

Humanistic Psychology: Unlocking Your True Potential

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Humanistic psychology is a psychological perspective which rose to prominence in the mid-20th century, drawing on the work of early pioneers like Carl Rogers and the philosophies of existentialism and phenomenology. It adopts a holistic approach to human existence through investigations of meaning, values, freedom, tragedy, personal responsibility, human potential, spirituality, and self-actualization.

Conceptual Origins

The humanistic approach has its roots in phenomenological and existentialist thought (see Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre). Eastern philosophy and psychology also play a central role in humanistic psychology, as well as Judao-Christian philosophies of personalism, as each shares similar concerns about the nature of human existence and consciousness. (For further information on influential figures in personalism, see: Emmanuel Mounier, Gabriel Marcel, Denis de Rougemont, Jacques Maritain, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Max Scheler, Karol Wojtyla, Borden Parker Browne, George H. Howison, Edgar Sheffield Brightman, Peter A. Bertocci, W. Gordon Allport, and Martin Luther King, Jr..)

It is also sometimes understood within the context of the three different forces of psychology: behaviorism, psychoanalysis and humanism. Behaviorism grew out of Ivan Pavlov's work with the conditioned reflex, and laid the foundations for academic psychology in the United States associated with the names of John B. Watson and B.F. Skinner. This school was later called the science of behavior. Abraham Maslow later gave behaviorism the name "the second force". The "first force" came out of Freud's research of psychoanalysis, and the psychologies of Alfred Adler, Erik Erikson, Carl Jung, Erich Fromm, Karen Horney, Otto Rank, Melanie Klein, Harry Stack Sullivan, and others. These theorists and practitioners, although basing their observations on extensive clinical data, primarily focused on the depth or "unconscious" aspects of human existence.

In the late 1950s, psychologists concerned with advancing a more holistic vision of psychology convened two meetings in Detroit, Michigan. These psychologists, including Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Clark Moustakas, were interested in founding a professional association dedicated to a psychology that focused on uniquely human issues, such as the self, self-actualization, health, hope, love, creativity, nature, being, becoming, individuality, and meaning--that is, a concrete understanding of human existence.

Development of The Field

These preliminary meetings eventually led to other developments, which culminated in the description of humanistic psychology as a recognizable "third force" in psychology (along with behaviorism and psychoanalysis). Significant developments included the formation of the

Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP) in 1961 and the launch of the Journal of Humanistic Psychology (originally "The Phoenix") in 1961.

Subsequently, graduate programs in Humanistic Psychology at institutions of higher learning grew in number and enrollment. In 1971, humanistic psychology as a field was recognized by the American Psychological Association (APA) and granted its own division (Division 32) within the APA. Division 32 publishes its own academic journal called The Humanistic Psychologist.

The major theorists considered to have prepared the ground for Humanistic Psychology are Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and Rollo May. Maslow was heavily influenced by Kurt Goldstein during their years together at Brandeis University. Psychoanalytic writers also influenced humanistic psychology. Maslow himself famously acknowledged his "indebtedness to Freud" in *Towards a Psychology of Being*. Other psychoanalytic influences include the work of Wilhelm Reich, who discussed an essentially 'good', healthy core self and *Character Analysis* (1933), and Carl Gustav Jung's mythological and archetypal emphasis. Other noteworthy inspirations for and leaders of the movement include Roberto Assagioli, Gordon Allport, Medard Boss, Martin Buber (close to Jacob L. Moreno), James Bugental, Victor Frankl, Erich Fromm, Hans-Werner Gessmann, Amedeo Giorgi, Kurt Goldstein, Sidney Jourard, R. D. Laing, Clark Moustakas, Lewis Mumford, Fritz Perls, Anthony Sutich, Thomas Szasz, Kirk J. Schneider, and Ken Wilber.

A human science view is not opposed to quantitative methods, but, following Edmund Husserl: 1) favors letting the methods be derived from the subject matter and not uncritically adopting the methods of natural science and 2) advocates for methodological pluralism. Consequently, much of the subject matter of psychology lends itself to qualitative approaches (e.g., the lived experience of grief) , and quantitative methods are mainly appropriate when something can be counted without leveling the phenomena (e.g., the length of time spent crying).

Basis

Humanistic Psychology is so named due to its core belief in the basic goodness present in and respect for humanity. Its core is founded upon existential psychology, or the realization and understanding of one's existence and social responsibility. The two psychologists, Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow initiated the movement with this new perspective on understanding people's personality and improving their overall life satisfaction.

When war broke out in the 1960s, the world felt compelled to better understand the nature of humanity. Humanistic theory provides an understandable mechanism for examining an individual's need for conflict in order to create peace. This simplistic theory has become a favorite and popular topic throughout self-help literature. Additionally, the struggle for mankind to gain greater understanding and meaning for life and existence is a timeless cornerstone conflict in

entertainment and literature.

The premise behind humanistic psychology is simple. So simple, in fact, that naysayers believe it to be excessively simple. Humanists adhere to these beliefs:

The present is the most significant aspect of someone. As a result, humanists emphasize the here and now instead of examining the past or attempting to predict the future.

To be mentally healthy, individuals must take personal responsibility for their actions, regardless if those actions are positive or negative.

Each person, simply by being, is inherently worthy. While any given action may be negative, these actions do not cancel out their value as a person.

The ultimate goal of living is to attain personal growth and understanding. Through constant self-improvement and self-understanding can an individual ever be truly happy.

Abraham Maslow provided the best known and mostly widely understood precept in humanistic psychology. Abraham Maslow believed that Watson and the other behaviorists' ideas about control were lacking. He saw human life as more than simply external reinforcement, disputing the assumption that humanity was born without value or direction.

When Maslow studied psychology, the prevalent ideas were psychoanalysis and behaviorism. These theories were covered by most courses and a great deal of energy was exerted for each psychologist to figure out the theory aspiring psychologists would subscribe to. Maslow did not follow either of these paths.

Maslow condemned behaviorism, eventually taking the same perspective with Freud's works as well. Even though Maslow accepted the existence of an unconscious being within us, Maslow refuted Freud's idea that the bulk of our being is hidden far from our consciousness. Maslow purported that humanity is aware of motivation and drives on the whole. Without life's obstacles, all of humanity would become healthy psychologically, attaining a deep self-understanding and acceptance of society and the world around them. Maslow reinforced his energy on realizing the positive aspects of mankind, while Freud saw mostly negativity. One might summarize the distinction between humanism and psychoanalytic thought in this way - psychoanalysis is founded upon acceptance determinism, or acceptance of aspects of our lives outside of control, while humanistic thought bases itself on the concept of free will.

Maslow's best known contribution to Humanistic psychology is his Needs Triangle/Pyramid. Maslow's Needs Hierarchy is frequently used to sum up the humanistic psychology belief system. The fundamental premise of his hierarchy is that everyone is born with specific needs. If we do not meet those base needs, we are unable to survive and focus upward within the hierarchy. The first stratum consists of physiological needs or survival needs. Unable to obtain oxygen, sleep, water, and food, all else is irrelevant.

After we meet these needs, we can shift our focus to the next stratum, the need for security and safety. When pursuing safety needs, we attempt to secure safety in others and yearn to create an environment that protects us, keeping us free from harm. Until these goals are met, it is unlikely that someone would consider higher order needs, and their growth is then stifled.

When someone feels safe and secure, we attempt to build friendships and establish a sense of belonging to a greater whole. Maslow's third level of needs, the social needs of belonging and love, focus on our desire to be belong to a group and have a place in a larger whole. Meeting social needs get us one step closer to the top of the triangle -- the fourth level: esteem needs. Those attempting to fulfill esteem needs channel their energy on respect from others, self-esteem, self-respect, and gaining recognition for our accomplishments in life. We push further and further to excel in our careers, to expand our knowledge, and to constantly increase our self-esteem.

The final level in the hierarchy is called the need for self-actualization. According to Maslow, many people may be in this level but very few, if anybody, ever master it. Self-actualization refers to a complete understanding of the self. To be self-actualized means to truly know who you are, where you belong in the greater society, and to feel like you are accomplishing all that you are meant to be. It means to no longer feel shame or guilt, or even hate, but to accept the world and see human nature as inherently good.

Counseling and Therapy

Humanistic psychology includes several approaches to counseling and therapy. Among the earliest approaches we find the developmental theory of Abraham Maslow, emphasizing a hierarchy of needs and motivations; the existential psychology of Rollo May acknowledging human choice and the tragic aspects of human existence; and the person-centered or client-centered therapy of Carl Rogers, which is centered on the clients' capacity for self-direction and understanding of his/her own development.

Other approaches to humanistic counseling and therapy include Gestalt therapy, humanistic psychotherapy, depth therapy, holistic health, encounter groups, sensitivity training, marital and family therapies, body work, and the existential psychotherapy of Medard Boss. Existential-integrative psychotherapy, developed by Kirk Schneider (2008), is a relatively new development within humanistic and existential therapy.

Self-help is also included in humanistic psychology: Sheila Ernst and Lucy Goodison have described using some of the main humanistic approaches in self-help groups. Co-counseling, which is a purely self-help approach, is regarded as coming within humanistic psychology (see John Rowan's Guide to Humanistic Psychology). Humanistic theory has had a strong influence on other forms of popular therapy, including Harvey Jackins' Re-evaluation Counseling and the work

of Carl Rogers.

Humanistic psychology tends to look beyond the medical model of psychology in order to open up a nonpathologizing view of the person. This usually implies that the therapist downplays the pathological aspects of a person's life in favour of the healthy aspects. A key ingredient in this approach is the meeting between therapist and client and the possibilities for dialogue. The aim of much humanistic therapy is to help the client approach a stronger and more healthy sense of self, also called self-actualization. All this is part of humanistic psychology's motivation to be a science of human experience, focusing on the actual lived experience of persons.

Humanistic Psychology and Social Issues

Although social transformation may not have been the primary focus in the past, a large percentage of contemporary humanistic psychologists currently investigate pressing social, cultural, and gender issues. Even the earliest writers who were associated with and inspired psychological humanism explored topics as diverse as the political nature of "normal" and everyday experience (RD Laing), the disintegration of the capacity to love in modern consumerist society (Erich Fromm), the growing technological dominance over human life (Medard Boss), and the question of evil (Rollo May-Carl Rogers debate). In addition, Maureen O'Hara, who worked with both Carl Rogers and Paolo Freire, has pointed to a convergence between the two thinkers given their distinct but mutually related focus on developing critical consciousness of situations which oppress and dehumanize.

Criticism of Humanistic Psychology

Critics of the field point out that it tends to ignore social change research. Isaac Prilleltensky, a self-described radical who champions community and feminist psychology, has argued for years that humanistic psychology inadvertently contributes to systemic injustice.

Further, it has been argued that the early incarnations of humanistic psychology lacked a cumulative empirical base, and the architects of the movement endorsed an "unembarrassed denial of human reciprocity and community." However, according to contemporary humanistic thinkers, humanistic psychology need not be understood to promote such ideas as narcissism, egotism, or selfishness.

The association of humanistic discourse with narcissistic and overly optimistic worldviews is a misreading of humanistic theory. In their response to Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000), Bohart and Greening (2001) note that along with pieces on self-actualization and individual fulfillment, humanistic psychologists have also published papers on a wide range of social issues and topics, such as the promotion of international peace and understanding, awareness of the holocaust, the

reduction of violence, and the promotion of social welfare and justice for all.

Criticisms that humanistic psychology lacks an "empirical base" have tended to rely on allegedly "restricted views" of what constitutes "empirical," an uncritical adoption of natural science methods (as opposed to human science methods), and an outright neglect of Rogers' own empirical work. To the contrary, humanistic psychology has a long history of empirical research, including but not limited to the work of Maslow, Amedeo Giorgi and David Elkins. In fact, humanistic psychology research traces its origins all the way back to American psychology pioneer William James' masterpiece, "Varieties of Religious Experience"

Humanistic Psychology: Against Scientific Basics

At its onset, Humanistic theory was not researched easily. To start with, since the fundamental belief of Humanism is in the goodness of people, treatment should focus on the positive, instead of negative. This leaves very few tests upon which to build the case of Humanism. Then, through assessment, the assessor is essentially trying to say that the tester knows more about the client's emotion, thought, and behavior. To do something so presumptuous is a flagrant contradiction of the belief principles of Humanism.

As a result, most theorists, specifically behaviorists, refuted humanistic theory since it was not easily researched. However, as with psychoanalysis, it was possible to aggregate meaningful data on the effectiveness of applying Humanistic theories. Actually, just as with psychoanalysis, innovative testing needed to be designed to accentuate the exact theory and the intended application of the theory. Psychoanalysis use tests like TAT and Rorschach -- humanists use the Q-Sort.

Conclusion

Humanistic Theory Strengths

Just as with every theory, some find humanistic psychology to be relevant, as others can only see the flaws. A couple of humanistic theory's strengths are the focus on the positivity and goodness of humanity, as well as the free will related to change. Contrasting Freud's and biological approaches, focusing on the belief that human behavior and cognition are causally determined by prior events and actions, such that we lack self-control, Maslow and Humanistic psychology believe that the individual is quite powerful.

Another strength of humanistic theory is how easily many aspects of the theory integrate with other schools of thought. A number of therapists adopt humanistic undertones when working with their clients. While the individual may believe that humanistic theory doesn't cover the distance, they

understand the benefit of the core values and beliefs in changing people's lives for the better.

Ultimately, humanism has benefits which carry over into a number of other professions. In a business class, you will probably cover Maslow's hierarchy. When studying finance or economics, the course will no doubt cover the concept of moving up financially and physically, to eventually become more enlightened and aware of who we are and our place in the world. This principle is similarly present in other professions such as criminology, history, and literature, since the core of humanistic thought rings true in everything that deals with what it means to be considered human.

Humanistic Theory Weaknesses

For every yin, there is also the yang. Humanistic theory has its share of flaws as well. The most significant criticism of humanistic psychology centers around its lack of specific approaches to treatment aimed at precise problems. Since the core belief behind Humanistic theory is that of free will, it is very complicated to both innovate a technique for treatment as well as a means to study the efficacy of this treatment technique.

Additionally, it is believed that humanistic theory falls is unable to help people with severe personality or mental health disorders. While Carl Rogers' Theory of Personality may have positive effects on a minor aberration, using it as treatment for schizophrenics is laughable.

Lastly, humanistic theory applies some human nature generalizations which are widely believed to be complete. Are all people good at the core of their being, or are some people just not there? Can we effectively position that Maslow's needs hierarchy, as explained, applies to everyone universally? Or is it possible that each individual can impose their own belief system or their order of attainment, or even their very definition?

Why is it that some individuals appear to consciously take negative alternatives while positive choices are right in front of them? These doubts haunt humanistic psychology and the complexity associated with performing measurable research of the theory further exacerbate the issue.

However, regardless of these trials, humanistic theory is incorporated into nearly every opposing school of psychotherapy and improvement of the human condition. It is widely believed that treatment with humanistic undertones creates a nice environment for positive change. While, alone, humanistic theory may be insufficient; the groundwork it lays might be a necessity for to effect significant changes of personality.