

"Reflections of Feelings"

by Carl R. Rogers

Although I am partially responsible for the use of this term to describe a certain type of therapist response, I have, over the years, become very unhappy with it. A major reason is that "reflection of feelings" has not infrequently been taught as a technique, and sometimes a very wooden technique at that. On the basis of written client expressions, the learner is expected to concoct a "correct" reflection of feeling - or even worse, to select the "correct" response from a multiple-choice list. Such training has very little to do with an effective therapeutic relationship. So I have become more and more allergic to the use of the term.

At the same time I know that many of my responses in an interview - as is evident from published examples - would seem to be "reflections of feelings". Inwardly I object. I am definitely not trying to "reflect feelings".

Then I receive a letter from my friend and former colleague, Dr. John Shlien of Harvard, which still further complicates my dilemma. He writes:

"Reflection" is unfairly damned. It was rightly criticised when you described the wooden mockery it could become in the hands of insensitive people, and you wrote beautifully on that point. But you neglected the other side. It is an instrument of artistic virtuosity in the hands of a sincere, intelligent, empathic listener. It made possible the development of client-centred therapy, when the philosophy alone could not have. Undeserved denigration of the technique leads to fatuous alternatives in the name of 'congruence'.

Puzzling over this matter, I have come to a double insight. From my point of view as therapist, I am not trying to "reflect feelings". I am trying to determine whether my understanding of the client's inner world is correct - whether I am seeing it as s/he is experiencing it at this moment. Each response of mine contains the unspoken question, 'Is this the way it is in you? Am I catching just the colour and texture and flavour of the personal meaning you are experiencing right now? If not, I wish to bring my perception in line with yours'.

On the other hand, I know that from the client's point of view we are holding up a mirror of his/her current experiencing. The feelings and personal meanings seem sharper when seen through the eyes of another, when they are reflected.

So I suggest that these therapist responses be labelled not 'Reflections of Feeling', but 'Testing Understandings', or 'Checking Perceptions'. Such terms would, I believe, be more accurate and would be helpful in the training of therapists, by supplying a sound motivation in responding, a questioning, rather than a desire to 'reflect'.

But in understanding the client's experience, we can realise that such responses do serve as a mirror. This is beautifully expressed by Sylvia Slack (1985, pp.41-42) as she tells of her reactions in a therapy interview held in front of a large audience, and video-taped:

"Watching the tapes helped me to visualise the counselling process more clearly. It was like Dr. Rogers was a magical mirror. The process involved my sending rays toward that mirror. I looked into the mirror to get a glimpse of the reality that I am. If I had sensed the mirror was affected by the rays being received, the reflection would have seemed distorted and not to be trusted. Although I was aware of sending rays, their nature was not truly discernible until they were reflected and clarified by the mirror. There was a curiosity about the rays and what they revealed about me. This experience allowed me an opportunity to get a view of myself that was untainted by the perceptions of outside viewers. This inner knowledge of myself enabled me to make choices more suited to the person who lives within me."

As she hints here, and goes on to elaborate, it is important that the therapist's understanding be so sensitively correct that the mirror image is clear and undistorted. This means laying aside our own judgements and values in order to grasp, with delicate accuracy, the exact meaning the client is experiencing.

Thinking these toughest thoughts and writing them out, has been clarifying for me. I can continue, from the therapist's point of view, to test my understanding of my client by making tentative attempts to perceive his/her inner world. I can recognise that for my client these responses are, at their best, a clear mirror image of the meanings and perceptions as experienced by the client which is clarifying and insight-producing.

References:

Shlien, J. Personal correspondence, April 2, 1986.

Slack, S. Reflections on a workshop with Carl Rogers. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Spring 1985, 25, 35-42.