

Reflective Listening: Rogers' Paradox

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There are few psychotherapeutic procedures as deeply misunderstood as reflective listening. Contrary to popular opinion in psychology, reflective listening is more than a parroting back of the client's speech.

Writing of reflective listening late in his career, Carl Rogers claimed that his goal in responding to his clients was not to reflect their feelings, but to ascertain whether his understanding of their subjective experience was correct. He restated clients' feelings back to them to make sure that he got them right. Although the patient may experience accurate therapist responses as mirror reflections of his or her feelings, the actual intent of these responses is not to reflect but to test the accuracy of the therapist's understanding. Accordingly, Rogers suggested that reflections be renamed "testing understandings" or "checking perceptions." To Rogers, the person-centered therapist must relentlessly work to understand the client's changing inner world, to get it moment to moment, in all its intricate detail. Despite its name, reflective listening is really the art of grasping the client as precisely as possible from one moment to the next.

This is all much more complicated than it looks. *Rogers is saying that the therapist does not experience his or her responses as reflections of the feelings the client expresses, even when the client experiences them as perfect reflections.* The client hears the therapist's responses, and experiences him- or herself as reflected there. Observing that reflection, he or she gains insight and self-acceptance. From the client's perspective, then, the therapist reflects.

From the therapist's perspective, however, the therapist is checking his or her understanding. Behind what looks like a mirror is a hard-working therapist—empathizing, listening, figuring things out so closely and sensitively that the work creates the impression of a

mirror image. The client may perceive no distinction between his or her actual feelings and those attributed to him or her by the therapist. The odd part is, though, that for this approach to work out well, the therapist *cannot* try to reflect, but rather try to understand. If the therapist tries to reflect, the client will not feel reflected! In short, we end up with the somewhat paradoxical notion of a reflection that must not reflect or it will cease to be a reflection. As a metaphor, one might think of the contrast between the reflective surface of a mirror and its tain, or nonreflective back surface.

Transcripts of Rogers' own therapy sessions illustrate this contrast. Although Rogers repeats portions of his clients' speech, he rearranges and expands on them. He paraphrases, re-introduces relevant material from previous remarks by clients, and explicitly states meanings that were only implied. Rogers does not copy his clients' speech. He *sculpts* it, shaping it into the most accurate understanding he can come up with at each moment.

Rogers' formulation offers a valuable guideline. When the therapist says back to a client what the client has said, he or she should not try to reflect it exactly. Don't try to be a parrot. Instead, work to understand in all its delicate detail the meanings and feelings expressed in what the client has said. Then, say all that back to the client, offering along with it your own inner understanding of what the client has said. Offer this understanding in the spirit of experimentation, with the expectation that it may turn out to need revising. Offer it generously and often, because that is the only way to know whether your empathic understanding is correct.

— Kyle Arnold

Today's guest contributor, Kyle Arnold, PhD, is a licensed psychologist in Brooklyn, NY and a member of the Society for Humanistic Psychology.