

Congruence and Control

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While congruency as a way of behaving has received wide acceptance, many criticize it as (a) giving way to license, (b) not allowing for change, and (c) not really being practical. If we recognize that congruence is not the only value we hold, perhaps we can respond to a range of feelings stemming from a more complex value system. Simple, impulsive behaviors may not represent the range of feelings induced by a complex set of values; to be truly congruent one must be aware of both his values and the range of his feelings. Neither does congruence mean the maintaining of one's behavioral status quo. Congruence would require that a person who has behaviors he does not like should declare these to others and engage in a process of change. Being congruent may not only represent a value but requires skill in performance, and this skill can perhaps be learned. Since certain social systems may not initially support congruent behaviors, it may mean introducing change into the system before congruence is recognized as a practical way of living with others.

CONGRUENT BEHAVIOR

The idea of *congruence* as defined by Rogers (1961) has generated a share of excited acceptance attended by some disturbing criticism. Rogers defined congruence as "the term we have used to indicate an accurate matching of experiencing and awareness. It may still be 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" (p. 308).

Rogers goes on to point out the disruption that occurs in a relationship where there is noncongruent behavior. If I experience a person as being angry, yet he denies he is angry, my trust of him is diminished and I become wary of a person who can act angry

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and yet deny it. On the other hand, if the person admits his anger, which is consistent with my experience of him, then I feel he is an honest, trustworthy person, my confidence increases, and the relationship develops around feelings of trust and openness. Thus, according to the Rogerian formulation, congruence leads to the following general principle:

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 more mutually accurate understanding of the communication; improved psychological adjustment and functioning in both parties; mutual satisfaction in the relationship (Rogers, 1961), p. 311.

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 (p. 313).

As I have presented this idea to many individuals and groups—while indicating my own acceptance of the general idea of congruent behavior—three main objections usually arise:

1. "Do you mean that a person should always behave exactly as he feels? If I feel like punching you in the nose, raping your wife, or yelling foul obscenities at you, should I go ahead?" The issue raised here is this: *Does congruence mean giving in to all impulses immediately?*
2. "I have been taught all my life that I should learn to control my anger or negative feelings. Suppose I don't like someone; if I behave as though I do like them then I will begin to like them. Suppose I feel unhappy; if I try to act happy then after awhile I will feel happier." The issue here is this: *If I behave congruently all the time will I ever learn to improve on those behaviors in myself that I do not like?*
3. "That congruence bit sounds good but it doesn't work. I told my wife the other night that I was really upset with the sloppy way I found the house every day when I came home from work. She was so mad she didn't speak to me for three days and I had to plead for forgiveness and buy her a present and behave in all kinds of noncongruent ways before we got back on an even keel." The issue here is this: *Congruence does not always seem to result in immediate improvement in relationships. Why not?*

DOES CONGRUENCE MEAN LICENSE?

Central to the first issue is the question: Is congruence synonymous with license? Does it mean that it is all right for a person to behave in any way so long as it is consistent with his current state of awareness and experience? Congruence in this direct and immediate sense *has* become a major value for some. The Hippies, for example, stress the hypocrisy of "society" and the lack of congruence they observe in conventional society. Behaving exactly as one feels—refusing to bathe, not working, taking drugs, freely exchanging sexual favors are the usually represented symbols of the congruent behavior of the Hippie subculture, although those acquainted with the movement contend it stands for much more than these stereotyped symbols.

Congruence as a value (implemented, it becomes a style of behavior) favored by Rogers seems to stem from a set of other kinds of values represented in our culture, in fact, as a counterreaction to certain values. Eric Berne (1964) has popularized the superficial "games" that characterize many human interactions. The "games people play" are the opposite of congruent behavior, and it is just such phony behavior that has given rise to the notion of congruence as an antidote to the prevailing pattern.

We also seem to be living in an emotional deprivation culture where the emphasis is on rational behavior to the restriction of emotional or feeling responses. Argyris (1962) and Gibb (1965), among others, have pointed out the dominance of rationality in the management of many organizations, with the resulting disruptive consequences as emotional behavior interferes with ongoing activities—because many persons prefer neither to recognize nor to deal with emotional behavior. Many of the writers who have pointed to this denial of emotional behavior in organizations have suggested that managers need to learn to recognize, accept, and deal more effectively with human emotions. In this sense they are suggesting more "congruence"—more openness of feelings and emotions and a greater willingness to deal with these feeling data openly and honestly. These arguments again are a reaction against those norms that support phoniness, maintenance of a facade, gamesmanship, and denial of feelings in behavior. But if congruency is a counter value, how far does it go? What are the limits, if any?

Control orientation. Congruency as a counter value is based on the fact of certain existing control orientations or value orientations already present in traditional society. While usually not explicitly

mentioned, for most people there are certain already built-in control features that usually result in congruency within limits. As mentioned above, the problem for many people is not going "too far" with congruency but dealing with overcontrolled behavior.

The great problem with issue number one stems from an assumption that congruency becomes if not the only value a person lives by at least the major value of import. At this level a searching examination of value systems for individuals and organizations becomes critical. One of the issues that has not been handled well in laboratory training is the personal value systems of participants. Congruency is suggested as a new value without really examining in any depth the other values people hold, including those values they perhaps should relinquish as no longer useful and those values they should cherish and retain.

When I am asked in a T Group the question raised in issue one—"Do you mean that you are always going to behave exactly as you feel even if you feel like hitting someone or seducing someone?" I answer the participants in this manner: "Being congruent is not the only value I hold. I also value the right of others. My personal value system stands for trying to live a helpful life with others, to value a society based on mutual respect and acceptance. If I were to engage in behavior that might be 'congruent' at the moment, it would also violate a great many other values that I deem important. I will not violate those values just to be congruent."

The issue then becomes: How do I deal with my hostile, punishing, or devastating feelings? If I were to act them out directly, it would violate certain other values I hold as important. If I deny these feelings and try to repress them, I am aware that the result may be a number of harmful consequences either toward myself (certain psychosomatic difficulties) or in subtle, hostile reactions toward others that are difficult to handle since they are hidden or guarded and can easily be denied. Thus my definition of congruence would encourage me to *express my feelings without necessarily acting them out*. However, this behavior leads to the problem raised in issue number two.

DOES CONGRUENCE ALLOW FOR CHANGE?

Here the issue concerns the matter of change. Congruence in its simplest form would require that each person behave according to his current level of awareness and experience. Sometimes we are not happy with that current level—we would like not to feel the

ways we sometimes do. We would like to change our pattern of feeling, experiencing, and expressing.

From time to time I encounter a person who accepts certain things about himself as fixed—as a part of his “personality” that is almost immutable. He explains that he should not really be held responsible for the consequences of his actions since “this is the way I am.” This reminds me of the story of the scorpion who asked a frog to carry him across a stream. “No,” said the frog, “you’ll sting me if I do.” “Of course not,” replied the scorpion, “for if I do, you will sink and we will both be lost.” At that the frog agreed and began to ferry the scorpion across the water. In the middle of the stream the scorpion suddenly jabbed the frog with a fatal sting. With his last breath the frog asked, “Why did you do it?” Replied the scorpion, “It’s in my nature.”

People are not scorpions (although some act the part), and we have learned that the nature of man is not fixed or unchangeable. A person who says, “I’m just a blunt person; if that hurts you, it’s just the way I am,” would seem to operate on the scorpion theory of personality. A congruence value would seem to give this type of person the perfect rationale to continue behaviors which are “just the way I am” regardless of their consequences on others.

Verbalizing ambivalence. When a person holds a complex of values, an experience will often elicit a range of feelings. To what feeling should one be congruent? Suppose I have strong hostile feelings toward another person to the extent that I feel like punching him in the nose. At the same time another set of values elicits some feelings of guilt about the hostile feelings; these other values suggest to me that I should be trying to “love my neighbor as myself.” In fact, these other values direct me toward a goal of trying to understand and accept others the way they are. I do not want to live my life responding in quick, hostile, punishing ways toward others even if I currently feel that way. I do not want to adopt the scorpion theory that “this is just the way I am,” therefore I will be congruent, and this makes everything justifiable. Certain values suggest change. While congruency *seems* to be a nonchange orientation, congruency in a more complete sense, in my experience, becomes the real basis for change.

If I feel hostile and punishing toward another person and at the same time have feelings of concern or guilt for feeling this way in light of other values, congruency theory would require that I share *all* of these feelings, not just the hostile ones. If I were truly con-

gruent (and this demands that I be aware of *all* my own values and my range of feeling experience), then I should express the range of feelings toward the person in words such as these: "John, when you try to dominate the meeting, I want to hit you on the nose. You make me feel very hostile and angry. But I don't like to feel that way. I also would like to accept you and work with you. How can I work out these feelings with you?"

Accepting and admitting that we do have certain "bad" feelings does not mean that we want to keep them or that we cannot change. My own experience tells me that if I can express these feelings that I do not like and want to change, that making them open to the person in question results in a lessening of these feelings in me and allows me to respond more to the feelings I have that I like better in light of other values. Should I go so far as to act as though I like a person even though I do not like him, in the hope that this will result in liking? In the light of the discussion above the answer would be no. I should share with the person both my feelings of dislike and my desire to like and engage in a continual interaction which will allow the liking feelings to be enhanced. This should be the result, if there is any validity to the Homans proposition that liking increases with interaction (Homans, 1961).

There is also the matter of timing. Should I express all of my feelings immediately? Does congruency demand immediacy of expression? A common experience for many is that if they "sleep on it" they will feel different later on. Some theories of personality would suggest that this lapse of time does not eliminate the feelings but allows the feelings to become buried in the unconscious part of ourselves. Others feel that through insight and self-dialogue we can resolve certain inner feelings without expressing them to others. This seems to me to be an interesting area for further research and analysis.

Can a person be congruent if he admits his feelings to himself but does not share them immediately and openly with the others involved? Can a person "wrestle" with his own feelings and the connected sets of values and win a private war within himself, or does congruency demand an open interaction? For me there is no clear answer to these questions. I think I have experienced both conditions. I think I have been able to silently examine my own conflicting feelings and achieve a sense of resolution or congruence, if you will, within myself. On the other hand, I have also experienced (usually in a laboratory setting) the exciting process of letting

another person know immediately my feelings about his behavior with a resultant working through of the differences between us. In my experience this had led to a deepening of the relationship as described by Rogers (1961). It may be that the non-open resolution of feelings toward another does not achieve an enhancement of the relationship although it may result in a sense of resolution within.

One theory of emotional behavior contends that emotions if not expressed continue to persist and to expand if the "cause" of the emotion continues. I am referring to the commonly experienced phenomenon of a person being continually irritated by another until he finally "can't stand it any longer." At that point there is an explosion of feeling that may actually be stronger than was originally warranted but was allowed to build up by the "holding in" of the feelings. If this is true of emotional behavior, then it would seem that resolutions of interpersonal conflict would result more easily if dealt with more immediately. It would also seem that if we would be more congruent in the earlier stage of the emotional experience, then our feelings at first would more accurately represent our reaction to the stimulus behavior. When expressed later on, the "built-up" emotion may not be a good representation of the feeling initially prompted by the behavior of the other. The "waiting game" may allow us to add fuel to the initial feelings as we begin via a selective perception process to "see things" in subsequent contacts. But then again, it may be that waiting for a time allows us to "cool down" and that the later emotion does more adequately represent a range of feelings and values if time is allowed for them to converge and interact within us. Again, more thinking and research seem to be needed.

CAN CONGRUENCE BE LEARNED?

The nub of issue number three seems to be: *How* are we congruent. Some people claim that they have tried congruent behavior and that the result has not been rewarding. Rogers (1961) feels that congruency will result in the enhancement of a relationship. It seems to me that there are differing ways or differing styles that people have in behaving congruently. Congruent behavior for Person A may appear to others as crude, blunt, and punishing, whereas Person B's behavior, also congruently oriented, may be perceived as open, helpful, and trustworthy. Is there not some element of skill in behavior? Is it possible in expressing our feelings toward others

to learn ways that communicate better and result in reactions from others more in line with our intentions toward them? It appears to me that one of the reasons for a "Human Relations Laboratory" is not only to help participants examine a new value like congruency and to see how it fits into their value structure but also to help them develop some behavior skills in implementing this new value.

In discussing feedback, Argyris (1962) points out what I have found to be an important factor in giving helpful feedback: namely, that we remain descriptive and nonevaluative. If this is true, we might then teach people to give nonevaluative feedback. This same condition may be true for all attempts at congruent behavior—that is, learning the skill of expressing our feelings in descriptive, nonevaluative terms. The process stemming from an interaction context may follow a formula expressed like this: "When you did this (describe the action), it made me feel this way (describe as accurately as possible the inner state you now experience)."

Many people worry about congruent behavior. "How can I present my feelings tactfully so I shall not hurt anyone?" "If I think through what I am going to say and choose my words carefully, then perhaps I shall not get into difficulty." This careful planning and choosing often results in a response that sounds guarded, cautious, rehearsed, and anything but authentic, congruent communication. The descriptive formula may be at least one method of allowing for more immediate, spontaneous congruency.

The setting. It should also be recognized that human interaction takes place in a social structure and that despite the skill of the one being congruent, social norms and expectations may mediate against a positive response. Each of us interacts with others within the context of a social system where certain norms operate and where each person has a defined position or status and a role definition. The operation of the system "expects" certain consistent role performances. Some persons in subordinate role positions have reported going back home from a human relations laboratory and trying out new congruent behaviors with disconcerting results. The superiors continue to expect the old subservient behavior of a subordinate. These new congruent behaviors are totally unexpected and are perceived as threatening, and are thus responded to negatively. There is little system support for the new congruent behaviors, and in a short time the person reluctantly abandons the new congruency for the old, more rewarded, role behaviors.

Goffman (1959), an astute observer of the interaction scene,

describes the social order that exists when people perform as expected:

Ordinarily the definitions of the situation projected by the several different participants are sufficiently attuned to one another so that open contradiction will not occur. I do not mean that there will be the kind of consensus that arises when each individual present candidly expresses what he really feels and honestly agrees with the expressed feelings of the others present. This kind of harmony is an optimistic idea and in any case not necessary for the smooth working of society. Rather, each participant is expected to suppress his immediate heartfelt feelings, conveying a view of the situation which he feels the others will be able to find at least temporarily acceptable. The maintenance of this surface of agreement, this veneer of consensus, is facilitated by each participant concealing his own wants behind statements which assert values to which everyone present feels obliged to give lip service. Further, there is usually a kind of division of definitional labor. Each participant is allowed to establish the tentative official ruling regarding matters which are vital to him, but not immediately important to others, e.g., the rationalizations and justifications by which he accounts for his past activity. In exchange for this courtesy he remains silent or non-committal on matters important to others but not immediately important to him. We have then a kind of interactional *modus vivendi*. Together the participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored. Real agreement will also exist concerning the desirability of avoiding an open conflict of definitions of the situation. I will refer to this level of agreement as a "working consensus" (Goffman, 1959, p. 9).

Goffman further claims there is a certain "morality" in behaving consistently with one's defined roles:

In stressing the fact that the initial definition of the situation projected by an individual tends to provide a plan for the cooperative activity that follows—in stressing this action point of view—we must not overlook the crucial fact that any projected definition of the situation also has a distinctive moral character. It is this moral character of projections that will chiefly concern us in this report. Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely, that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is. In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that

persons of his kind have a right to expect. He also implicitly foregoes all claims to be things he does not appear to be and hence foregoes the treatment that would be appropriate for such individuals. The others find, then, that the individual has informed them as to what is and as to what they *ought* to see as the "is" (Goffman, 1959, pp. 12-13).

Here, then, is a real dilemma for the person who is suddenly confronted with a new value of congruency. This new value may "ring true," may be very appealing, and he may want to adopt it. However, those persons who surround him in his home, work, church, or community setting are not oriented toward this new value; they may expect him to perform as he has done in the past, and rewards will be contingent on a continuation of expected behaviors.

Thus the young husband who goes home and suddenly begins to behave congruently may be seriously violating a whole set of interaction expectations developed with his wife over a long period of time. It would be surprising if she began to respond positively from the first. What is necessary is the changing of the whole nature of the social system. The couple needs to develop together a whole new set of norms, roles, and expectations. Congruency theory would argue that the best way to begin this change is for the husband to begin the new behaviors and then work through the consequences with his wife. Other models of change would suggest that the change agent (the husband, in this case) should not impose change, but that change procedures be a collaborative effort agreed upon by both. It is not uncommon for a husband (or wife) who has attended a laboratory to try to get the spouse to attend also so that together they can begin a new pattern of behavior based on a common frame of reference. Many organizations use a laboratory experience for the same purpose: they send teams of managers to laboratories so that they can adopt new behaviors for the system based on a common new experience.

SUMMARY

In this paper I have been trying to look at some of the problems which a person who adopts a new value of congruency may expect to encounter. If these conditions are recognized, congruent behavior may be successful.

1. Congruency as a value is not the only value a person holds. To be congruent he must still behave consistently with old values or begin the process of reevaluation of his value system and begin to abandon or modify old values.

2. If one's values are in contradiction, it seems to me that the congruency stance is one effective method of beginning the process of personal value change. That is, one can begin to verbalize the ambivalence one feels and involve others in the process of examining the problems that result in the relationship.

3. Congruency does not mean that people cannot change. Certain values may support behaviors that we "like" better than others, even if we do not feel or behave in the desired way now. By expressing our current state of feelings and also our desires for improvement, we enter into a process that would seem to help us move toward the desired behavior goals.

4. Congruent behavior may take more skill than one now possesses. One possibility is that learning to be congruent via a descriptive rather than an evaluative process may result in the type of response more consistent with the end result wished for in the relationship.

5. There are many conditions in the social systems within which interaction takes place which may be resistant to new, congruent behaviors. These structured role definitions and expectations may need to be altered through a change process before congruency as a reciprocal process can be engaged in by all.

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