

## Empirical research related to Rogers

Carl Rogers is the founder of the counselling movement, and he is a classic example of a humanistic psychologist. His view of human development was that personal growth was only possible with unconditional positive regard from significant others. This frees individuals from striving for social approval so that they can seek self-actualisation. Conditional love from a significant other leads to maladjustment because the self and ideal self within the individual are in conflict. Rogers, as all humanistic psychologists, values the uniqueness of each individual and the potential each person has for self-determination and self-actualisation. Rogers is related to the psychodynamic approach in that he also describes the dynamics of adult personality. Although Rogers believes in free will, he acknowledges that determinism is present in the case of conditional love because that may affect a person's self-esteem.

An extensive study of the origins of self-esteem gives support to the importance of the dimensions suggested by Rogers. Coopersmith (1967) conducted a study of self-esteem, which he defined as the evaluation an individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to the self. Self-esteem, then, is a personal judgment of worthiness. It is a general personality characteristic, not a momentary attitude or an attitude specific to individual situations. Self-esteem was measured by a **50-item Self Esteem Inventory**, with most of the items coming from scales previously used by Rogers. Children in the public schools of central Connecticut filled out the inventory, and their scores were used to define groups with high, medium, and low self-esteem. Compared to children low in self-esteem, those high in self-esteem were found to be more assertive, independent, and creative. The high self-esteem subjects were also less likely to accept social definitions of reality unless they were in accord with their own observations, were more flexible and imaginative, and were capable of finding more original solutions to problems. In other words, the subjective estimates of self-esteem had a variety of behaviours attached to them.

What of the origins of self-esteem? Coopersmith obtained data on the children's perceptions of their parents, ratings from staff members who interviewed the mothers, and responses from the mothers to a questionnaire relating to child-rearing attitudes and practices. The results indicated that external indicators of prestige such as wealth, amount of education, and job title did not have as overwhelming and as significant an effect on self-esteem as is often assumed. Instead, the conditions in the home and the immediate interpersonal environment had the major effect on judgments of self-worth. Apparently children are influenced in their self-judgments through a process of *reflected appraisal* in which they take the opinions of them expressed by others who are important to them and then use these opinions in their own self-judgment.

What kinds of parental attitudes and behaviours appeared to be important in the formation of self-esteem? Three critical areas of parent-child interaction seemed to be particularly important.

1. The degree of acceptance, interest, affection, and warmth expressed toward the child. The data revealed that the mothers of children with high self-esteem were more loving and had closer relationships with their children than did the mothers of children with low self-esteem. The interest on the part of the mother appeared to be interpreted by children as an indication of their significance, that they were

worthy of the concern, attention, and time of those who were important.

2. Parent—child interaction related to *permissiveness and punishment*. The data revealed that the parents of children with high self-esteem made clear demands that were firmly enforced. Reward generally was the preferred mode of affecting behaviour. In contrast to this pattern, the parents of children with low self-esteem gave little guidance and were harsh and disrespectful in their treatment. These parents did not establish and enforce guidelines for their children, were apt to use punishment rather than reward, and tended to stress force and loss of love.
3. Parent—child interactions in relation to democratic practices. Parents of children with high self-esteem established an extensive set of rules and were zealous in enforcing them, but treatment within the defined limits was non-coercive and recognized the rights and opinions of the child. Parents of children low in self-esteem set few and poorly defined limits and were autocratic, dictatorial, rejecting, and uncompromising in their methods of control.

Coopersmith summarized his findings as follows: “*The most general statement about the origins of self-esteem can be given in terms of three conditions: total or nearly total acceptance of the children by their parents, clearly defined and enforced limits, and the respect and latitude for individual actions that exist within the defined limits*” (1967, p. 236). Coopersmith further suggested that it is the perception of the parents by the child, and not necessarily the specific actions they express, that is important. Further, the total climate in the family influences the child’s perception of the parents and their motives.

A recent study further supports the relevance of democratic child-rearing conditions for the development of creative potential. According to Rogers, children raised by parents who provide conditions of psychological safety and psychological freedom are more likely to develop creative potential than children raised by parents who do not provide these conditions. Conditions of psychological safety are provided by parental expressions of unconditional positive regard for the child and empathic understanding, and conditions of psychological freedom are expressed in permission to engage in unrestrained expression of ideas. In a test of this view, child-rearing practices and parent—child interaction patterns were measured for children between the ages of three and five (Figure 1). Independent measures of creative potential in the children were obtained prior to their admission to school and in adolescence. In support of Rogers’ theory, measures of childhood (preschool) environmental conditions of psychological safety and freedom were significantly associated with creative potential—both in preschool and in adolescence (Harrington, Block, & Block, 1987).

**Evaluation of Roger’s theory on self-esteem:** Rogers’ views on parents’ characteristics and practices that influence the child’s development of self-esteem have influenced the thinking of researchers and child-care experts. Although they do not always refer to Rogers, in many cases their emphasis on respect for the child and protection of the child’s self-esteem speaks to the influence of Rogers and other members of the human potential movement. His emphasis on the conditions that promote or block self-actualisation receives further attention in the next chapter, where we consider the clinical applications of the theory.

### **Creativity-fostering Environment**

Parents respect the child's opinions and encourage expression of them.

Parents and child have warm, intimate time together.

Children are allowed to spend time with other children or families who have Different ideas or values.

Parents are encouraging and supportive of the child.

Parents encourage the child to proceed independently.

### **The Creative Personality**

Tends to be proud of accomplishments.

Is resourceful in initiating activities.

Becomes strongly involved in activities.

Has a wide range of interests.

Is comfortable with uncertainties and complexities.

Perseveres in the face of adversity.

*Figure 1 Illustrative Characteristics of Creativity-fostering Environments and the Creative Personality. (Adapted from Harrington, Block, & Block, 1987.)*

### **Research on Self-Consistency and Congruence**

An early study in this area was performed by Chodorkoff(1954). In a study of self-perception, perceptual defence, and adjustment, Chodorkoff found that subjects were slower to perceive words that were personally threatening than they were to perceive neutral words. This tendency was particularly characteristic of defensive, poorly adjusted individuals. The poorly adjusted individual, in particular, attempts to deny awareness to threatening stimuli.

Additional research by Cartwright (1956) involved the study of self-consistency as a factor affecting immediate recall. Following Rogers' theory, Cartwright hypothesized that individuals would show better recall for stimuli that are consistent with the self than for stimuli that are inconsistent. He hypothesized further that this tendency would be greater for maladjusted subjects than for adjusted subjects. In general, subjects were able to recall adjectives they felt were descriptive of them selves better than they were able to recall adjectives they felt were most unlike themselves. Also, there was considerable distortion in recall for the latter, inconsistent adjectives. For example, a subject who viewed himself as hopeful mis-recalled the word "hopeless" as being "hopeful," and a subject who viewed himself as friendly mis-recalled the word "hostile" as being "hospitable." As predicted, poorly adjusted subjects (those applying for therapy and those for whom psychotherapy had been judged to be unsuccessful) showed a greater difference in recall than did adjusted subjects (those who did not plan on treatment and those for whom psychotherapy had been judged to be successful). This difference in recall scores was due particularly to the poorer recall of the maladjusted subjects for inconsistent stimuli.

In a related study, an effort was made to determine the ability of subjects to recall adjectives used by others to describe them (Suinn, Osborne, & Winfree, 1962). Accuracy of recall was best for adjectives used by others that were consistent with the

self-concept of subjects and was poorest for adjectives used by others that were inconsistent with the self-concept. In sum, the accuracy of recall of self-related stimuli appears to be a function of the degree to which the stimuli are consistent with the self-concept.

The two studies just discussed related to perception and recall. What of overt behaviour? Aronson and Mettee (1968) found results that were consistent with Rogers' view that the individual behaves in ways that are congruent with the self-concept. In a study of dishonest behaviour, they reasoned that if people were tempted to cheat, they would be more likely to do so if their self-esteem is low than if it is high; that is, whereas cheating is not inconsistent with generally low self-esteem, it is inconsistent with generally high self-esteem. The data gathered indeed suggested that whether or not an individual cheats is influenced by the nature of the self-concept. People who have a high opinion of themselves are likely to behave in ways they can respect, whereas people with a low opinion of themselves are likely to behave in ways that are consistent with that self-image.

More recent research supports the view that the self-concept influences behaviour in varied ways (Markus, 1983). What is particularly noteworthy here is the suggestion that people often behave in ways that will lead others to confirm the perception they have of themselves—a self-fulfilling prophecy (Darley & Fazio, 1980; Swann, 1983). For example, people who believe they are likable may behave in ways that lead others to like them, whereas others who believe themselves to be unlikable may behave in ways that lead others to dislike them (Curtis & Miller, 1986). For better or for worse, your self-concept may be maintained by behaviours of others that were influenced in the first place by your own self-concept!

**The Q-sort method** is one way of assessing the self-concept and the ideal self. It can be used before, under and after therapy and works in the following way:

- An individual is presented with a pile of cards, each of which contains a personal statement (e.g., “I’m a friendly person”; “I’m tense most of the time”).
- The individual decides which statements best describe his or her own self, which statements are the next best, and so on, right down to those statements that are the least descriptive.
- The same procedure is followed with respect to the ideal self.
- The experimenter works out the size of the gap between the statements selected as descriptive of the self and the ideal self.

There are 3 problems with using the Q-sort method or any similar method to assess the self-concept and the ideal self.

1. Such methods cannot shed any light on those aspects of the self that are not conscious.
2. There are obvious possibilities of deliberate distortion. For example, it is more desirable to be a friendly rather than an unfriendly person (so unfriendly persons may pretend to be friendly for the purposes of the test).

3. People may possess a number of self-concepts, but the Q-sort is designed to assess a single self-concept.

### **Outcomes of Client-Centred Therapy**

One of Rogers' landmark contributions was his opening up the field of psychotherapy for systematic investigation. During the 1940s and 1950s a number of studies were done by Rogers and others to determine the changes associated with client-centred therapy. Among the changes observed were a decrease in defensiveness and an increase in openness to experience; development of a more positive and more congruent self; development of more positive feelings toward others; and a shift away from using the values of others to asserting their own evaluations.

In addition to his work with neurotic clients, Rogers undertook a major therapeutic and research effort with schizophrenic patients (Rogers, 1967). In this study scales were developed to measure the critical therapist variables of a therapeutic climate (empathy, congruence, positive regard) and the process of patient experiencing. Once more he found evidence that a positive therapeutic climate was associated with positive personality change. Indeed, these conditions seemed even more critical for schizophrenics than for neurotics. However, the therapeutic climate was found to depend on a complex dynamic interaction between patient and therapist, rather than on patient or therapist factors alone. Further, there was evidence that patients of therapists who were generally competent and conscientious, yet unable to establish positive therapeutic conditions, sometimes got worse.

### **Evaluation of Rogers**

**Strengths:** Rogers' approach (and the humanistic psychological approach in general) has made psychologists aware that there is perhaps more to behaviour than objectively discoverable facts. His positive view on humans and his emphasis on personal responsibility in life have given people the notion of choice in relation to their own lives.

Client-centered therapy is a major contribution in therapy, and counseling has become a huge industry underpinning self-help groups, and telephone help lines as well as trained therapists. The fundamental element of humanistic psychotherapy is unconditional positive regard and the power of each individual for self-healing.

**Weaknesses:** Humanistic psychology is concerned only with those thoughts of which we have conscious awareness and it relies too heavily on self-reports (which may be distorted). The humanistic perspective is vague, unscientific, and untestable mostly. The theories are not set out in a way that lends itself to empirical verification but this is to some extent because psychologists within this perspective do not strive for this kind of confirmation. Humanistic theories also lack falsifiability, and this prevents our advance of understanding.

For many people, free will is not a reality. There are too many things in their lives that dictate how they must behave, so free will may be the luxury of the middle classes in the Western world. Free will is also a burden (Sartre said that people are condemned to be free).