

THE HUMANISTIC APPROACH

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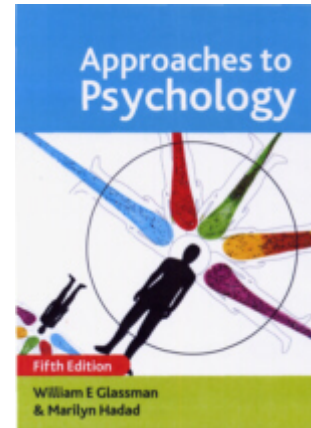
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Introduction to the Humanistic Approach

The Humanistic Approach began in response to concerns by therapists against perceived limitations of Psychodynamic theories, especially psychoanalysis. Individuals like Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow felt existing (psychodynamic) theories failed to adequately address issues like the meaning of behaviour, and the nature of healthy growth. However, the result was not simply new variations on psychodynamic theory, but rather a fundamentally new approach.

There are several factors which distinguish the Humanistic Approach from other approaches within psychology, including the emphasis on subjective meaning, a rejection of **determinism**, and a concern for positive growth rather than pathology. While one might argue that some psychodynamic theories provide a vision of healthy growth (including Jung's concept of **individuation**), the other characteristics distinguish the Humanistic Approach from every other approach within psychology (and sometimes lead theorists from other approaches to say the Humanistic Approach is not a science at all). Most psychologists believe that behaviour can only be understood objectively (by an impartial observer), but the humanists argue that this results in concluding that an individual is incapable of understanding their own behaviour – a view which they see as both paradoxical and dangerous to well-being. Instead, humanists like Rogers argue that the meaning of behaviour is essentially personal and subjective; they further argue that accepting this idea is not unscientific, because ultimately all individuals are subjective: what makes science reliable is not that scientists are purely objective, but that the nature of observed events can be agreed upon by different observers (a process Rogers calls **intersubjective verification**).

The issues underlying the Humanistic Approach, and its differences from other approaches, are discussed more fully in the text, but the sources below provide useful

supplementary information. One point worth noting: if you want to fully grasp the nature of the Humanistic Approach, you cannot consider it in abstract terms. Instead, you must consider if and how the ideas connect to your own experience – for that is how the meaning of behaviour is derived!

Resources

About Humanistic Psychology

Introductory discussion of history and nature of the humanistic approach, by the Association for Humanistic Psychology

A Guide to Humanistic Psychology

Extensive introduction, broken into chapters by topic, by John Rowan, Assoc. for Humanistic Psychology; chapters include bibliographies for further reading.

Carl Rogers

Carl Rogers was not only one of the founders of the Humanistic Approach, but also arguably the most influential therapist in the 20th century: a number of surveys, including several done after his death, found that more therapists cited Rogers as a major influence on their thinking and clinical practice than any other person in psychology (including Freud). To understand this, one must know something about Rogers as a person, as well as his theoretical ideas.

I never met him, but have seen several videos of him, and have read a number of accounts, both biographical and anecdotal, by individuals who know him well. Consistently, what comes across is a person who was caring and respectful of others, a man who found value in all people, yet was humble about his own achievements – in many ways, he represented the **fully functioning person** which his theory describes!

In terms of his theory, there are two fundamental ideas which are particularly worth noting. (For a more complete discussion, see the text.) First, Rogers talked about healthy development in terms of how the individual perceived their own being. A healthy individual will tend to see **congruence** between their sense of who they are (**self**) and who they feel they should be (**ideal self**). While no one tends to experience perfect congruence at all times, the relative degree of congruence is an indicator of health. Some researchers have tried to measure congruence by using a self-assessment technique called a **Q-Sort**. (If you are interested in exploring this, click [here](#) for a version of a Q-sort I've created.)

The second fundamental idea is Rogers's concept of the **conditions for healthy growth**, and the role of a therapist in fostering healthy growth. Through a process Rogers called person-centred therapy, the therapist seeks to provide empathy, openness, and unconditional positive regard. These conditions for growth are discussed further in the text; for information on person-centred therapy, see the links below. (One

note about person-centred therapy: originally, Rogers called his technique non-directive therapy, based on the concept that the therapist is simply a 'mirror' who reflects the individual's thoughts and feelings. As his own research showed, no therapist is truly non-directive – and if they were, it would likely be poor therapy, as the following [joke](#) illustrates!)

Resources

Carl Rogers

Biography and other material, on site maintained by his daughter, Natalie Rogers (who is also trained as a therapist).

Carl Rogers and Education

Site providing biographical information as well as examination of Rogers's ideas about education.

Introduction to Person-Centred Counselling

A clear overview by Dr. Greg Mulhauser, on CounsellingResources.com.

Abraham Maslow

Like Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow is widely regarded as one of the founders of the Humanistic Approach. While less influential among therapists than Rogers, Maslow may actually be better known to the general public, because of his interest in applying psychological principles to areas like behaviour in business settings. In this regard, his **hierarchy of needs** has been a basic concept in human resources and organisational behaviour for several decades.

Maslow coined the term "the Third Force" to describe the Humanistic Approach, to emphasise how it differed from the Psychodynamic and Behaviourist Approaches, which dominated psychology (at least in North America) in the 1950s. His theory emphasises motivation as the key to understanding human behaviour (an emphasis which is somewhat reminiscent of Freud's theory, though the two models focus on very different types of motives). Nonetheless, it becomes the basis of a theory of personality (as discussed in the text, talking about motives implies a *person* who experiences those motives!), and ends up describing the characteristics of healthy growth in ways that are very similar to Rogers's "fully functioning person".

One difference between Maslow and Rogers is the emphasis that Maslow gave to **peak experiences**. Peak experiences are moments in life which take us beyond our ordinary perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. Typically, the individual feels energised, more 'alive'. In some ways, peak experiences are similar to the Zen concept of satori (literally 'enlightenment'), which, like a peak experience, comes unexpectedly, and transforms the individual's understanding of themselves and the world. Because of the 'mystical' nature

of peak experiences, some psychologists are less comfortable with Maslow's theory than with Rogers's, which uses concepts more easily related to 'mainstream' psychology. Possibly, this accounts for Maslow being viewed as less influential among therapists. In any case, there is no doubt that Maslow's ideas about motivation have become widely known and used, as the links below help to illustrate.

Resources

[Abraham Maslow.com](#)

Provides full listing of his publications, and links to other Maslow-related sites.

[People and Discoveries: Abraham Maslow](#)

Brief biography from *A Science Odyssey*, PBS series on famous discoverers.

[Abraham Maslow](#)

Chapter from Dr. George Boeree's online personality textbook.

[Revisiting Maslow](#)

Discussion of relevance of Maslow's ideas for education and living; part of New Horizons for Learning website.

Existential Psychology

As in many areas of psychology, there are close linkages between the Humanistic Approach and philosophy. For example, Rogers's concept of the **phenomenal field** as the basis of defining the *self* can be linked to the ideas of phenomenological philosophers like Edmund Husserl. Similarly, the *existentialist* tradition began with European philosophers like Soren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre. While its roots extend back to the turn of the 20th century (and some would say even earlier), it really gained momentum as a result of World War II, whose devastation and destruction gave a sense of immediacy to questions about the purpose of living. (For example, Albert Camus, a leading existentialist writer, was a member of the French Resistance.) Existentialists start from the premise that there is no absolute meaning to life, and hence that life in a purely rational sense is without purpose. Interestingly, however, from this bleak beginning, many arrive at interpretations that nonetheless affirm a value to life.

Asking about what life means to an individual provides an overlapping area of concern between existentialism and humanistic psychology, since the humanists seek to identify a positive model for human growth. As a result, while some psychologists prefer one term over the other, the theories often share a focus on similar kinds of issues, especially the questions of what an individual finds meaningful in life, and how individuals deal with the prospect of death. Among the psychologists who have developed theories related to existential ideas are Rollo May, Ernest Becker, and Viktor

Frankl. Of these, Frankl is arguably the best known to the general public; his best-known book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, went through multiple editions and reprintings, and was translated into dozens of languages. Frankl, who began as a doctor and therapist in Vienna, was a prisoner in various Nazi concentration camps during the war, and it was partly his exposure to the horrors of the camps that contributed to his existentialist orientation. To learn more about him and other existential psychologists, and how their ideas relate to humanistic theories more generally, see the text or the following links.

Resources

Meaningful Therapy

Basic introduction to existential forms of therapy, with links to material on particular therapists/theorists, including Frankl; part of International Network on Personal Meaning site, in Vancouver, Canada.

Viktor Frankl Institute

Official website for Institute founded by Frankl; contains biography, videos, and other material on Frankl and his work.

Viktor Frankl

Biography, discussion of Frankl's ideas, and large set of links to other sites on Frankl and existentialism; by Boston psychotherapist Tracy Marks.

The Existential Primer

Provides a variety of material related to existentialism, especially its philosophical origins, by a non-psychologist, Christopher Scott Wyatt.

Extending the Humanistic Approach

In recent years, a number of initiatives have appeared which, while influenced significantly by humanistic ideas and theories, have in new directions. Perhaps the most significant is **positive psychology**, a term coined by Dr. Martin Seligman when he was President of the American Psychological Association in 2000. Positive psychology, like the humanistic approach, focusses on enhancing human potential--but embraces research methods (e.g., surveys, group data) which humanists have traditionally avoided. Another area influenced by the humanistic approach has been **coaching psychology**. While the term originated in "personal coaching" in sports, it more generally refers to a focus on enhancing individual potential, and the field has gradually become a specific area within many psychology associations.

Resources

Positive Psychology Center--Website for Seligman's research group at the University of Pennsylvania; provides a variety of information and resources.

Authentic Happiness--An offshoot of Seligman's work (the title comes from one of his books), but more focussed on providing resources for individuals (including a variety of self-test questionnaires).

Special Group in Coaching Psychology--Site for section of British Psychological Society; includes a variety of background information, as well as on-line articles.

Applying the Concepts: Maslow's Hierarchy in the Workplace

Several researchers in the 1950s recognised the practical importance of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs to the working world. It was not difficult to establish that for nonmanagement workers, jobs mainly fulfilled the basic physical and security needs of the individual: if the work is done, the worker is paid and more-or-less assured of being paid for subsequent work. Higher order needs, such as social, esteem and self-actualisation needs were not considered. Lyman Porter (1961) at the University of California at Berkeley, suggested that higher needs might be of more concern on the management level of an organisation. He saw that people in most organisations received promotions from one job to another based on their technical qualifications, but nothing else. That is, it was assumed that because an individual could do the job, that job was the best one for him or her. There was no indication that anyone regarded the psychological satisfaction with a job as being an important factor. Consequently, people might sometimes be promoted out of jobs that gave them satisfaction into jobs that were less satisfying for them, potentially rendering them less effective in their work. Porter realised that for individual satisfaction and for organisational efficiency, it was necessary to discover how people perceived their jobs in terms of need satisfaction, as Maslow had outlined. Knowing this might allow organisations to match people to jobs that they were not only qualified for, but which would give them the most satisfaction as well.

In order to study this, Porter sent a fixed alternative survey to 228 people in three companies. These people worked at different managerial levels, from bottom level supervisors or foremen up to middle level management who were just below vice presidency or major department head. The survey studied 15 characteristics or qualities that Porter thought were connected with management positions and were relevant to Maslow's need hierarchy. For example, to determine whether esteem needs were being met by the job, Porter asked about the prestige of a managerial position; to determine whether social needs were being met by the job, he asked about the opportunities to develop friendships on the job; to determine whether self-actualisation needs were being met by the job, he asked about feelings of self-fulfillment derived from the individual's working position. The respondents to the survey were asked to indicate on a 7-point scale (with 1 indicating the lowest amount and 7 indicating the highest amount) first, how much of that quality was connected with the individual's management position; second, how much of that quality should be connected with the individual's management position; and third, how important that quality was to the respondent. So questions on the survey might look like this:

The feeling of self-esteem a person gets from being in my management position:

a) How much is there now? (min) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 (max)

b) How much should there be? (min) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 (max)

c) How important is this to me? (min) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 (max)

Of the 228 people who were given the survey, 139 (61%) filled it out. While Porter attempted to give the surveys to a representative sample of low to middle management personnel, it cannot be claimed that the individuals who actually returned the survey constitute such a sample, so the results of this study must be interpreted with caution. Porter found that among these respondents, there was no difference in the amount of fulfillment of social needs, and that esteem needs are more often satisfied in middle management than in low management levels, not surprisingly. But in both low and middle management, the respondents indicated that self-actualisation needs are of great importance to them, but there were few opportunities for these needs to be fulfilled at work. It seems, then, that among the people who answered this survey, at least, their work did not offer them a sense of self-fulfillment, or an opportunity for personal growth and development or a feeling of worthwhile accomplishment. It would be expected that in higher management, the level at which policy decisions are made, there may be a greater chance to find areas of self-actualisation.

What are the implications of this study? While we must be careful in making conclusions since a survey cannot demonstrate a causal relationship and since we have no way of knowing whether the sample was indeed representative of the population, we may still make some tentative conclusions. Most of us spend almost 30% of our lives at work, and yet this work may not give us the opportunity to pursue what we find important: self-actualisation. Our deficiency needs may be met to a greater or lesser extent, but our growth needs may not. What if our work gave us opportunity to fulfill growth needs, though? What if the organisation we work for allowed us to help make the policy decisions that would affect the well-being of ourselves and others, for example? Orpen (1998) has found that among the respondents to his survey, job satisfaction is indeed greater when there is more opportunity for such decision-making. Did his respondents feel greater satisfaction because this gave them a chance to pursue self-actualisation? We don't know, but maybe.

References

Orpen, C. (1998). The effects of organisational centrality on employee success and satisfaction. *Social Behaviour and Personality*, 26. 85-88.

Porter, L. (1961). A study of perceived need satisfactions in bottom and middle management jobs. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 45. 1-10.

Publications Related to the Humanistic Approach

Journal of Humanistic Psychology

Published by the Association for Humanistic Psychology; has monthly contents, and searchable archive of contents, but no open access to articles.

The Humanistic Psychologist

Journal of APA Division on Humanistic Psychology; contains article titles listed by author, but no online archive.

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