

## A Brief Review of Humanistic Psychology

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journal or publication title	New directions
number	37
page range	11-19
year	2019-03-31
URL	<a href="http://id.nii.ac.jp/1476/00006776/">http://id.nii.ac.jp/1476/00006776/</a>

# A Brief Review of Humanistic Psychology

Brian Cullen

This article presents a short summary of the development of humanistic psychology and describes the work of key figures in the field.

## 1. A Reaction to Psychoanalysis and Behaviourism

Humanistic psychology emerged during the 1950s primarily as a reaction to the schools of psychoanalysis and behaviorism which held sway over the field of psychology at the time. This third movement in psychology, as it was soon called, criticized psychoanalysis for many reasons including its overly strong focus on the negative sides of human personality and its emphasis on the uncovering of childhood memories rather than helping people to cope effectively with present circumstances. Behaviourism was also seen as having an over-negative focus, in particular because of its failure to take account of the human will and agency involved in people's actions.

Humanistic psychology can be seen as the early form of what is now known as positive psychology because it regarded people as basically good, with a natural instinct to make themselves and the world better. In contrast to behaviourism and psychoanalysis, it recognized that people's behavior is not wholly determined by their childhood or their environments, but that they have free will. Methodologically, the humanistic philosophers also differed from behaviouralists in two important ways. First, they believed that human behavior can only be properly understood by studying humans - not animals, and second, they recognized the uniqueness of each person and drew on the older philosophical approach of phenomenology to suggest that psychology should focus on the case of each individual rather than the average performance of groups.

Rather than concentrating on people's problems and mental illnesses, humanistic psychology aims to focus on positive aspects of human behavior and cognition in order to help people achieve their potential and maximize their well-being. It stresses the importance of growth and self-actualization for each person in their own unique way. A fundamental belief is that people are innately good and that both mental and social problems result from people deviating from this natural tendency. People's behaviour is continually shaped by their attempts to find new ways to grow and to become better.

The sections below summarize some of the key figures who have shaped humanistic psychology.

## 1. Otto Rank

Otto Rank was a member of the inner circle of Freud's psychoanalytic research group in Vienna at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was initially a very strong proponent in spreading and extending Freud's ideas, in particular the view that all emotional experience and neurotic disorder could be analyzed as being derived from libido and sexual tensions. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the role of the analyst was to make the unconscious conscious through expert interpretation of dreams and personal history. This interpretation provided by the analyst supposedly gave the patient the cognitive insight necessary to subdue the unconscious desire, or in Freud's terms: letting the ego reduce the thrust of the id.

Rank eventually rebelled against Freud's reduction of all emotional experience to the sexual, and instead of looking to childhood memories, Rank began to suggest in his writing that emotions result not from suppressed past events, but how events are perceived in the present moment. In Rank's view, neurotics live too much in the past and are not sufficiently aware or open to present circumstances. By becoming more aware and being willing to allow the self to grow, Rank showed how humans can continue to adapt and develop with circumstances over the whole course

of a lifetime. In this way, he shifted the responsibility of change within therapy from the therapist to the client and presaged the later work of person-centered therapy and agency. He also criticized the Freudian analyst's deliberately emotionless approach to therapy and opened the way for future therapists to be more connected to their clients in a manner closer to natural conversational style.

## **2. Abraham Maslow**

Maslow is often considered to be the father of humanistic psychology. He is best known for his pyramid-shaped hierarchy of needs which places the basic physiological needs of food and safety at the base of the pyramid and higher needs such as belonging and esteem higher up. At the peak of Maslow's pyramid is what he terms as self-actualization which he regarded as the ultimate goal of each human being's life. The concept of self-actualization can be summarized by his aspirational words: "What a man can be, he must be" (Maslow, 1954, p. 91). Maslow's initial view was that all of the lower levels of the pyramid must be completely mastered before self-actualization could be achieved, but later he recognized that all of these human needs are present at all times. In other words, even a fully self-actualized person's behavior can easily be shaped by hunger or fatigue or loneliness. Later work by others (Geller, 1982) has pointed out the shortcomings of the concept of self-actualization describing it as having an overly Western-world ideological bias and being unworkable and unmeasurable in practice as a research construct. In his later work, Maslow also criticized his own earlier conception of self-actualization (Maslow, 1991) suggesting that the goal of human life was actually self-transcendence which he defined as a focus on things beyond the self, for example altruism, spiritual awakening, or liberation from egocentricity. These are again concepts that have found their way into humanistic psychology as it exists today.

Despite the shortcomings of the concept of self-actualization, Maslow deserves great credit for being one of the first researchers to seriously push

a psychological agenda which focused on the positive potential of humans rather than their negative afflictions. His work also includes considerable research into creativity, peak experiences, and personality and his influence on the field is still felt strongly today.

### 3. Victor Frankl

Frankl is best known for his book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Frankl, 1992), which describes his experience of being a Jewish prisoner at several concentration camps during the second world war. In this short volume, Frankl not only manages to give a realistic and harrowing picture of life in these camps, but also uses the narrative to introduce the main ideas of his psychological theory called Logotherapy, described in more detail in *The Will to Meaning* (Frankl, 2014). The name comes from the Greek word, *Logos*, which is translated into English as 'meaning.' Logotherapy postulates that the primary drive for humans is to find meaning in their lives – known as the will to meaning – in contrast to Freud who suggested that humans have a will to pleasure and Adler's idea of a will to strive for superiority.

Logotherapy had a strong influence on humanistic psychology because it considered a human to be “a being whose main concern consists in fulfilling a meaning, rather than in the mere gratification and satisfaction of drives and instincts, or in merely reconciling the conflicting claims of id, ego and superego, or in the mere adaptation and adjustment to society and environment.”

Even in a place of horrific conditions such as a concentration camp, prisoners were trying to create meaning in their lives, and Frankl suggests that those who successfully achieved this were more likely to survive the ordeal. He describes how this meaning could be found in various ways: by vividly reliving pleasant memories of the *past*, by finding joy in the *present* moment through tiny things such as having a work foreman who was not brutal, or by imagining better *future* times such as Frankl picturing himself giving lectures about his wartime experiences to an appreciative future

audience. In contrast, those who were unable to find meaning “ceased living for the future.... the whole structure of his inner life changed; signs of decay set in” which led to complete apathy and often death within a few days. The ideas of logotherapy have found their way into modern psychological practices such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and mindfulness.

#### 4. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Csikszentmihalyi is best known for his book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) which takes a similar approach to Maslow’s research into peak experiences. It contributes to humanistic psychology by looking at the functioning of high-performing people or at the peak moments of average people. Csikszentmihalyi uses the word *flow* to describe the psychological state of people in these moments when a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment. Flow can cause a distortion in one's sense of space and time. Flow can happen in almost any activity including teaching, studying, playing music, playing sport, or everyday clerical work. Csikszentmihalyi notes that most enjoyable activities are not natural but instead demand an effort that initially one is reluctant to make. But once the interaction starts to provide feedback to the person's skills, it begins to be intrinsically rewarding. This is an important finding that highlights the role of self-responsibility, determination, or what is now often called *grit* in carrying out any long-term activity even when it is initially difficult (Duckworth, Peterson, & Kelly, 2007). When a person perseveres, flow means that almost any activity can eventually become its own reward.

#### 5. Carl Rogers

Along with Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers is also sometimes referred to as the founder of the humanistic psychology movement. In contrast to traditional Freudian psychotherapy which generally featured the psychotherapist directing the session and authoritatively interpreting the

client's thoughts, dreams, and personal history, Rogers used a non-directive therapeutic approach which he termed person-centered (Rogers, 1995). This was based on his belief that the best way to understand and help another person was to attempt to see the world from his or her perspective, a view that has now become so commonplace and integrated into modern therapy and other fields that Rogers' innovations are often forgotten. Rogers' central concept of *unconditional positive regard* involved accepting a person without any negative judgment of that person's worth, a concept that almost any modern counsellor or therapist would readily agree to.

Rogers' contributed to humanistic psychology in many ways including the recognition that a healthy psyche requires a person to continually be aware of experience and respond to it appropriately in a way that allows the self to be maintained and to grow. Psychological problems can arise when a person does not allow awareness and integration of significant life experiences into the self, so a key role of the therapist is to facilitate a space where these experiences can be brought into awareness and integrated safely. His ideas are now widely seen in action today in the fields of therapy, counselling, healthcare, education, social work, and beyond.

## 6. Martin Seligman

Seligman is generally considered to be the father of positive psychology which is a modern offspring of humanistic psychology. The research which he was initially best known for is the area of learned helplessness. When a person or an animal perceive themselves as powerless in a situation, they eventually give up rather than fight for control. Although they initially had a will and the strength to change, this got worn down by the constraints of the situation and eventually they learned to be helpless. Seligman showed that this was commonly the root of depression and his research led to prevention and treatment of depression.

Seligman awoke to the possibilities of psychology focusing on the positive rather than the negative when he shouted at his five-year-old daughter and she told him not to be so grumpy. She said that when she turned five years

old on her previous birthday, she decided not to whine anymore, and if she could give up whining then he could give up being grumpy. This made him realize that human mood is created at least partially by the habitual filters through which we see any given situation. If we expect to see problems or to be unhappy, we are likely to find that to be true, whereas if we expect to see potential and happiness, that is also likely to be true.

From the 1990s, Seligman, who was then president of the American Psychological Association, called for and led research programs to investigate the effect of deliberate focusing on the positive aspects of life. For example, he discovered that keeping a simple gratitude diary was a powerful way to reduce depression. Other techniques that he championed are summarized by the mnemonic PERMA (Seligman, 2012).

- **Positive emotions:** Take time to try to deliberately experience joy, gratitude, optimism, pride, and other positive emotions on a regular basis.
- **Engagement:** Become more engaged in everyday activities through mindfulness and greater awareness.
- **Relationships:** Cultivate good relationships at home and work.
- **Meaning:** Try to find meaning in your life's activities.
- **Achievement:** Set meaningful goals and work towards them.

## **7. Strengths and Criticisms**

While humanistic psychology has added much to our understanding of people and how to improve therapy, education, work, and other spheres of life, many limitations have also been pointed out. For example, it has underestimated the importance of biology and genetics and how our body chemistries have a powerful impact on behavior and mood. In a similar vein, in distinguishing humans from animals, it has failed to take account of the fact that our shared DNA, especially in our close primate relatives, correctly accounts for much of human behavior. Even experimentation in more distant animals such as mice has consistently proven that there is a lot of common ground between animals and humans. In addition, while people

obviously do have free will, it is also vital to take account of the social and environmental pressures that influence people's behaviours. Finally, humanistic psychology was developed in the context of Western culture with its emphasis on individual freedom and autonomy. In more group-oriented cultures such as is often found in Asia, many of the aspirations and findings of humanistic psychology are not necessarily as well supported.

On the other hand, humanistic psychology has added much to our understanding. It has raised awareness of the role of agency in human behavior and given us a certain freedom from the control of our unconscious minds and genes. It has highlighted the importance of personal ideals and the uniqueness of each human life in a way that can enrich people's lives. The qualitative research methodology that is commonly used has also provided genuine insight and a more holistic view of what is important to people. Since it is now more mainstream and unstigmatized, it is now more acceptable for people to foster their potential and take control of their own mental health. Overall, humanistic psychology has made major practical and theoretical contributions to therapy, education, and other spheres of life, and it is likely to continue to develop new useful insights to support in the years to come.

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