Congruence and communication of the therapist - a model and practical guidelines

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Congruence on an intrapsychic level

A: congruent = consonance of experience and awareness
B: distorted symbolization of experience
C: experience not in awareness (denied, incomplete)

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Aspects of congruence

- theoretical psychological concept (for others only to a certain extent perceivable)
- a relation (experience – self – furthermore communication)
- intra-psychic = state of being
- to symbolize experiences accurately is a functional quality
Aspects of congruence

➤ on a **continuum** (from less to more congruent) = not always and not in every respect – *sufficiently is enough*

➤ it is not possible to have all experiences present → available on demand

➤ **generalized capacity** vs. specific experience in a situation

➤ according to theory of therapy **starting point for the therapist**

➤ **therapy goal for client**
Congruence in its particular meaning in person-centered theory is not ...

- consonance of self-concept and ideal self
- overlap of different parts of the self
- harmony of the actualizing tendency of the whole organism and the actualizing tendency of the self (as part of the organism)
- accordance of subjective reality (phenomenal field) and external reality (incl. reality of others) → it is not constituted by consensual reality or by a social contract

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Congruence: Extension to the interpersonal level

Consonance of experience, awareness and communication of (perceived) experiences to others

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Transparency

- Via (explicit) communication congruence (in the meaning of inside = to be) becomes a transparent behavioral phenomenon (outside = to do)

- Ability of the therapist to communicate in such a way that the client receives the congruent message, above all unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding, not necessarily verbally

- Ongoing background melody = autonomous body language
Experience, self and communication: a model

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Experience, self and communication of the therapist: segments of the model

experience  self

D: congruent and fully transparent

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E: congruent and fully transparent
D: congruent but selective

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Experience, self and communication of the therapist: segments of the model

Experience, self and explicit communication of the therapist:

D: congruent and fully transparent
E: congruent but selective
F: communication of distorted symbolization

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Experience, self and communication of the therapist: segments of the model

Experience, self

explicit communication

D: congruent and fully transparent

E: congruent but selective

F: communication of distorted symbolization

G: inauthentic (selective, distorted)

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Experience, self and communication of the therapist: segments of the model

- **D**: congruent and fully transparent
- **E**: congruent but selective
- **F**: communication of distorted symbolization
- **G**: inauthentic (selective, distorted)
- **H**: autonomous body language (no awareness)

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Experience, self and communication of the therapist: segments of the model

- **D**: congruent and fully transparent
- **E**: congruent but selective
- **F**: communication of distorted symbolization
- **G**: inauthentic (selective, distorted)
- **H**: autonomous body language (no awareness)
- **I**: implicit processes (unaware, cannot be observed from the outside)

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Expressions from frame of reference of therapist

Why?

- Being present to the client in a holistic way
- Transcending alter ego relationship → dialogic quality and (existential) equality
- Use of the self of therapist (expert for own experiencing) (≠ expert for the client)
Expressions from frame of reference of therapist

When?

➢ Persistent experience of not understanding and/or not valuing the client

➢ spontaneous responses

➢ on demand = questions and requests of the client

➢ to avoid confusion of the client

➢ many more reasons ➔ overall: fostering trust of clients and engaging in experiential exploration

Brodley (2011); Mearns & Thorne (2007)
Guidelines for T-frame responses

How?

- in line with philosophy that client is expert for themselves
- keep track with client and anticipate if relevant
- sporadic and non-systematic (check motives and intentions) → “facilitative, non-exploitive, non-intrusive, non-dominant” (Wyatt, 2001; p. 230)
- use language that conveys your own experiencing
- avoid responses that may be construed as facts or comments about the client

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Guidelines for T-frame responses

How?

- personal style and subjective perspective (instead of stressing own qualification or professional role)
- tentative emphasis
- make clear what made you bring in your frame of reference

Guidelines for T-frame responses

- technically speaking no limit (but ethical and personal boundaries!)
- nurtured by care, discipline, and self-control → “disciplined spontaneity“
- consider vulnerability of clients and power issues - self-determination of clients as “compass“
- in reverse: therapist might not be present enough for the client
Conclusion

- very important aspect in theory of therapy
- **model**: map serves for illustration and clarification of and attention to different aspects
- crucial is client's perception of a basic reliability
- congruence of therapist (as intra-psychic phenomenon) as much as possible - a never ending story/process
- transparence better selective according to a number of guidelines (optimum instead of a maximum!)

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Historical sketch

- Rogers (1957; 1959): Congruence as state of therapist = intra-psychic concept; in accord with oneself
- Rogers (1962): client's perception of therapist's congruence = hide nothing and be transparent for the client
- Rogers & Sanford (1984): explicit communication of therapist's experiencing
Techniques?

Finke (2004) - following Carkhuff - distinguishes three typical techniques to implement the therapy principle “congruence“:

- self-disclosure
- immediacy
- confrontation

But, as it is an inner state, operationalization of congruence in behavioral terms is problematic!  → background melody rather than systematic techniques
Interplay with other core conditions

- congruence = unconditional positive self-regard
- entering the world of the client without reservation (= UPR)

- Congruence is internal (and external), UPR external openness

- congruence increases self-understanding and as a consequence empathic understanding of clients → congruence of therapist is upper limit of empathic capacity!