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PERSON-CENTRED DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY: REFLECTIONS AND REVISIONS[1]
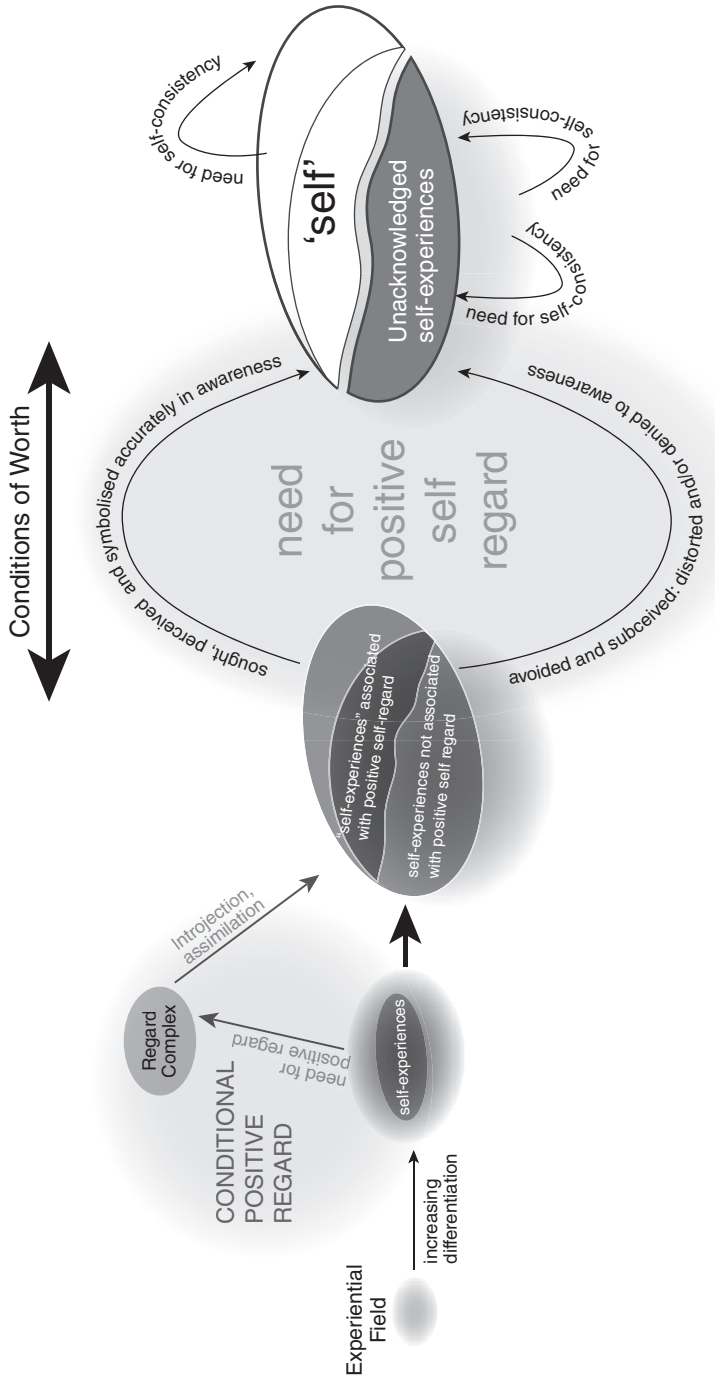
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INTRODUCTION

Whilst recent years have witnessed considerable debate regarding person-centred practice (e.g. Bozarth, 1998; Gendlin, 1996), a person-centred model of how people come to be the way they are has received little such interest. Indeed, in presenting a person-centred model of human development, both Merry (1999) and Mearns and Thorne (1999) – authors of two key introductory works on person-centred counselling – refer primarily to concepts developed over thirty-five years ago.

In accounting for this lack of reflection regarding developmental issues, one might argue that the person-centred approach, as a phenomenological form of therapy, should be more concerned with bracketing theoretical assumption than attempting to construct and impose new developmental narratives upon clients' actual lived-experiences. Yet, as postmodern thinkers like Lyotard (1981) have argued, it is never possible for us to stand entirely outside of some particular theoretical framework. We can not *not* interpret. The choice, therefore, is not between assumptions and an absence of assumptions. Rather, it is between sedimented assumptions that will influence a practitioner's work in non-conscious ways; and critically considered assumptions, that a practitioner can reflectively choose to bracket off or to use to help make sense of a client's experiences. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to revive the question of how, from a person-centred perspective, we can understand the process of human development, and to suggest some revisions to Rogers' (1959) original account. In doing so, I do not wish to propose a fixed alternative to Rogers' model. Rather, I hope to stimulate interest and debate in this question, to ensure that the person-centred understanding of human development remains reflective, fluid and alive.

ROGERS' DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL

Rogers' model of human development is most rigorously outlined in his 'self-proclaimed magnum opus' (Ford, 1991): his 1959 chapter in Koch's *Psychology: A Study of a Science*.
Figure one presents a diagrammatic conceptualisation of Rogers' (1959) developmental model. This model can be summarised as follows: In the first stages of life, the child's experiential field is an integrated whole, with a gradual differentiating off of self-related experiences. One of these self-experiences is a need for positive regard: the need to, 'experience oneself as making a positive difference in the experiential field of another' (p.208). As a result of this, the child begins to build up a picture of the self-experiences that others will value her for. This 'regard complex' is then internalised, such that the child starts to like *herself* for certain self-experiences but not for others (assuming that her positive regard has been conditional). If she experiences positive regard for self-experiences that are entirely outside of her experiential field, she may also begin to like herself for experiences that she thinks she has, but has not

Conditions of Worth

'self'

need for self-consistency

need for self-consistency

need for self-consistency

Unacknowledged self-experiences

sought, perceived and symbolised accurately in awareness

need for positive self regard

avoided and subceived: distorted and/or denied to awareness

"self-experiences" associated with positive self-regard

self-experiences not associated with positive self regard

Introjection, assimilation

Regard Complex

need for positive regard

CONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD

self-experiences

increasing differentiation

Experiential Field

actually experienced. Because the child wants to like herself (i.e., experience 'positive *self*-regard'), she then starts to seek out and accurately symbolise in awareness those 'self-experiences' for which she values herself, whilst concomitantly avoiding and distorting or denying to awareness those experiences for which she does not experience positive self-regard. Those 'self-experiences' which are symbolised in awareness then become the basis for the child's concept of self, whilst the denied and distorted self-experiences are kept outside of the self-concept. This configuration is then further reinforced as a consequence of the child's desire for self-consistency. The final result of this is that the individual becomes a 'divided personality' – someone who defends herself against much of her actual experiencing, whilst identifying with 'experiences' that she may not of actually experienced at all.

MULTIPLE CONFLICTS

Rogers' (1959) developmental model proposes a fundamental splitting of the actualising tendency 'into two systems at least partially antagonistic in their directions' (Rogers, 1963, p.16). But what is the nature of these two systems? Commentators like Ford (1991, p.105) have generally taken Rogers to mean a splitting between the 'actualising tendency' and the 'self-actualising tendency', perhaps as a parallel to the splitting between organismic experiencing and self-concept. Yet, in contrast to the relationship between self-construct and organismic experiencing, Rogers does not conceptualise the self-actualising tendency as standing, even partially, outside of the more general actualising tendency. Rather, he sees it as a 'sub-system' of the actualising tendency – the only motive that he postulates within his system. In this sense, then, it would not be quite right to read Rogers as saying that the basic split is between the actualising tendency and the self-actualising tendency – How can a part be split against a whole of which it is part of? Furthermore, if the basic conflict is understood in this way, then the fact that the self-actualising tendency frequently dominates its 'adversary' would have to be taken as evidence that the actualising tendency is not 'at all times' (Rogers, 1980, p. 118) the organism's sole and dominant motive. A more logically consistent way of understanding Rogers' fundamental development conflict, then, might be to construe it as a conflict between the self-actualising tendency and *non-self-actualising sub-systems* of the actualising tendency: such as the tendency to actualise one's creative potential, or the tendency to actualise one's potential to nurture. In other words, Rogers' developmental model can be understood as proposing that the organism inhabits a world in which to actualise one potentiality – its 'self' – it must inhibit the actualisation of other potentialities.

Construing Rogers' (1959) developmental model in this way opens a particularly interesting door. If one is talking about the emergence of sub-system conflicts as a result of the organism's world only sustaining the actualisation of one sub-system at the expense of another, then there is the possibility of the organism's world evoking other sub-system conflicts. For example, a working class young man may want to

actualise his creative potentiality by becoming a dancer, but may also want to actualise his nurturing potential by earning enough money to support his family. If his world is such that he can not earn sufficient money through dancing, he may have to choose between pursuing his creative yearnings and foregoing his nurturing desires, or vice versa. Such a conflict might be every bit as divisive as those involving the drive towards self-actualisation – days in a mundane job spent yearning for the dance-studio, or days in the dance-studio spent riddled with guilt – yet the primary issue here is not the maintenance and enhancement of the self-concept. The conflict here is between other sub-systems of the actualising tendency, and it would seem useful to revise Rogers' (1959) original model to take into account the possibility of conflicts between non-self-actualising sub-systems of the actualising tendency.

THE SELF-CONCEPT: MULTIPLE SOURCES

A similar theoretical revision and expansion seems necessary when considering the question of how the self-concept develops. Rogers (1959) is almost certainly right to suggest that the self-concept *can* develop as a consequence of the need for positive (self-)regard. However, it seems highly unlikely that this is the only process through which an organism can acquire a concept of who they are. Indeed, if the way we did see ourselves was entirely based on a need for positive (self-)regard, then an individual's self-concept would always correlate with those qualities and characteristics that significant others in their lives had valued highly. Clearly, this is not always the case. For instance, an individual whose parents place enormous value on intellectual achievement, rather than coming to see herself as intelligent, may come to see himself as stupid and inadequate as a consequence of not meeting her parents' standards.

An individual, therefore, may develop a concept of self through social comparison (Festinger, 1954), and there are almost certainly other ways in which an individual may come to develop beliefs about who she is. Cooley (1902) and the symbolic interactionists, for instance, have proposed that the way we see ourselves is dependent on how we imagine others see us. Existentialists like Sartre (1943/1958), on the other hand, have suggested that we construct a concrete notion of who we are as a means of staving off the anxieties of an anchor-less, flux-like existence. Berne (1961) suggests a third source from which notions of self may emerge: we may retain concepts of self from earlier periods in life (for instance, 'free' or 'adapted' child selves). We may also develop notions of who we are by noticing how we behave, feel or look – perhaps as a consequence of biologically inherited traits. In all these cases, the development of the individual's concept of self is not primarily derived from positive regard considerations. Again, then, it would seem necessary to revise Rogers' (1959) original developmental theory by suggesting that the self-concept – which may then serve to enhance or filter out certain organismic experiences in the quest for self-consistency – can emerge from a number of sources.

MULTIPLE SELF-CONCEPTS

In recent years, a number of person-centred writers (Cooper, 1999; Keil, 1996; Mearns, 1999) have highlighted a further aspect of Rogers' (1959) developmental theory that would seem in need of revision: his tendency to conceptualise the self-construct as a singular, rather than plural, entity. In fact, Rogers does contemplate the possibility of an individual having more than one self-concept, writing that others in his 'group' have felt that a plural definition of the self – 'indicating many specific selves in each of various life contexts' (p.203) – would be fruitful. He also writes that the concept of self can undergo violent fluctuations, and gives the example of a client whose concept of self flip-flopped from 'worthwhile and courageous' to 'immature and inadequate' in the space of a few days. Yet, Rogers' does not elaborate further on the possible existence of multiple self-concepts, and it has been left to subsequent authors to develop this possibility.

For Keil (1996), Mearns (1999) and Cooper (1999), the proposition that individuals may have more than one self-concept arises primarily as a consequence of direct clinical experience. Mearns (1999), for instance, writes, 'Clients often use the simple word "parts" to describe dimension of their Self' (p.126); and describe a client, Derek, who identified a number of different parts of his Self such as 'clever me', 'bully me' and 'little boy lost'. Similarly, Cooper writes that, 'it is by no means uncommon for individuals to describe their subjectively-felt, lived-experiences in fundamentally self-pluralistic terms' (p.53). He describes a client, Joan, who experienced herself as switching between being a 'good little girl' and a 'bitch from hell'.

These phenomenological self-reports, indicating the existence of multiple self-concepts, would seem to fundamentally challenge Rogers' (1959) developmental model. However, Cooper (1999) suggests two means by which relatively minor revisions of Rogers' model can allow for the possibility of multiple self-concepts. First, he points out that Rogers defines the regard-complex as being related to the positive regard 'of a *particular* social other' (p.63, italics added) rather than social others in general. Hence, he highlights the possibility that, if the *particular* social others surrounding an individual conferred positive regard for very different self-experiences, then it is possible that the individual would develop a plurality of self-concepts, each one attempting to maximise the positive regard experienced within a particular social context. A second possibility suggested by Cooper is that, although an individual may maintain self-consistency when threatened with self-concept-incongruent experiences by transforming the experiences (through denial or distortion), he or she could also maintain self-consistency through developing an alternate self-concept. For instance, an individual who sees herself as relatively calm and relaxed, on experiencing profound anxiety, might temporarily identify with – and develop – a self-concept that is in-line with the incongruent self-experiences. In other words, rather than distorting or denying the anxiety, she might temporarily see herself as someone who is 'scared and helpless'.

Given, however, that an individual's view of themselves is likely to be derived from multiple sources, a plurality of self-concepts is likely to be derived from a plurality of starting points. Keil (1996), for instance, suggests that the 'inner people' develop in response to the multiple demands of the environment – 'roles' that allow the individual to get their needs met in a variety of situations. Mearns (1999), on the other hand, suggests that self-concepts may begin their lives as introjects, such as 'I am a failure', around which the individual then constellates supporting evidence via the self-fulfilling prophecy.

MULTIPLE DISTORTIONS, MULTIPLE DENIALS

The three suggested revisions of Rogers' (1959) developmental model lead on to a fourth. If multiple conflicts may develop within the actualising tendency, and if multiple self-concepts may emerge for a multiplicity of reasons, then it follows that the needs for self-consistency and positive self-regard – the self-actualising tendency – are unlikely to be the only reason why people come to deny or distort their experiences. For instance, the young man cited earlier, pulled between his desire to support his family and his desire to be a dancer, may try to 'resolve' his internal conflict by taking a mundane job and then attempting to deny his yearnings to dance.

In this example, the man is not defending himself against his organismic experiences because they do not fit in with his concept of self, but because it is too *painful* for him to reflect on his fading hopes and dreams. The central process here is a defense against pain, and, indeed, it might be argued that 'defending oneself against self-concept-incongruent experiences' is effectively just a subset of 'defending oneself against experiences that threaten to be too painful'. Certainly, there may be a number of reasons why an experience may feel too potentially painful to symbolise accurately in awareness. An individual may fear, for instance, that she will feel too depressed if she doesn't deny or distort the experience – as may happen in the early stages of grief. Alternatively, she may fear that she will feel too anxious if she doesn't defend herself against the experience – as may happen with someone who has unsafe sex and then fails to acknowledge the dangers of it because of the anxiety it would evoke. Fears of guilt, remorse, jealousy, existential dread, isolation are just some of the many other possible reasons why an individual may come to deny or distort their experiences.

CONCLUSION

On reflection, then, it would seem that a number of the concepts outlined in Rogers' (1959) model of human development – the model still most consistently referred to by person-centred writers – are in need of revision. As has been argued in this paper, there is the possibility of multiple aspects of the actualising tendency coming into conflict, the development of multiple selves from multiple sources, and the distortion

and denial of organismic experiences for multiple reasons. What is being suggested, then, is that the developmental pathway outlined by Rogers in his 1959 paper should be understood as one specific route by which an individual may come to be who they are, but not the only means by which this can happen. What remains unchallenged in these critical reflections, however, is the most fundamental tenet of the person-centred approach: that the organism is an actualising being who, in a world that puts conditions on the actualisation of its potentialities, may come to inhibit the development of its full potential.

It is my hope that these reflections and proposed revisions will stimulate members of the person-centred community to critically reflect, themselves, on the question of human development, to ensure that the person-centred understanding of how people come to be the way they are remains fresh, fluid and alive. It is my hope, too, that in proposing a need to pluralise out a person-centred understanding of human development, the person-centred community may be able to develop a richer and more encompassing understanding of how people come to be the way they are. In particular, by generalising out 'conditional positive regard' to any social conditions that necessitates the actualisation of one potential at the expense of another, the person-centred community may be able to construct a developmental model that accounts for the growth-inhibiting effects of both interpersonal and socio-economic impoverishment – a model that would be uniquely integrated, comprehensive, and humanistic.

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