

A Tentative Formulation of
A General Law of Interpersonal Relationships
by
Carl It. Rogers, Ph.D.
University of Chicago
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I have many times asked myself how our learnings in the field of psycho-therapy apply to human relationships in general. During recent years I have thought much about this issue and attempted to state a theory of interpersonal relationships as a part of the larger structure of theory in client-centered therapy. This present document undertakes to spell out, in a somewhat different way, one of the aspects of that theory. It endeavors to look at a perceived underlying orderliness in all human relationships, an order which determines whether the relationship will make for the growth, enhancement, openness, and development of both individuals or whether it will make for inhibition of psychological growth, for defensiveness and blockage in both parties.

The Concept of Congruence

Fundamental to much of what I wish to say is the term “congruence”. This construct has been developed to cover a group of phenomena which seem important to therapy and to all interpersonal interaction. I would like to try to define it.

Congruence is the term we have used to indicate an accurate matching of experience and awareness. It may be still further extended to cover a matching of experience, awareness, and communication. Perhaps the simplest example is an infant. If he is experiencing hunger at the physiological and visceral level, then his awareness appears to match this experience, and his communication is also congruent with his experience. He is hungry and dissatisfied, and this is true of him at all levels. He is at this moment integrated or unified in being hungry. On the other hand if he is satiated and content this too is a unified congruence, similar at the visceral level, the level of awareness and the level of communication. He is one unified person all the way through, whether we tap his experience at the visceral level, the level of his awareness, or the level of communication. Probably one of the reasons why most people respond to infants is that they are so completely genuine, integrated or congruent. If an infant expresses affection or anger or contentment or fear there is no doubt in our minds that he is this experience, all the way through. He is transparently fearful or loving or hungry or whatever.

For an example of incongruence we must turn to someone beyond the stage of infancy. To pick an easily recognizable example take the man who becomes angrily involved in a group discussion. His face flushes, his tone communicates anger, he shakes his finger at his opponent. Yet when a friend says “Well, let’s not get angry about this” he replies, with evident sincerity and surprise, “I’m not angry! I don’t have any feeling about this at all. I was just pointing out the logical facts.” The other men in the group break out in laughter at this statement.

What is happening here? It seems clear that at a physiological level he is experiencing anger. This is not matched by his awareness. Consciously he is not experiencing anger, nor is he communicating this (so far as he is consciously aware.) There is a real incongruence between experience and awareness, and between experience and communication.

Another point to be noted here is that his communication is actually ambiguous and unclear. In its words it is a setting forth of logic and fact. In its tone, and in the accompanying gestures it is

carrying a very different message, "I am angry at you." I believe this ambiguity or contradictoriness of communication is always present when a person who is at that moment incongruent endeavors to communicate.

Still another facet of the concept of incongruence is illustrated by this example. The Individual himself is not a sound judge of his own degree of congruence. Thus the laughter of the group indicates a clear consensual judgment that the man is experiencing anger, whether or not he thinks so. Yet in his own awareness this is not true. In other words it appears that the degree of congruence cannot be evaluated by the person himself at that moment. We may make progress in learning to measure it from an external frame of reference. We have also learned much about incongruence from the person's own ability to recognize incongruence in himself in the past. Thus if the man of our example were in therapy, he might look back on this incident in the acceptant safety of the therapeutic hour and say, "I realize now I was terribly angry at him, even though at the time I thought I was not." He has, we say, come to recognize that his defensiveness at that moment kept him from being aware of his anger.

One more example will portray another aspect of incongruence. Mrs. Brown, who has been stifling yawns and looking at her watch for hours, says to her hostess on departing, "I enjoyed this evening so much. It was a delightful party." Here the incongruence is not between experience and awareness. Mrs. Brown is well aware that she is bored. The incongruence is between awareness and communication. Thus it might be noted that when there is an incongruence between experience and awareness, it is usually spoken of as defensiveness, or denial to awareness. When the incongruence is between awareness and communication it is usually thought of as falseness or deceit.

There is an important corollary of the construct of congruence which is not at all obvious. It may be stated in this way: If an individual is at this moment entirely congruent, his actual physiological experience being accurately represented in his awareness, and his communication being accurately congruent with his awareness, then his communication could never contain an expression of an external fact. If he was congruent he could not say, "That rock is hard;" "He is stupid;" "You are bad;" or "She is intelligent." The reason for this is that we never experience such "facts." Accurate awareness of experience would always be expressed as feelings, perceptions, meanings from an internal frame of reference. I never know that he is stupid or you are bad. I can only perceive that you seem this way to me. Likewise, strictly speaking I do not know that the rock is hard, even though I may be very sure that I experience it as hard if I fall down on it. (And even then I can permit the physicist to perceive it as a very permeable mass of high-speed atoms and molecules.) If the person is thoroughly congruent then it is clear that all of his communication would necessarily be put in a context of personal perception. This has very important implications.

As an aside it might be mentioned that for a person always to speak from a context of personal perception does not necessarily imply congruence, since any mode of expression may be used as a type of defensiveness. Thus the person in a moment of congruence would necessarily communicate his perceptions and feelings as being these, and not as being facts about another person or the outside world. The reverse does not necessarily hold, however.

Perhaps I have said enough to indicate that this concept of congruence is a somewhat complex concept with a number of characteristics and implications. It is not easily defined in operational terms, though some studies have been completed and others are in process which do provide crude operational indicators of what is being experienced, as distinct from the awareness of that experience. It is believed that further refinements are possible.

To conclude our definition of this construct in a much more common-sense way, I believe all of us tend to recognize congruence or incongruence in individuals with whom we deal. With some individuals we realize that in most areas this person not only consciously means exactly what he says, but that his deepest feelings also match what he is expressing, whether it is anger or competitiveness or affection or cooperativeness. We feel that “we know exactly where he stands.” With another individual we recognize that what he is saying is almost certainly a front, a facade. We wonder what he really feels. We wonder if he knows what he feels. We tend to be wary and cautious with such an individual.

Obviously then different individuals differ in their degree of congruence, and the same individual differs at different moments in degree of a congruence, depending on what he is experiencing and whether he can accept this experience in his awareness, or must defend himself against it.

Relating Congruence to Communication in Interpersonal Relationships

Perhaps the significance of this concept for interpersonal interaction can be recognized if we make a few statements about a hypothetical Smith and Jones.

1. Any communication of Smith to Jones is marked by some degree of congruence in Smith. This is obvious from the above.
2. The greater the congruence of experience, awareness, and communication in Smith, the more it is likely that Jones will experience it as a clear communication. I believe this has been adequately covered. If all the cues from speech, tone and gesture are unified because they spring from a congruence and unity in Smith, then there is much less likelihood that these cues will have an ambiguous or unclear meaning to Jones.
3. Consequently, the more clear the communication from Smith, the more Jones responds with clarity. This is simply saying that even though Jones might be quite incongruent in his experiencing of the topic under discussion, nevertheless his response will have more clarity and congruence in it than if he had experienced Smith's communication as ambiguous.
4. The more that Smith is congruent in the topic about which they are communicating, the less he has to defend himself against in this area, and the more able he is to listen accurately to Jones' response. Putting it in other terms, Smith has expressed what he genuinely feels. He is therefore more free to listen. The less he is presenting a facade to be defended, the more he can listen accurately to what Jones is communicating.
5. But to this degree, then, Jones feels empathically understood. He feels that in so far as he has expressed himself, (and whether this is defensively or congruently) Smith has understood him pretty much as he sees himself, and as he perceives the topic under consideration.
6. For Jones to feel understood is for him to experience positive regard for Smith. To feel that one is understood is to feel that one is regarded as worthy of being understood. It means that one has made some kind of a positive difference in the experience of another, in this case of Smith.

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7. But to the degree that Jones (a) experiences Smith as congruent or integrated in this relationship; (b) experiences Smith as having positive regard for him; (c) experiences Smith as

being empathically understanding; to that degree the conditions of a therapeutic relationship are established. I have tried in another paper (2) to describe the conditions which our experience has led us to believe are necessary and sufficient for therapy, and will not repeat that description here.

8. To the extent that Jones is experiencing these characteristics of a therapeutic relationship, he finds himself experiencing fewer barriers to communication. Hence he tends to communicate himself more as he is, more congruently. Little by little his defensiveness decreases.

9. Having communicated himself more freely, with less of defensive-ness, Jones is now more able to listen accurately, without a need for defensive distortion, to Smith's further communication. This is a repetition of step 4, but now in terms of Jones.

10. To the degree that Jones is able to listen, Smith now feels empathically understood (as in step 5 for Jones); experiences Jones' positive regard (a parallel to step 6); and finds himself experiencing the relationship as therapeutic (in a way parallel to step 7). Thus Smith and Jones have to some degree become reciprocally therapeutic for each other,

11. This means that to some degree the process of therapy occurs in each and that the outcomes of therapy will to that same degree occur in each; change in personality in the direction of greater unity and Integration; less conflict and more energy utilizable for effective living; change in behavior in the direction of greater maturity.

12. The limiting element in this chain of events appears to be the introduction of threatening material. Thus if Jones in step 3 includes in his more congruent response new material which is outside of the realm of Smith's congruence, touching an area in which Smith is incongruent, then Smith may not be able to listen accurately, he defends himself against hearing what Jones is communicating, he responds with communication which is ambiguous, and the whole process described in these steps begins to occur in reverse.

A Tentative Statement of a General Law

Taking all of the above into account, it seems possible to state it for more parsimoniously as a generalized principle. Here is such an attempt.

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Assuming (a) a minimal willingness on the part of two people to be in contact; (b) an ability and minimal willingness on the part of each to receive communication from the other; and (c) assuming the contact to continue over a period of time; then the following relationship is hypothesized to hold true:

The greater the congruence of experience, awareness and communication on the part of one individual, the more the ensuing relationship will involve a tendency toward reciprocal communication with a quality of increasing congruence; a tendency toward more mutually accurate understanding of the communications; improved psychological adjustment and functioning in both parties; mutual satisfaction in the relationship.

Conversely the greater the communicated incongruence of experience and awareness, the more the ensuing relationship will involve: further communication with the same quality;

disintegration of accurate understanding, less adequate psychological adjustment and functioning in both parties; and mutual dissatisfaction in the relationship.

With probably even greater formal accuracy this general law could be stated in a way which recognizes that it is the perception of the receiver of communication which is crucial. Thus the hypothesized law could be put in these terms, assuming the same pre-conditions as before as to willingness to be in contact, etc.

The more that Y experiences the communication of X as a congruence of experience, awareness, and communication. the more the ensuing relationship will involve: (etc., as stated above.)

Stated in this way this "law" becomes an hypotheses which it should be possible to put to test, since Y's perception of X's communication should not be too difficult to measure.

The Existential Choice

Very tentatively indeed I would like to set forth one further aspect of this whole matter, an aspect which is frequently very real in the therapeutic relationship, and also in other relationships, though perhaps less sharply noted.

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In the actual relationship both the client and the therapist are frequently faced with the existential choice, "Do I dare to communicate the full degree of congruence which I feel? Do I dare match my experience, and my awareness of that experience, with my communication? Do I dare to communicate myself as I am or must my communication be some what less than or different from this?" The sharpness of this issue lies in the often vividly foreseen possibility of threat or rejection. To communicate one's full awareness of the relevant experience is a risk in interpersonal relationships. It seems to me that it is the taking or not taking of this risk which determines whether a given relationship becomes more and more mutually therapeutic or whether it lead in a disintegrative direction.

To put it another way. I cannot choose whether my awareness will be congruent with my experience. This is answered by my need for defense, and of this I am not aware. But there is a continuing existential choice as to whether my communication will be congruent with the awareness I do have of my experience. In this moment by moment choice in a relationship may lie the answer as to whether the movement is in one direction or the other in terms of this hypothesized law.

REFERENCES

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