then in turn our communications with others would reflect our internal feelings, experience, and perception, an internal frame of reference reflecting our feelings, perceptions, and perceived meanings. He suggested that congruent communication would be perceived as clear communication, which in turn may support a clarity in response from others. This implies that congruence offered to others becomes a potential starting point for it being offered in return.

Yet Rogers (1961) offered an intriguing additional possibility on the cognitive impact of congruence; he suggested that the more our awareness is open to ourselves, freely, the more a freedom and a capacity will exist to listen to others in a way that might be unusual or rare. It is as if an openness to ourselves, in a state of congruence, takes less cognitive energy than incongruence, and in turn this energy then becomes available to be used in relationship with others.

While many references to congruence may occur in Rogers' (1961) definition of the conditions of growth, it is also found in his development and description of the *Seven Stages of Process* (see p. 132–159), his theorized journey or the steps and nature of human change. In writing that was clearly innovative in its time, he suggested the continuum of personal change is one from a fixed and rigid personal state, toward one that is in process. The openness involved in congruence is also reflective of an openness to experience and change found in the descriptions of the Seven Stages of Process (particularly stages six and seven, see p. 145–156) and that of what Rogers described as the “fully functioning person” (cf. Proctor 2017, this volume).

In his descriptions Rogers infers the receipt of the core conditions of growth and the relationship in which they occur, which facilitates the movement across this continuum. Rogers (1980) is explicit this progress may be slow and describes the shift, the movement within a person, as one from incongruence to congruence. Rogers accepted this state may be rarely fully achieved, yet that it is available and aspired to by us.

## Conclusion

Rogers (1959, 1961, 1980) reflects in his writing a step beyond the counseling or therapeutic relationship. He portrayed his growing understanding that if the core conditions promote growth in clients, they would, in turn, do so in relationships generally, such as education and the family. He asserted that congruence was probably the key in relationship, being real or genuine with another person and living in a climate characterized by this.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Conditions of Worth](#)
- ▶ [Person-Centered Therapy \(Client-Centered\)](#)
- ▶ [Personal Growth](#)

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