The Uniqueness of Similarities: Parallels of Milton H. Erickson and Carl Rogers

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The philosophy and values of Carl Rogers hold a central position in the counseling profession. Today the writings and work of Milton H. Erickson are beginning to have a similar influence. Erickson's strategies and techniques have been explored from many theoretical frames of reference, but little attention has been paid to his values regarding the human condition. It is these value assumptions of Rogers and Erickson that will be examined in this article.

Although Milton H. Erickson did not identify with any particular theory in psychiatry or psychology, I will argue here that his values regarding human beings are aligned with humanistic psychology (Maslow, 1971) and more specifically the person-centered approach of Carl Rogers (1980).

It is hardly necessary to introduce the works of Carl Rogers; however, the seminal mind of the late Milton Erickson may be less familiar to the reader. Erickson is generally considered to be the world's leading authority on hypnotherapy and brief strategic psychotherapy (Haley, 1967). His work is so original and complex that he has been called "Mr. Hypnosis" (Weitenhoffer, 1976). He was the founding leader and first president of the American Society for Clinical Hypnosis and the founder and editor of its journal. Zeig (1980) wrote that "it is not hyperbole to state that history will demonstrate that what Freud contributed to the theory of psychotherapy, Erickson will be known as contributing to the practice of psychotherapy" (p. xix).

One can analyze Erickson's techniques (Erickson & Rossi, 1979) through many theoretical models and arrive at varying understandings. Zeig (1980) recounted how Haley (1973) approached Erickson's work through an interactive view, Grinder and Bandler (1981) through a linguistic view, and Rossi (Erickson & Rossi, 1979) through a Jungian-intrapsychic orientation, each providing another rich perspective. This article examines the works of Erickson and Rogers from a person-centered approach (Evens, 1975; Rogers, 1980).

In a recent survey of practicing counseling and clinical psychologists designed to ascertain the names of those who have had the most influence, Smith (1982) reported that Rogers's name led the list. Probably the influence of Rogers still remains because of his relentless belief in the importance of the therapeutic relationship, the value-belief system regarding the person, and intrapersonal communication—the now so increasingly familiar hallmarks of Erickson's hypnotic patterns and psychotherapy. Rogers (1980) put it this way: "I discern more sharply the theme of my life as having been built around the desire for clarity of communication, with all its ramifying results" (p. 66).

Throughout the writings of Erickson (Rossi, 1980a,b) one is struck by his brilliant communication abilities, the connecting with his patients at direct and indirect levels. Weitenhoffer (1976) described Erickson as a master of verbal and nonverbal communication, the heart of his theory of intervention.

ON THE PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH

In summarizing the two central hypotheses of a person-centered approach, Rogers (1980) demonstrated a very positive and optimistic view of the human. He held that "individuals have within themselves vast resources for self-understanding and for altering their self-concepts, basic attitudes and self-directed behavior; these resources can be tapped if a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided" (p. 115). This quote has rich value implications. It suggests a belief that in this "definable climate," each person's potential can be achieved.

ON DIRECTION

The term "non-directive," originally used to describe Rogers's (1942) early therapeutic approach, became so thoroughly misunderstood that he tried to avoid it. By non-directive, Rogers meant not directing, advising, interpreting, or guiding the person, but rather allowing the person's actualizing tendency to emerge. Rogers (1977) began to realize that his very presence in a relationship had many powerful and "directive" aspects. He was keenly aware of the power of a therapeutic climate that allowed or assisted his client to change in growing directions.

Rogers's (1978) "direction" comes out of his strong belief that within each individual there are powerful instinct-like potentials. In 1942, he created great furor when he argued that counseling

relies much more heavily on the individual drive toward growth, health and adjustment. Therapy is not a matter of doing something to the individual, or of inducing him to do something about himself. It is instead a matter of freeing him for normal growth and development, of removing obstacles so that he can again move forward. (Rogers, 1942, p. 29)

"Person-centered" became a more accurate label of his approach. Erickson (Erickson & Rossi, 1979) may have been discussing a similar process. The utilization "approach is patient-centered and highly dependent on the momentary needs of the individual" (p. 14). The utilization approach focused on the person, utilizing and activating unconscious resources and learnings that were already within rather than imposing from without (Erickson, Rossi, & Rossi, 1976).

Rossi, in a dialogue with Erickson (Erickson et al., 1976), commented that "Patients keep pulling at the therapist for the cure, the magic, the change, rather than looking at themselves as the change agent. You are continually putting the responsibility for change back on the patient." Erickson replied: "On to them always!" (p. 27).

ON THE FORMATIVE TENDENCY AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

Both Rogers and Erickson in their words and deeds emphasized the internal motivation of people—Rogers (1980) in his "growth
or formative tendency" and Erickson in his view of the "unconscious."

Beahrs (1982) described Erickson's "unconscious" as being very different from Freud's, not the teeming caldron of untamed energy screaming to be suppressed and repressed for society's sake. Erickson saw the unconscious as the core or center of the person, a repository of all past experiences and learning, the source for growth lying mostly beneath the conscious level. Unlike so many of his time, he emphasized the positive aspects of the unconscious (Haley, 1967). To Secter (1982), one of the most important statements from Erickson was, "Let the unconscious do the work" (p. 450). This statement was so simple yet so profound in its implications. Gilligan (1982) quoted Erickson's notion: "Unconscious processes can operate in an intelligent, autonomous and creative fashion . . . people have stored in their unconscious all the resources necessary to transform their experience" (p. 89). In the same article, Gilligan described Erickson's view of the therapeutic task—arranging conditions that facilitate and elicit this unconscious processing.

As with Erickson, Rogers (1951, 1959, 1961) emphasized the importance of trusting the individual's potential toward growth. He (Rogers, 1961) stated that:

There is one central source of energy in the human organism. This source is a trustworthy function of the whole system rather than of some portion of it; it is most simply conceptualized as a tendency toward fulfillment, toward actualization, involving not only the maintenance but also the enhancement of the organism. (p. 123)

As early as the 1940s, Rogers warned against diagnosing, advising, and interpreting (Evans, 1975). A person-centered approach holds that individuals have within themselves the basic wherewithal for growth. Rogers (1978) called it the formative tendency. Albert Szent-Györgyi (1974), a Nobel Prize winning biologist, called this tendency "syntropy," or the other side of the process of "entropy." Entropy has been traditionally described as the natural process in the universe whereby organized forms gradually disintegrate, not unlike a vast machine running down. Erickson assigned syntropy, or the growth process, to the unconscious and talked about "the wisdom of the unconscious" (Rosen, 1982b). Rogers (1961, 1976) used the phrase "wisdom of the organism" in much the same way.

ON THE THEORY

Rogers (1959) developed a theory for a person-centered approach, but he warned that theories can become dogma and highly rigid (Evans, 1975). I can recall, in a personal discussion with Rogers at St. Lawrence University in 1978, his emphasis on the person and on the concept "that the person becomes your theory." He also related to me that what he had "ultimately learned about people, was from people," Erickson, when quizzed as to where he obtained his psychiatric knowledge, responded, "From patients" (Secter, 1982, p. 451).

Rogers emphasized the importance of setting theory aside and letting the person emerge. Erickson similarly believed that theory was restrictive and could trap both patient and therapist (Zeig, 1980). He espoused the ideas of flexibility, indirection, persimiveness, and unique differences. How apt all of these terms are to Rogers' description of the attitudes of the effective counselor-therapist.

According to Rogers (1961), the process of effective counseling involves "a change in the manner of the client's experiencing . . . a loosening of the cognitive maps of experience" (p. 64). These are almost Erickson's very words: "Patients have problems because their conscious programming has too severely limited their capacities. The solution is to help them break through the limitations of their conscious attitudes to free their unconscious potential for problem solving" (Erickson et al., 1976, p. 18).

ON THE CLIMATE

For many years Rogers studied the specific characteristics of the therapeutic climate. He chose not to study the process of change through a theoretical framework; instead, he "approach[ed] the phenomena with as few preconceptions as possible, to take a naturalist's observational, descriptive approach. . . . I used myself as a tool" (Rogers, 1961, p. 128).

In his study of hypnosis, Erickson also used himself as his own best instrument, spending countless hours as a youth reflecting on experiences in altered states and learning to relieve his own pain by focusing on relaxation, fatigue, heaviness, and so forth (Rossi, 1980a). He, too, was discovering through his own incredible facilities of observation and introspection. Both he and Rogers were able to look at different ways of "seeing" themselves, others, and the relativity of different world views.

Rogers emphasized the importance of empathy in the climate of the relationship. Empathy, along with reality or genuineness in the relationship and deep caring and trust in the potential of the person, was the basis for the "definable" climate so critical in Rogers' works (Rogers, 1957).

Empathy or deep understanding of the client is essentially an attitude of "desiring" to understand. For Rogers (1980), empathy is a process: "It means entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it . . . you lay aside your own views and values in order to enter another's world without prejudice" (pp. 142-143).

As did Rogers, Erickson continually stressed the importance of empathy. In the preparation phase of his approach, the initial and most important factor is building "sound rapport—that is, a positive feeling of understanding and mutual regard between therapist and patient" (Erickson & Rossi, 1979, p. 1). Erickson believed that "an attitude of empathy and respect on the part of the therapist is crucial to ensure successful change" (Erickson & Zeig, 1980, p. 336). He (Erickson & Rossi, 1979) amplified the concept of rapport that develops out of a sincere acceptance of another. Through the use of the client's own vocabulary and frames of reference, pacing, and matching (Grinder & Bandler, 1981) a powerful kind of empathy develops that forms the interpersonal connection. Erickson and Rossi (1979) commented on the similarity between this approach and Roger's: "At this level our approach might appear similar to the non-directive client centered approach of Rogers (1951)" [italics added] (p. 51).

The second and probably the most critical ingredient within the climate has to be reality or genuineness, because if empathy and positive regard and respect are not genuinely felt or expressed, then the climate becomes toxic and phony. For the counselor-therapist, reality means being fully there with the client, matching the experiencing of the moment with clear and transparent communication.

Sometimes a feeling "rises up in me" which seems to have no particular relationship to what is going on. Yet I have learned to accept and trust this feeling by my awareness and to try to communicate it to my client. (Rogers, 1980, p. 14)

I suggest that Rogers has moved into what Erickson might describe as an altered state, particularly when he accepts and trusts those sensations and images that "seem to have no particular relationship to what is going on." Rogers continually emphasizes that the counselor-therapist must trust and accept him or herself in the ongoing process. Erickson did this elegantly and naturally. He was so "in touch" with his own inner experiences and so trusted the "wisdom of his unconscious" that he was capable of incredible understandings of his patients' worlds (Zeig, 1982).
Erickson advised against limiting our approaches because of loyalty to a method, a school, or a mentor. He suggested that we learn and observe as widely as possible, but practice only those techniques and skills that allow us to express ourselves genuinely. "Remember that whatever way you choose to work must be your own way, because you cannot really imitate someone else." (Erickson, 1967, p. 355).

Rogers argued that a third condition, positive regard or caring, was necessary in the creation of the therapeutic climate. When the therapist is experiencing positive, warm, and accepting feelings toward what is going on in the client, "it means that he [she] prides the client, in a non-possessive way" (Rogers, 1961, p. 62).

Haley (1967) mentioned a similar deep caring in Erickson's work. Erickson told of working with a patient about whom he felt had little chance for successful change. Despite the poor prognosis, Erickson kept the doubt "to himself and let [the patient] know by manner, tone of voice, by everything said that he [Erickson] was genuinely interested in him, was genuinely desirous of helping him" (Haley, 1967, p. 516).

Erickson's belief and respect in people were evident in his deep and abiding faith in the competence of people to work out things in their own lives, comfortably and confidently. Erickson believed that his patients each had the natural desire "to acquire mastery, to obtain understanding, to have fun, to have certainty and to have immediate results" (Lustig, 1982, p. 459).

**ON YOUTH AND STORIES**

The work of the counselor-therapist is inextricably intertwined with the early experiences that shape his or her philosophy of life and beliefs about the world, the self, and others.

In a line from his poem, *My Heart Leaps Up*, William Wordsworth wrote that "the child is father of the man," and the childhoods and youth of Erickson and Rogers deserve mention.

Both grew up on farms. Both were struck by the growth processes that they witnessed and the experiences that permeated their values—the optimistic and positive joy in life and the simple everchanging world around them. Both emphasized and sensed the uniqueness of each living thing and prized above all these differences.

Erickson used stories, anecdotes, and metaphors as a significant part of his utilization approach. Conversely, anecdotes and metaphors were not a distinct part of Rogers's approach. But he would use them to make a point and, like Erickson, would often draw them from his youth and childhood. Both used "growing" metaphors in powerful ways.

Rogers (1961), in trying to describe the formative growth tendency, drew upon an experience from his youth.

I remember that in my boyhood, the bin in which we stored our winter's supply of potatoes was in the basement, several feet below a small window. The conditions were unfavorable, but the potatoes would begin to sprout. . . . But these sad, spindly sprouts would grow 2 or 3 feet in length as they reached toward the distant light of the window. The sprouts were, in their bizarre, fulsome growth, a sort of desperate expression of the directional tendency. . . . But under the most adverse circumstances, they were striving to become. Life would not give up, even if it could not flourish. (p. 118)

Erickson regarded stories and metaphors as a central part of his approach, but he rarely ever explained them to patients. Instead, patients drew their own conclusions and created their own meanings by using their own experiences and resources. Erickson emphasized concepts such as growth and delight and joy. . . . Life isn't something you can give an answer to today. You should enjoy the process of waiting, the process of becoming what you are. There is nothing more delightful than planting flower seeds and not knowing what kinds of flowers are going to come up. (Rosen, 1979, p. xii)

Probably Erickson is conveying the suggestion of becoming and growing as well as the excitement and patience in waiting.

Erickson's use of anecdotes, puns, metaphors, stories, and jokes has become legendary (Rosen, 1982a). A person probably grasps their general contextual meaning at the conscious level; however, each word and phrase has unique associations that go beyond the general context (Erickson et al., 1976). In this, his interspersal technique, Erickson (1966) inserted words and phrases that indirectly stimulated deeper focusing on the patient's experiences and interests. Through the interspersing of indirect suggestions, the unconscious is put to work. For example, when Erickson used as a metaphor a tomato seed in the process of becoming a tomato (Haley, 1967), the patient, a florist, had this general context within his conscious perceptual field. Erickson interspersed suggestions as he related the story, letting the "unconscious do the work." Gordon and Meyers-Anderson (1981) described a delightful and powerful metaphor that Erickson had recalled from his youth. It seems that a riderless horse appeared one day. There was no way of knowing to whom the horse belonged. Erickson volunteered to find the owners by mounting the horse and leading it to the road. As he approached the road, he let go of the reins and waited to see in which direction the horse would go. Erickson intervened only when the road would wander off the road. After about 4 miles, the horse turned into a farmyard. The surprised owner asked young Erickson how he knew where the horse belonged. "I didn't know. The horse knew. All I did was keep him on the road" (p. 6). What an elegant description of therapy; what an elegant description of the utilization and person-centered approaches!

**ON CONCLUDING**

Although this article has focused on the value assumptions of Erickson from a person-centered approach, the model could easily be reversed. Gunnison and Renick (in press) discuss the hidden hypnotic Ericksonian patterns in counseling about which the counselor is often unaware. Lankton and Lankton (1983) analyzed, from an Ericksonian model, the hypnotic patterns of Rogers's work in the film, *Gloria*. What appear to be highly divergent approaches assume the most interesting connections and similarities.

Rogers and Erickson had similar goals for their clients and patients: the utilizing of their directional tendencies, the evoking of the wisdom of the organism (the unconscious), and the providing of the greatest freedom. Each did it so genuinely and so differently. Rosen (1979) described this as "a typical Ericksonian paradox. The master manipulator [facilitator] allows and stimulates the greatest freedom" (p. xiii). And each did it so humanely and so uniquely.

**REFERENCES**


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