

The interdependence of self and congruence – a visual understanding

I will start by saying my presentation is not the result of research and it brings nothing new from the standpoint of theory. It is based on Rogers' personality theory and basically on everything I read on congruence, the self, presence, relational depth and levels of experiencing. It takes into account my own experience as a psychotherapist (such as it is) and it is a representation stemmed from my own personal process. As such, it is a model of understanding that works for me – it makes sense and is personally rewarding. My hope in presenting it is that it would also make sense for someone other than me and that by sharing it I will be able to enrich it and to better adjust it to a larger experience.

Congruence had been puzzling me for a long time. What was most intriguing was that its scope and significance seemed to vary depending on the context it was defined or used in. In its absolute sense it was the outstanding characteristic of a fully functioning person and it implied a fluid harmony between all elements of the self and between the self and the world, in the context of an ever-changing flow of experience. In this respect, it was the goal of therapy – to be reached by the client in some degree.

However, when reading about congruence in a therapeutic context, the stress seemed to be on the therapist's congruence and how it is conveyed to the client. Genuineness, authenticity and transparency were three of the most commonly associated concepts with congruence and its communication. Presence was another, focusing mostly on what it means to be congruent in an interaction, in a deep and meaningful way.

I now think the most important difference between the two views and uses of the concept of congruence is that the first one seems to be more about inner structure and functioning, while the latter – about how that translates in relationships. What it means to be congruent and what it means to act congruently.

But some time ago, congruence as I understood it was on the one hand about deep and powerful structures, while on the other – it was about being oneself in an interaction. It was not a contradiction necessarily, but it was a

distance in my mind between the two dimensions, that for a long time I was unable to reduce or fill.

Trying to seamlessly fit the two perspectives together, I felt almost like a blind man trying to perceive an elephant – having difficulties in forming an integrated and unitary representation.

As a novice therapist, my main focus in this respect soon became being myself in the therapy session, while somehow also being a true professional and facilitating my clients to become more in agreement with themselves and their world. And if I am to look upon my early practice, I would now say I was congruent, and at the same time I was far from it (again, without it being a contradiction).

What I had been constantly struggling with in therapy with my clients was the distance between myself and them. I had thought it to be a matter of empathy, but it was, in fact, one of congruence. I was always in the danger of either identifying myself with my clients or becoming immersed within myself, in each case losing contact with them. I was congruent, in the respect that I was generally aware of myself – my thoughts and actions, my motives and feelings – and I didn't have any hidden agenda or issues that could cloud my relationship with my clients without me realizing them relatively soon and thus enabling me to act accordingly. But what I lacked then was actually a stronger sense of self. I oscillated between coming too close and going too far away from my clients (emotionally speaking) because I had no fixed point which to judge the distance from. Of course, I don't mean it in an absolute sense. But my congruence didn't really stretch too far (or too deep) within myself. In simpler, other terms, I could also say I was immature. So I was congruent, but only to the extent of my maturity.

Combining the two perspectives on congruence, the structural and the relational – trying to form that image of an elephant in my mind – made me realise that I could be congruent on a level that is mostly about moment-to-moment being and interaction (in which I actually spend most of my time and my focus). And I could also be congruent on a deeper level, one that has to do with identity and my more stable (and subtle) being. However, the first level doesn't necessarily imply the latter. I work well with visual information, so it came naturally to me to make a scheme to understand it

all better. The form that could adequately represent the two levels at the same time had for me the basic shape of a funnel.

It was a funnel (and not a cylinder nor a cone, for example) because the moment-to-moment experiencing is far richer (in quantity at least) and wider than what I consider to be at my core. Furthermore, I can interact with people only using my superficial self, but connecting to my deeper levels in that process allows me to be more receptive, open and flexible in that interaction and it brings about presence on my part, at least. So the deeper and narrower part of my self actually sustains, conditions and permeates the wider and more superficial part of it, very much like a stem would for a leaf.

Thinking of the self as having this basic shape of a funnel makes a lot of sense to me. It helps me visualise better some inner processes and ways of being, as well as my role as a therapist.

As I see it, the upper part of the funnel is the one that is in contact with the outside world (with everything that means). It is where the here and now happen, where the moment-to-moment interactions take place, with their corresponding ways of being, reactions, feelings, thoughts, sensations and perceptions, needs and wishes and so on. The pace of experiencing is very fast at this level, ever-changing and immensely rich.

But as is the case with the selectivity of perception, some experiences stick – they stay longer in the self than others, and go deeper in the funnel. Like sediments, they sink in, either because they are significant, or intense, or simply many (of the same kind, perhaps). Thus, the lower they go, the more they tend to become part of identity, to stabilise within the self and to constitute a more or less continuous core. As experiences go deeper, they are changing less and less easily and frequently. The flow of movement and time is much slower at this level. Things like patterns of behaviour, values and beliefs, modes of interaction, deep needs, and profound experiences (etc.) – tend to be some of the “heavy” things that go towards the bottom of the funnel.

While the uppermost level of the self is the most fleeting, diverse, unspecified and at the same time the most unique, the deepest level of the self is, I think, the most personal and synthesised one, it is essential and at

the same time probably fundamentally humane, and common to everyone. I see the narrow end of the funnel as having a sealed bottom, but it might be so that if reached and opened it could be the path to connect to other, spiritual, realities.

To better illustrate what I mean, I shall take an example. Mimi, one of my clients, is a woman in her thirties. She has an older sister with whom she had an uneasy relationship while growing up – always feeling rejected and unvalued by her. While exploring her present feelings for her partner – whom she's thinking to separate from – and the ideas she has about relationships in general, Mimi remembered a moment when she was three years old. It was her birthday and she brought a cake at the kindergarten. Her sister was in another group and she knew she was supposed to invite her to serve the cake together. She asked the educator for permission to go and call her sister, but the educator said to wait. Later, Mimi felt ashamed to ask the educator again and ate the cake without her sister, feeling very bad about it. That experience had been meaningful to her even then, and it was something particular to her – her sister doesn't remember the moment. While exploring the meaning with her adult mind, Mimi came to the conclusion that the experience is about the feeling of abandonment and treason she felt in relation to her sister. Her shame overcame what she knew she had to do to show her love and thus she abandoned and betrayed her sister. This is something she doesn't want to repeat in the relationship with her partner and her unmet needs in the relationship challenge this principle.

So the initial experience, the incident with the cake, sank in and got into the deep and narrow part of Mimi's self. It is a meaningful and profound experience for her. It is at the same time very personal – no one else has this experience. But what it actually stands for is something we all share (or at least the vast majority of us): the need to stay true and strong to ourselves and what we believe in, and to show loyalty to those whom we love. This drive, however, influences her more superficial experience – the current relationship with her partner. This relationship is meaningful for her, but cannot compare with the one she has with her sister. Her organismic reactions, her tone of voice and her words implicitly and explicitly make that clear. This doesn't mean the relationship with her partner is not important – on the contrary. It is the main focus of her

attention and the decision she feels she has to take regarding it has long-term consequences she is aware of. So even though what she experiences in the present and the meanings she constructs have the potential to become part of her inner structure, at the moment they belong towards the upper part of the funnel. They are unique and diverse and they change rapidly. On the other hand, Mimi's experience with her sister and their relationship belong towards a deeper part of the funnel. They are synthesised, difficult to bulge, and they change little and slow.

I see all this as an organic structure, malleable and sensitive, with a unique and constantly changing shape. As I said, the lower levels permeate the upper levels, condition and sustain them. Stimuli and experiences come through the wide part of the funnel and gather in the upper levels. As they become more numerous and/or more intense or significant, they tend to sink towards the deeper levels. But as they do so, they put pressure on the structure. There are several possible consequences to that: either the structure integrates them, and grows, thus becoming able to receive and sustain a wider range of experiences and stimuli, or it becomes rigid, isolating, distorting or blocking the experiences, or even causing the entire structure to overflow – to reject most of the outside world the self comes into contact with.

The two possibilities generally coexist, since they probably are very rarely and for a very short time absolute, and everything is an on-going process.

I see incongruences as being dried up and rigid, more or less isolated areas within the funnel that impede a unitary growth and that partly put a lid on the funnel, or restrict its opening. The lower in the funnel incongruences are, the more they influence the upper levels of the structure – or the more experiences from the upper levels they influence. Thus, fluidising experiences from as below as possible would create more flexibility and free flowing movement throughout more of the entire self. This, in turn, would create more space and allow for more experiences to enter and potentially sink in towards the deepest levels. The farther down congruence reaches, the stronger and larger and deeper the stem would be, and the wider the opening – and vice-versa.

The image of the self as a having a funnel shape is ultimately a way of categorising experiences and of visualising their dynamics. However, I am

not sure whether experience per se exists, as something that simply happens to something. To say the least, it is very difficult for me to separate the event itself from the meaning it has or gains. I believe we cannot help but creating meaning and we probably are mainly unaware of it. I also believe it can be constructed everywhere inside the self, in the deeper, narrower part as well as in the wider, upper part, regardless of the modality – be it organismic or conceptual.

To give a conceptual example (it's easier to start with), I know about myself that I like chocolate. This is a meaning I have come upon after tasting chocolate numerous times and I consider it part of my self-concept ("I am a person who likes chocolate"). It belongs, however, to the upper part of my funnel-shaped self, since it doesn't involve some crucial part of me. But I also know about myself that I like running and jumping. This is a part of my self-concept that belongs to a deeper area of my self, because it's related to a strong need for freedom of movement and expression.

Another example would be about perceptions. While I am speaking now, I might be aware of the air around me, of a numbness in my leg, of the sounds around me. They all mean something to my organism – that I'm comfortable with the temperature, that I need to change the position of my leg, that everything is well in my surrounding world... But I might also feel a tightness in my stomach, for example, which is there most of the time and that basically means I'm afraid of being hurt or unappreciated. The first three would belong to the upper part of the funnel, while the latter – to the narrower part of it. I am not aware of everything that happens, but my organism knows by itself what and how to do, it creates meanings by itself.

The self-concept, the organismic self and all other elements of the self are thus represented throughout the entire funnel, not being localised to a specific part of it. Between them, congruence acts as a communication fluid inside the self, allowing meanings and experiences to flow within the structure and to connect with each other, as well as with the outside world.

It is probably evident by now that I do not see the self in isolation, but in permanent contact and interaction with its context – the relationships, the culture, the society, economic and geographical situations (and so on) it is embedded in. I believe congruence manifests first and foremost at the

surface of the funnel, where the on-going contact and interaction with the outside world take place.

I shall give another example, this time from my own process. A year ago I was part of an encounter group and I felt myself open, curious, joyful and energetic. I was being hospitable while sincerely being my own self, and quite aware of my momentary feelings and reactions. The relationship I had with the group was also open, flexible and trusting. "Congruent" would be a word I would use to describe both myself and my relationship with the group. (To be fair, it wasn't always present, but most of the time, and concerning the group it was something we gained/created). However, at some point I became aware of something shifting inside me and processing it with the help of one of the group members I reached a much deeper part of myself, and I realised that my previous way of being had some underlying mechanisms I hadn't been in contact with. My hospitability, for example, was not only an innocent way of being in the group. It came, instead, from a deep, reactive need to be accepted and valued that had its origin in a specific event in my childhood. I was small when my parents divorced and I perceived it, on an organismic level, as a betrayal and rejection. Since then, I had always tried to prevent that from happening again by being as nice as possible, and my relationship with my mother maintained and deepened that throughout my adolescence. However, this clashed profoundly with my need to express myself freely without always taking care not to hurt people. In the light of my new discovery, I couldn't say I was congruent before that moment. But I couldn't have reached the deeper levels of myself without being at first as congruent as possible at the more superficial levels of myself. Since then, I have been able to have more meaningful interactions with people, to perceive them more clearly and truly, to receive them more openly and to show myself in the world in a more relaxed and original manner. (I am still in that process...)

Thus, congruence moves downwards at first, from the outside, within. Being congruent at the upper levels of the funnel can then unblock deeper dried up areas of experience and meaning, transforming them into accessible resources. Energy can then be spent less on maintaining and integrating the incongruence and more on creative or expressive processes, influencing in turn the outside world in a more profound manner. Allowing congruence to reach deeper levels of the funnel gives the self strength and openness to

what moves beyond it. It gives grounding, brings about presence, broadens the range of perceivable and acceptable experiences and stimuli from the outside world, and creates the premises for interaction at relational depth.

This is why I see my role as a therapist as an engaging and active one, in the sense of allowing my deep self to manifest through my way of being as well as offering my clients support towards deepening their process. It is more a philosophical direction, since I follow the clients' pace and choices in processing, but it is, nonetheless, a direction, or – to use other words - a wish I have for them (as a wish for good is, for example).

To wrap things up, seeing the self as a funnel adds clarity to concepts such as presence, relational depth and the levels of experiencing or processing. It brings no new theoretical advance but it does create for me a missing link between the different perspectives on congruence I have come across. It connects the structural and the relational sides of it and it allows communication between them. And to move things further, I can apply the same basic dynamics to every kind of organism or living structure embedded in a larger context. It is like perceiving an elephant in miniature, allowing me to form a unitary image of its body, all at once.

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