

GESTALT THEORY AND C. ROGERS' INTERVIEWEE-CENTERED INTERVIEW - DAS WERDEN OF THE INTERVIEW CLIMATE

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The subject I have selected in order to analyse the influence of *Gestalttheorie* on contemporary psychology might seem over-technical. For this reason, I think it is necessary to explain from the beginning why I regard ROGERS' approach as a crucial resource for actualizing a theoretical demand common to everyone involved in therapy, education and other applications of psychology. I am referring to the demand for a more consistent connection between basic theoretical principles such as the importance of respecting the feelings, experiences, needs and thoughts of patients, pupils or students and communicational behavior in professional practice.

In my opinion, Carl ROGERS' most important contribution is the concept of *implementation* (1951, pp. 20-28) meaning the systematic actualization of those attitudes, intentions or requirements which are theoretically assumed and emphasized. This concept enabled ROGERS to "discover" the specific kind of communicational behavior which is the core of my own educational research and the subject of this paper.

More precisely, I will be referring to the informational interview rather than to the therapeutic one, because I consider it to be the application of ROGERS' theory which is most correctly generalized to any interaction where a person (the interviewer) is aiming to encourage another person (the interviewee) to supply information about him/herself. The dynamics of this kind of interview may be the dynamics of a psychological consultation (e.g. with the aim of guiding someone's decisions) or the dynamics of an individualized educational interaction, in which a teacher wishes to ascertain a pupil's cognitive needs as accurately as possible so as to tailor the educational intervention precisely to those needs (LUMBELLI, 1996).

For this reason, I shall take into consideration those pieces of ROGERS' work relevant to the aspects which the therapeutic situation shares with any communicational situation where the aim is to obtain valid and faithful information about the interviewee's emotional or cognitive experiences.

I will be referring in particular to those pieces in which ROGERS paid great attention to the *behavior* of therapists, or of interviewers in general, that is, to how they *implement* their intentions and attitudes (ROGERS, 1942, 1945, 1951; ROGERS & KINGET, 1966).

KAHN and CANNEL (1957) already described the informational interview as a field of forces in which the interviewer's behavior plays an important role and which significantly affects the quality and quantity of the information supplied by the interviewee. They put LEWIN's field theory in relationship with ROGERS' theory of the therapist's attitudes and behavior. The interview technique they designed, however, is a compromise between adopting both those theories and inserting their operational implications into a scheme of prestructured, direct questions. Despite recognizing the important function ROGERS attributed to reflection-response (which they named *non-directive controlled probing*), they inserted this behavior into the series of direct questions making up a questionnaire and assumed that it is to be used only when an answer to one of the questions seemed incomplete and /or ambiguous.

I shall try to show the inconsistency between adopting ROGERS' personality theory and describing the interview as a field of forces, on one hand, and alternating the use of prestructured questions with *reflection responses* in the course of the interview, on the other. My methodological stance is partially different from KAHN and CANNEL's one but is consistent with their theoretical assumptions. According to this common assumption the reflection responses will be as effective as possible in creating a field of forces which enhances the reassuring climate in the interview situation. Gradually enhancing the reassuring climate should make the interviewee's mind increasingly flexible, that is, should make the boundaries within his/her mind increasingly loose and easy to change; this increase in looseness should give rise, in turn, to an increasingly rich and clear verbal production.

We might say that *das Werden* (the genesis) in the field conditions created by the interviewers' reflection responses gives rise to *das Werden* in the interviewees' mind and in their verbal production. The latter begins as a hesitating, laconic, superficial way of communicating and tends to become fluent, rich and deep.

In this theoretical framework, alternating direct, interviewer-centered questions with reflection responses is also alternating the desirable effects of the latter with the negative effects of forces working in a different direction, that is, forces which are likely to provoke hesitations and blocks in the interviewees' communication, thus interfering with the effects of the reflection responses, which KAHN and CANNEL recognize as well.

I shall, first, briefly describe the structure of reflection response by stressing its function of *implementing* interviewers' attitudes of unconditional acceptance and empathic comprehension and its consequent function of enhancing the reassuring forces and therefore lessening those field forces which tend, instead, to increase close-mindedness and communication blocks.

Secondly, I shall show some of the clues in ROGERS' work to the influence of *Gestalttheorie* on his definition of the function of interviewers' verbal behavior and I shall explain how and why I reached the conclusion that the theoretical framework underlying the definition of the interviewee-centered interview also requires a

systematic use of reflection responses and not a discontinuous and/or a contingent one.

1. A special solution of a widely shared problem

The linguistic form of reflection response may be described as the paraphrase or reformulation of one of the statements which the interviewee has just uttered; this reformulation is preceded by an expression of uncertainty such as: If I have correctly understood what you said ...; It seems to me that you are saying ...

The standards for the reflection response are therefore, first, the accuracy of the paraphrase and, second, the hypothetical character of the utterance. The interviewee must be able to recognize what he/she has just said and must be able to perceive the opportunity to clarify and complete what he/she has just said every time the mirror effect makes him/her realize that what he/she said does not quite correspond to what he/she is thinking or experiencing.

Both of these criteria are connected to the function ROGERS attributes to the reflection response within his theory of personality and therapy, that is, the function of enhancing the reassuring forces and reducing the threatening ones in his/her phenomenal field.

The importance of enhancing the reassuring forces derives, in turn, from the following basic principle which ROGERS shares with K. GOLDSTEIN and K. LEWIN as well as other adherents to organismic theory of personality (HALL & LINDZEY, 1957): the more reassuring a situation, the more flexible the mind becomes and open to change: a change which may consist of becoming conscious of removed conflicts or of managing to face some learning tasks.

In the interview situation, this greater flexibility within the mind enhances, in turn, the quality and quantity of the interviewee's verbal production and explains the effectiveness of reflection response in obtaining more information from the interviewee.

Furthermore, the effect of reflection response is not just local and immediate, but general and cumulative: the whole climate of the communicational situation becomes increasingly reassuring and should so stimulate increasingly significant information from the interviewee.

I will now summarize how ROGERS specifies how interviewers can enhance those all-important reassuring forces in the interviewees' phenomenal fields.

First, the interviewers have to adopt an attitude of *unconditional acceptance*, in the sense that they must avoid any kind of evaluation: not only of a negative kind but also of a positive one. In fact, the interviewer's goal is to enhance the interviewee's autonomous activity, his/her motivation to explore his/her mind and talk freely and openly about it, without expecting any threat from the interviewer.

This goal cannot be pursued using that kind of encouragement consisting of praising, because whoever expresses a positive evaluation might also express a negative one in the future.

In this way unconditional acceptance is operationally defined as complete avoidance of evaluation, a definition based on what one must *not* do, on those speech acts which one must *not* use in the interview: implicit evaluations and direct questions.

Some further specifications are needed about these two prohibitions. Firstly, interviewers have to avoid the implicit negative evaluations which can be seen in very common questions such as: What do you mean by ...? Please, would you explain your thought better? Please, could you speak more clearly? In fact, since evaluation always implies some degree of threat, it is not enough to avoid *explicit* evaluation; the interviewer must also be careful to avoid those utterances from which the interviewee may *infer* some kind of negative evaluation.

Secondly, since the interviewer's attitude of unconditional acceptance has to encourage the interviewee to choose the topic and the tone of discourse actively and autonomously, direct questions are to be avoided. In fact, any question on the part of the interviewer, being obviously planned outside the interviewee, works as a constraint on her/his communication acts and is therefore likely to work against those forces making the interviewee openminded and willing to explore and express his/her own experience.

This risk is present in situations in which the interviewer is pursuing the aim of faithfully adhering to the interviewees' thoughts and utterances, but is only asking questions. This emerges clearly in many instances of *clinical interview* we may find in PIAGET (1926). There, we see that it is the use of questions *as such* that prevents the PIAGETian interviewers from implementing their project of avoiding the shortcomings of *prestructured* questions.

The second reassuring factor identified by ROGERS is *empathy*. While his definition of unconditional acceptance serves simply to show us which probes are to be avoided, his operational definition of empathic comprehension enables us to identify the specific verbal behavior which is the *positive alternative to direct questions* and which implements the attitude of unconditional acceptance as well. In fact, empathic comprehension consists firstly of carefully listening to what the interviewee is saying and trying hard to adopt his/her frame of reference, and secondly of showing the interviewee this involvement by supplying real, observable, evidence of it. This evidence is provided by the *reflection response*. This special behavior is therefore the only sure way of implementing those attitudes of unconditional acceptance and empathy which enhance those reassuring forces which result in improving the quality and quantity of the interviewees' verbal production.

ROGERS' discovery of this special way of probing implies that interviewers can and must systematically avoid behavior likely to be perceived by the interviewees as threatening in some way. Since implicit evaluations and questions in general may be

a source of discomfort or embarrassment, they can also give rise to forces which increase the amount of threat in the interviewee's field, thus jeopardizing the quantity and quality of his/her verbal production.

One more particular point shows how much greater the reassurance potential of reflection response is than that of the direct question.

Let us consider the case of an interviewee who has trouble answering a certain question posed by the interviewer. He/she has no choice but to submit to the troublesome task assigned by the interviewer or face the equally troublesome task of openly refusing to answer. Both alternatives imply some threat for the interviewee and consequently some increase of negative forces in his/her field.

This uncomfortable dilemma no longer exists when direct questions are replaced by the corresponding reflection responses. In this latter case, the interviewee who feels uncomfortable with continuing to talk about the subject being mirrored may freely decide to react with simple statements such as: Yes, or: I think so, or: That is what I said. These simple affirmative answers are pragmatically appropriate to the request for confirmation implicit in any reflection response.

In fact, these answers may mean both that the interviewees recognize the interviewer's reformulation as completely adequate to their thought and that they do not want to go on talking about the subject reflected on.

The reflection response never runs the risk of increasing the threatening forces, a risk inevitable when direct questions are being asked.

2. References to Gestalt theory in ROGERS' work

I am now going to analyse and discuss the four main points of ROGERS' work which clearly show the influence of Gestalt theory. The first two are general aspects of the rogerian approach and consist of, first, the concept of personality as an organized whole, and, second, the emphasis upon an individual's *hic et nunc* experience, that is, his/her actual phenomenal field at a certain moment, rather than upon those historical-biographical events which might have given rise to it. The other two points are more specific and consist of ROGERS' references to the concept of *insight* and to the phenomenological and experimental evidence on the relation between figure and ground in visual perception.

1. As to the first point, I shall only mention the global consequences of that single, local, event which is the effect of the reflection response on the interviewee's mind.

Every reflection response affects to a certain degree the interviewee's global perception of the interview, his/her phenomenal field. This means that the interviewers' behavior can affect the interviewees' total mind organisation making it increasingly *differentiated* (LEWIN, 1935). This increasing differentiation in the

interviewees' mind serves, in turn, to explain that enrichment of their verbal production which is the goal of every interview, not only of the therapeutic one.

In my opinion, C. ROGERS may be considered as akin to Gestalt theorists also because his total approach to personality does not involve the risk of stating that everything interacts with everything else, and of consequently denying any possibility of a scientific knowledge of mind; a risk which G. KANIZSA (1971) pointed out as one of the possible misunderstandings of Gestalt theory in his preface to the Italian translation of METZGERs *Psychologie* (1971).

In fact, ROGERS' research was oriented by the goal of, firstly, defining the verbal behavior which could positively affect the global condition of the interviewee's state of mind and, secondly, verifying accurate hypotheses about the processes that verbal behavior triggers.

2. As to ROGERS' emphasis on the individual's experience and/or phenomenal field - which, incidentally, distanced him from FREUDs psychoanalysis - it may be traced back to those aspects of Gestalt theory which are best highlighted by LEWINs essay on *regression* and *retrogression*. As you know, LEWIN (1951) used these two words to distinguish two ways of describing the effects of frustration. He traces that distinction back to the difference between the historical reconstruction and the phenomenological description of an individual's state of mind at a given moment: though not denying the value of the former, that is, historical reconstruction, he deems the independent ascertainment of the latter feasible and advantageous.

Similarly, ROGERS deems the client's perceptual experience or phenomenal field to be the sole relevant target of the therapist's work, although he never denies its historical "causes" or the distortion in a client's phenomenal field which historical events may have provoked.

The same rationale which helped LEWIN save the perspective of an experimental study of personality allowed ROGERS to define the therapist's role in such a way that his definition does not include attributes specific only to therapy and can so be generalized to every interviewer.

Inasmuch as the therapeutic facilitation depends on that verbal behavior which guarantees the maximum reassurance and empathy, this behavior is also relevant to any interviewer's general aim, that is the aim of encouraging the interviewee's verbal production as much as possible.

This emphasis on experiencing and on the reflection response as the behavior best suited to affect this experiencing, helped ROGERS not only to elaborate precise suggestions about that behavior, but also to identify the processes most likely to facilitate the desired changes in the interviewer's experience.

3. The concept of *insight* seems crucial both from the interviewers' point of view and from the interviewees'. More precisely, we can find in ROGERS' work accurate references to K. DUNCKERs contribution to the theory of problem-solving.

As you know, DUNCKER (1935) reconciled the immediacy of solution attainment with the reconstruction of the underlying cognitive processes, thus providing a rational (and not mystical) explanation of the experience of detecting the solution all of a sudden.

ROGERS applied DUNCKERs theory to the definition of the therapists' empathy, which should consist of exploiting the clients' utterances as much as possible in order to enter into their frame of reference, to see their phenomenal world as much as possible through their own eyes.

These efforts to enter someone else's world may often be ineffective and the therapist may go on feeling outside the client for some time. However, he/she may suddenly find him/herself inside the client, and this sudden outcome is clearly due to that long sequence of processes elicited by an equally long sequence of reflection responses.

The experience of insight or *Aha Erlebnis* can also happen when a client suddenly discovers some organismic experiences previously denied to consciousness, which he/she had confusedly tried to arrive at in the course of several therapeutic sessions.

4. From a certain point of view, ROGERS' references to the concept of insight are closely connected to the references to that core of Gestalt theory represented by the studies about the figure-ground relationship in visual perception.

According to him, the therapists' experience of finding themselves inside a client's frame of reference is not only sudden, but also *unstable*: in fact, after feeling themselves inside the world perceived by a client for a certain period of time, they may find themselves outside it just as suddenly as they had found themselves inside. In order to describe this crucial aspect of therapists' experience, ROGERS often likens it to the visual perception of so-called "ambiguous figures". This analogy is not only rhetorical, since the very core of ROGERS' theory is the emphasis on the individual's phenomenal field to which both visual perception and the perception of other people's experience belong.

ROGERS also uses the studies about figure-ground relation to describe the variety of ways in which a reflection response can refer to a previous utterance of the interviewee. ROGERS and KINGET (1966) review a typology of various possible reflection responses corresponding to various kinds of figure-ground relationship.

The first type of reflection response *stresses* precisely what the interviewee seems to perceive as a figure; for example, if the client is saying: "I am totally desperate. I can't go on", a reflection response of this type would be: "You're at the end of your tether".

A second type of reflection response *supplements* or *expands* upon what is functioning as the figure in the interviewee's utterance. The client's utterance quoted above, for example, might be mirrored as follows: "You're at the end of your tether or at least that's how you feel at the moment".

A third type of reflection response consists of *contrasting* the pattern of a client's utterance by transforming what is functioning as a ground into a figure, that is, by drawing some authorized inference from what is explicitly expressed.

For example, let us assume that a client is saying: "The town I live in is a real hole. Among the hundred-thousand odd inhabitants, there's not one you can even have an intelligent conversation with. Notice that I didn't say interesting, but just intelligent". A reversal of figure-ground relation might be obtained with the following reflection response: "As regards certain things like intelligence for example you're quite alone in this town".

Another example of this type of reflection response is: "You're glad you're not American" in reaction to the following utterance of a female client: "O.k., perhaps American women are the most attractive women in the world, although it's not very easy to decide. It's a question of taste. They're very well-groomed, I just admit. But they have no personality, no individuality. They're empty, they're robots. You can't make friends of them. They have nothing to offer as friends. There's an emptiness inside them, an inner poverty. That's almost pathetic".

This second example seems to me questionable because the inference drawn and expressed by the interviewer is too interpretative; that is, the resulting reformulation makes it unlikely that the interviewee will perceive it as a clue to the interviewer's effort to understand what she is really experiencing.

This analogy with figure-ground relation in visual perception seems to me useful for ensuring an accurate distinction between reformulations which are likely to work as effective reflection of interviewees' utterances and those which are instead likely to be experienced as something foreign and therefore fail to work effectively.

3. Some conclusive remarks

In conclusion, let us now summarize how and why the theoretical framework presented here argues against the partial, occasional, use of reflection response suggested by KAHN and CANNEL (1957) for the informational interview.

What consequences can be predicted in an interview in which reflection responses are alternated with prestructured questions?

We have seen that the effects of reflection response are local and immediate as well as global and delayed: however, only the latter affect the interview climate significantly and thus make the interviewees' mind increasingly flexible and the information they express increasingly complete.

We have also seen that direct questions, on the other hand, are likely to work in the opposite direction, i.e. they can make the interviewees feel threatened by implicitly inflicting negative evaluation upon them, or by placing troublesome constraints on their verbal planning. Furthermore, the simple fact of the interviewer questioning the interviewee on a new topic which is different from the one just dealt with in the previous phase of *non-directive controlled probing* can be experienced as a sudden departure from the attitude of empathy and consequently as another threatening event.

Another shortcoming of alternating reflection responses and direct questions is that it can produce a special kind of *double-bind* (SLUZKI and RANSOM, 1967), since the already mentioned conflicting effects of direct *versus* indirect probing can be judged as paradoxical. This paradox may be briefly described.

The direct questions can be seen as containing the following implicit statement about the interpersonal relationship: I'm the one who decides what we talk about, even if this topic makes you feel uncomfortable, and I also decide how we have to talk about it, even if the way I am imposing sounds foreign to you.

When the interviewers use reflection responses they imply something like the following statement: You're the one who decides whether we have to talk about a certain topic or not, and how this topic has to be dealt with.

When we alternate reflection response with direct question the implicit information about the interpersonal relationship to be implemented in the course of the interview is inconsistent. This inconsistency is another reason for judging the occasional use of reflection response suggested by KAHN and CANNEL (1957) as ineffective and questionable. At least in situations when the whole pattern of effects of reflection response is required, that is, when the dynamics of the interview is considered important, this combination is to be rejected.

In other words, this is true every time an interviewer (teacher, psychiatrist, psychologist or researcher) pursues first and foremost the goal of encouraging the interviewees' autonomous participation and therefore wants to avoid creating a threatening or frustrating climate.

Summary

That developmental phase of Carl ROGERS' thought is emphasized in which the concept of *implementation* has replaced the concepts of *technique* or *method*. In that phase the importance of therapists' attitudes of unconditional acceptance and empathic understanding is used as an argumentation in favour of - rather than against - that verbal behavior called *reflection-response* (ROGERS; 1951) and *non-directive controlled probing* (KAHN & CANNEL, 1957).

Emphasis is placed on the role of the references to Gestalt psychology in this phase of ROGERS' thought: four relevant points are examined and discussed: the concept of personality as a whole and the consequent global quality of the effects attributed to *reflection-response*; the emphasis on the phenomenal *hic et nunc* experience and the consequent importance attributed to the therapists' verbal behavior; the use of Karl DUNCKER's *insight* and of the empirical evidence about the perception of ambiguous figures in order to describe the therapy process from the therapists' and clients' standpoint.

Zusammenfassung

Rekapituliert wird jenes Stadium der Entwicklung des Konzepts von C. ROGERS, in dem die Technik- und Methodenbegriffe durch den Begriff der Implementierung ersetzt werden und in dem die Bedeutung des Verhaltens des Therapeuten, insbesondere die unbedingte Akzeptanz und das empathische Verstehen, als Argument zugunsten (und nicht gegen) das Engagement in der Ausführung des verbalen Verhaltens angewendet wird, welches als *reflection-response* (ROGERS, 1951) und *non-directive controlled probing* (KAHN & CANNEL, 1957) bezeichnet worden ist.

Es werden vor allem die Bezüge zur *Gestaltpsychologie* in dieser Phase herausgestellt; vier Punkte werden näher untersucht und diskutiert: der Begriff der Persönlichkeit als ein Ganzes und der sich ergebende globale Charakter der der *reflection-response* zugeschriebenen Wirkungen; die Betonung auf die phänomenale *Hier-und-Jetzt-Erfahrung* und die sich daraus ergebende Bedeutung des verbalen Verhaltens des Therapeuten; die Anwendung sowohl des Begriffs der *Einsicht* nach Karl DUNCKER als auch der empirischen Evidenz der Wahrnehmung zweideutiger Figuren auf den therapeutischen Prozeß.

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