CHAPTER 7

The Process of Learning: Roger’s Phenomenology
THE PROCESS OF LEARNING: ROGER’S PHENOMENOLOGY

In the seventh chapter of their book “From Skinner to Rogers; Contrasting Approaches to Education” Frank Milhollan and Bill E. Forisha explain the Carl Rogers’ phenomenology and learning process through his 19 phenomenological (or humanistic) principles that govern human behavior and learning. Here are the main point of the chapter/principles:

- Rogers worked with people not with animals in laboratories. (real life situations). From his clinical experience as a ‘Psychologist’ he developed 19 formal principles regarding human behavior.

- Rogers’ theoretical work on scientific methodology, psychological counseling or therapy, personality, interpersonal relationships, mental health, and learning paved the way for humanistic approach to Psychology (Third force).

- Those 19 principles are concerned with learning from phenomenological viewpoint:
  1. Development of an individual’s own sense of reality
  2. Those internal forces which cause him to act,
  3. And the development of individual’s own self–concept, i.e. his concept of himself as a person who acts.

Rogers’ 19 Principles

1. Every individual exists in a continually changing world of experience of which he is the center.

Sensory input (environmental stimuli) + Internal stimuli\(\xrightarrow{\text{Phenomenological field}}\) Valuing Stimuli (Perception) \(\xrightarrow{\text{Individual’s Behavior (Action)}}\)
An individual always has a unique & private world of experience available to his consciousness. He / she can know the experiences as they are in their totality. Communication between individuals is, therefore, difficult, incomplete & distorted.

- Example: Your experience of skiing—thrill—I can’t get it, but partially I can get it, when I also had my previous experience with mountains, speed, snow etc. but never in totality.

2. **The organism reacts to the field as it is experienced and perceived. This perceptual field is, for the individual, his “reality”**.

- Our reaction or behavior depends upon our perceptions about a thing or concept; and that perception involves both individual’s immediate inner feelings, emotions and external or environmental stimuli or conditions prevailing on that moment; then one attaches meaning or value to this phenomenological field that is called perception; therefore our perceptions work as our own unique world of ‘realities’ which tend to initiate our particular behavior.

- For example, we judge someone’s behavior as ‘stupid’ at one time, but alter our judgment later when particular circumstances come to light, or we can say that we have become more aware of that man’s context.

- To use a cliché: truth as beauty exists in the eyes of the beholder.

3. **The organism reacts as an organized whole to this phenomenal field.**

- All aspects of an individual’s being—both physical and mental or emotional – enter behavior as interdependent elements in the world of experience.

- For example: Hand burnt by a hot stove → physical pain + mental feelings + medication + an explanation to another of what occurred + loss of appetite etc work simultaneously as whole (learning through insight). Person learns through perception of the relationships of all elements exist in his phenomenal field.
4. **The organism has one basic tendency and striving to actualize, maintain, and enhance the experiencing organism.**

- The theme is similar with the idea of survival in evolutionary theory.
- Monistic dynamic system; one drive suffices to account for all behavior --- (no mind-body duality).
- In all cases the base or prerequisite for behavior is individual’s own perception which keeps him experiencing.
- This principle is based on the idea that man is inherently “good” as he internally is always striving to actualize, maintain, and enhance his experience of personal world.
- However, in actualizing, the organism experiences differentiation within the phenomenal field. For instance, a baby experiences the first sense of differentiation from the mother’s experiences. Other extreme may employ the sense of uniqueness experienced (by someone) in creative arts.
- Self-actualization involves all kinds of behavior (physical & cognitive).
- Behaviorists see man as neutral & passive whereas, phenomenologists treat him ‘good’ and active, having unique world of ‘reality’ (unique values & judgments attached) and active to explore the things on his own.

5. **Behavior is basically the goal-directed attempt of the organism to satisfy its need as experienced in the perceived field.**

- All behavior is purposive. Purpose evolves from ‘obstacle’ in perceived-field, which leads individual to self-actualization & enhancement.
- Exp. Hunger, higher authority etc may be such an obstacle, which leads to satisfy with food & required obedience – behavior.
External and Internal stimuli may work as ‘obstacles’ to initiate a purposive behavior.

For an observer another’s purposive behavior may seem as ‘irrelevant’, inadequate, or even destructive because only isolated ‘action’ cannot provide all evidence or consciousness or context, which is necessary for understanding one’s behavior (action). (all evidence or consciousness is available only to the person himself).

6. Emotion accompanies and in general facilitates such goal-directed behavior, the kind of emotion being related to the seeking versus the consummatory aspects of the behavior, and the intensity of the emotion being related to the perceived significance of the behavior for the maintenance and enhancement of the organism.

➢ Cause of behavior = physiological changes + emotions.

➢ For example Nervous speaker feels dry-mouth so takes a drink. Actually emotions cause perceived purposes to initiate action. These emotions prepare individual for action—fear, excitement, or joy, or general unpleasantness. However, emotions occurring after an ‘action’ are not actual stimuli for action but they are consequences i.e. feelings of satisfaction, relaxation, calmness etc. The behaviorists have contrasting point of view as they perceive that behavior is the result of the consequence that occurs after an individual’s response.

➢ For an observer, the emotions may seem as retarding rather than facilitating the behavior or ‘action’ of an individual, because emotions are only a part of phenomenal field. The attached meaning & value and relationship of all elements are out of reach of observer consciousness.

7. The best vantage point for understanding behavior is from the internal frame of reference of the individual himself.

• Emphasizes uniqueness of each individual’s world of being.
• Evaluating another’s behavior is more or less impossible. But another’s behavior may be (partial) some what understood through ‘empathy’, otherwise communication would be impossible.

• Prejudice (bias) diminished if empathy-oriented mode of communication.

• Empathetic communication will always be partially successful.

8. A portion of the total perceptual field gradually becomes differentiated as the “self”.
   ✓ Process of change & development is continuous in one’s phenomenological field; however, there are two structural constructs: the organism and the self (Rogers theory labeled as self-theory)
   ✓ Totality of all awareness is experience or phenomenal field.
   ✓ A portion of this field becomes differentiated as a ‘self’.
   ✓ ‘Self’ is aware of being & functioning in the world—knows that it exists, and it knows that it is an experiencing organism.
   ✓ ‘Self’ is not always present to awareness, but it is always available.
   ✓ “It (self) is the organized, consistent conceptual gestalt with characteristics of ‘I’ or ‘me’, and the relationships of I or me to other’s people, things, and aspects of life, together with values attached to these perceptions. It is a fluid and a changing gestalt, but at any given moment a specific entity”.

9. As a result of interaction with the environment and, particularly, as a result of evolitional interaction with others, the structure of self is formed—an organized, fluid, but consistent conceptual pattern of perceptions of characteristics and relationships of ‘I’ or ‘me’ together with values attached to these concepts.
   ✓ From all parts of the phenomenal field, a part is differentiated as ‘self’ having particular meaning or value—‘me’, while within the phenomenal field a part also
develops or exists as ‘not me’. In other words the evaluations of possible actions become either ‘desirable’ or ‘undesirable’/ ‘good’ or ‘bad’. More valuable or desirable parts of the field (related to self or ‘me’) create purposes of enhancement.

✔ For example, reactions of delight by parents to the behavior of a ‘good’ baby.

✔ These parts (desirable or good or ‘me’) become more permanent and consistent and are consistently in the form of ‘becoming’, whereas, other ‘undesirable’ part proceeds in the opposite direction.

10. The values attached to experiences, and the values which are a part of the self-structure, in some instances are values experienced directly by the organism, and in some instances are values introjected or taken over from others, but perceived in distorted fashion as if they had been experienced directly.

- Self-structure is combination of the existing values of an individual which evolve through external or environmental as well as internal stimuli, and the values attached to the present experiences.

- Some behaviors are directly experienced and valued by an individual i.e. enjoying music, playing games, etc, but some behaviors are valued and influenced by other people primarily, but ultimately a person accepts them as their own if they are in consistency with his personal values. Poets and writers often unintentionally use others concepts and claim as their own.

- Maladjustment occurs when a large number of other people’s values are in conflict with person’s direct experience and values. In this case the person may adopt or discard the either experiences or values, sometimes in one time he accepts his values and on the other time rejects his to adopt social norms.

- All prominent behaviors which are generally associated with particular sex, profession, or ethnic group are the result of this phenomenon.

For example: (these are generally accepted but not true always)
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- **Sex-roles**—female child is to cook, serve, and choose teaching job etc

- The concept that **all ‘Mullahs’ are extremists** and irrational.

- The concept that **‘police’ are the most corrupt** people.

- The concept that **‘religious people’ are irrational** as conceived by highly educated and liberal people.

11. As experience occur in the life of the individual, they are either (a) symbolized, perceived, and organized into some relationship to the self; (b) ignored because there is no perceived relationship to the self-structure, or (c) denied symbolization or given a distorted symbolization because the experience is inconsistent with the structure of the self.

- **Phenomenal field** is made up of both **conscious** and symbolized experiences and **unconscious** or un-symbolized experiences.

- **Consciousness** is the symbolization of some of our experiences.

- Individual may however react as well to un-symbolized (unconscious) experience—called as ‘**subception’**.

- **Symbolized experiences are enhancing** the self-structure. For example, competent hunter → empty-handed returned → admits failure (symbolized experience).

  Incompetent hunter → empty handed returned → may perceive the day relaxing and enjoyable (denied or distorted symbolization of experience).

- **Denial or distortion** in symbolizing process may occur if the experience is perceived as being **inconsistent with the self-structure**.

- For example, **unsuccessful hunter** may distort the same experience by saying, “This gun is too old,” or “Everyone was too noisy”—responses (undue cause) about consistently distorted experiences are known as “rationalization”. 

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These distortions are unimportant in our lives, however, refusal to actualize basic organic experience may cause severe coping problems—i.e. ‘sexual frigidity’. Anxiety and tension results from a number of such ‘subceived experiences’.

12. Most of the ways of behaving which are adopted by the organism are those which are consistent with the concept of self.

- An individual initiates behavior that is in line with his ‘self-structure’, even when the environment is providing a contrary stimulus (a threat or unfavorable consequence).
- Thus an individual only proceeds to experience things which are consistent with his self-construct/structure otherwise not. A new experience (contrary to one’s self) is never likely to occur consciously.

13. Behavior may, in some instances, be brought about by organic experiences and needs which have not been symbolized, such behavior may be inconsistent with the structure of the self, but in such instances the behavior is not “owned” by the individual.

- Un-symbolized behavior caused by organic experiences and needs (i.e. alcohol, drugs, or unusual pressure) may appear as strange and is not owned.
- Here, the self-structure becomes diffused and thus allowing non-symbolized experiences to be actualized.

14. Psychological maladjustment exists when the organism denies to awareness significant sensory and visceral experiences which consequently are not symbolized and organized into the gestalt of the self-structure. When this situation exists, there is a basic or potential psychological tension.

- When an individual denies to important sensory & environmental experiences or awareness, then those experiences and awareness remain un-symbolized (un-
perceived) within the phenomenal-field, consequently psychological tension occurs.

Exp. An individual is unable even to react to the stimulation provided by a loved one. (psychological impotency)

15. Psychological adjustment exists when the concept of the self is such that all the sensory and visceral experience of the organism are, or may be assimilated on a symbolic level into a consistent relationship with the concept of self.

- When sensory or environmental experiences that are in line with one’s self concept are allowed and perceived properly (become symbolized), psychological adjustment occurs and the experiences are assimilated, consequently the self-construct is enhanced.

- Competent hunter → no game bagged → finds no faults with gun → may fry to enhance his skill more

- Young girl → ‘lady – like’ at home → ‘climbs trees’ when with friends → or may choose to forego the pleasure to make his parents happier.

16 Any experience which is inconsistent with the organization or structure of self may be perceived as a threat, and the more of these perceptions there are the more rigidly the self-structure is organized to maintain itself.

- An experience which is contrary to self is a threat.

- If, more such experiences, then one’s ‘self’ is denied. Therefore, to avoid such state of nonbeing, all being that is available to him becomes organized to maintain the self-structure, which, however, produces a narrow purpose. The consciousness contracts & one’s behavior may become rigid, unpleasant, and even paranoid.

- It is a circular process, which becomes constricted & harder and harder: (As implies in R.D Liang’s thought).
I want it,
I get it
Therefore I am good.
I want it,
I don’t get it,
Therefore I am bad.
I am bad because I didn’t get it,
I am bad because I wanted what I didn’t get.
I must take care
to get what I want,
and want what I get,
and not get what I don’t want.

For example, the stereotype by poorer whites of southern states is: “Life is hard”. It provides narrow experience or purpose. To withstand with it they argue & rationalize: “Suffering is God’s will”.

- In our (Sindh’s) culture poorer people and some ethnic groups also face with this dilemma, as they in their routine lives encounter and feed the experiences which are opposed to their ‘self’, therefore, their potential of experiencing is narrow, and they organize their consciousness to narrow purpose and rationalize it with certain concepts i.e. :

‘Respect’ or ‘Disrespect’ is from God.
Everything (good or bad) is from God.
Life, death, health, disease is from God.
Corruption could never come to end etc.

17. Under certain conditions, involving primarily complete absence of any threat to the self-structure, experiences which are inconsistent with it may be perceived, and examined, and the structure of self revised to assimilate and include such experiences.

- Roger’s this principle brings psychology to the human science where existential phenomenology and empiricism are herein brought together and made compatible.
• From this principle, teachers, counselors, administrators, therapists, and good friends might build ‘helping relationships’ with those in need that come their way.

• For instance, we are more like our ‘true selves’ around friends. That is, in the presence of an accepting person, we feel non-threatened and free to incorporate more or our experience into our self-structure.

• Your perception about something is ‘false’ (as opposed to your ‘self’) hence you avoid experiencing it (thing perceived as threat). But when you are among your friends (environmental stimuli) you feel no threat and become ready to experience that ‘thing’ and eventually your consciousness of self is modified and your behavior is modified and you treat it ‘not that false’. (you accept it)

• ‘Truth’ and ‘falsity’ is tentative within no threatening situation. Person is willing to even experience the things contrary to one’s self structure within supporting environmental conditions.

• In his book ‘Experience and Education’ Dr Dewey also states that in traditional education students’ artificial decorum of ‘being attentive’ and ‘being obedient’ through imposed discipline puts hurdles for a teacher or a facilitator to be aware of the real nature of learners and to understand their inner and social experiences that are most important for them. Teacher as a facilitator when provides non threatening environment in classroom, the learners then may drop their defenses and then he or she is in a better position to understand them and help them out; in turn, it also enables learners to understand both the facilitator and the class resulting in better educational experiences and learning outcomes.

• The ‘being’ undergoes four specific attitudes in reality testing:

  1. **Openness** to experience,
  2. **Trust in** the wisdom of the organism to maintain and enhance itself,
  3. **Willingness** to be a process,
4. While in process—willingness to experience ambiguity.

- This process of reality testing is then a process of experimenting with the possible range of experience available to the organism. When threat to the self is absent, experience can be perceived in differentiated fashion, that is, learning of new modes of being can proceed. In case of more rigidity, other friendly people may facilitate the process.

18. When the individual perceives and accepts into one consistent and integrated system all his sensory and visceral experiences then he is necessarily more understanding of others and is more accepting of others as separate individuals.

19. As the individual perceives and accepts into his self-structure more of his organic experience, he finds that he is replacing his present value system—based so largely upon introjections which have been distortedly symbolized—with a continuing organismic valuing process.

- For positive mental health, an individual must be a fully-functional person. He not only accepts his self-oriented inner experiences, but accepts also all his sensory and visceral experiences (present in environment).

- When an individual fully accepts his inner and outer experiences he then is accepting and understanding other value system; ultimately, he reaches at a balanced satisfaction of needs demanded.