



Humanistic Psychology: Emphasizing Self, Freedom, and Human Potential

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Abstract

Humanistic psychology emerged as a response to the deterministic views of psychoanalysis and behaviorism, emphasizing the unique qualities of human beings, their freedom, and their potential for personal growth. Pioneered by theorists such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, humanism highlights the importance of self-concept, subjective experience, and self-actualization. Rogers' person-centered theory focuses on the development of the self, the role of unconditional positive regard, and the impact of incongruence on psychological well-being. Maslow's hierarchy of needs presents a motivational framework that prioritizes self-actualization as the ultimate goal of human development. Despite criticisms regarding its scientific rigor, humanistic psychology has significantly influenced modern psychology, particularly in areas related to personal growth, well-being, and positive psychology. This perspective continues to inspire research and therapeutic practices aimed at fostering self-awareness, authenticity, and human potential.

Keywords: Humanistic psychology, self-actualization, self-concept, personal growth, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, person-centered theory, hierarchy of needs



Introduction

As an approach to psychology that was born in the midst of the 20th century, humanistic psychology was a response to psychoanalysis and behaviorism which had a deterministic view of psychology (Dumont et al 2010). This singular viewpoint was critiqued for disregarding the individual's freedom and ability to develop. Differing from these former perspectives, humanistic psychology appreciates the goodness in people, their ability to self-reflect, and their capability to determine their own future. The work of some humanistic psychologists, such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, built around self-concept, self-actualization, and personal fulfillment, significantly advanced the field.

Furthermore, Rogers developed the person-centered theory where personal growth can only be achieved with the appropriate self-concept and surrounding conditions, like unconditional positive regard (Presbury et al 2007). On the contrary, Maslow's theory of human motivation organized the drive for self-actualization into a pyramid style, as it is the last and highest psychological need after all the other needs have been satisfied. At the core of these theories is the acknowledgment that one's personal experience and their self-constructed meaning of the world influences their behavior and mental health.

Nonetheless, even with doubters of its scientific structure, humanistic psychology remains as an approach that has had the largest impact on contemporary psychological studies, treatment methods, and modern day positive psychology (Brendel et al 2009).

Humanistic Perspectives

In the 1950s, humanistic philosophy developed as a sort of response to the previously stated behavioural and psychodynamic theories. Dehumanisation was the primary charge made against these two paradigms. The idea that sex and aggression—primitive animal drives—dominate behaviour led to criticism of Freudian philosophy. Animal research was a point of contention for behaviourism (Agassi et al 1977).

Both schools of thought were criticised for being overly deterministic and for failing to acknowledge that people had the freedom to choose their own paths in life.

Because of its only emphasis on human behaviour, many of these critiques merged into a loose coalition that came to be known as humanism. Humanism is a theoretical perspective in psychology that highlights the distinctive characteristics of people, particularly their capacity for personal development and freedom. Humanistic thinkers like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers adopt a positive perspective on human nature, in contrast to the majority of psychodynamic and behavioural theorists. They believe that humans are not helpless pawns of deterministic processes, that they are primarily conscious and logical beings free from unconscious and irrational conflicts, and that they may transcend their primal animal origins. A person's subjective perception of the universe is also more significant than objective reality, according to humanistic theorists (Buhler et al 1971). This idea states that your behaviour will be more influenced by your belief that you are homely, intelligent, or gregarious than by your actual level of these traits.



Rogers's Person-Centered Theory

Carl Rogers was one of the pioneers of the human potential movement (1951, 1961, 1980). Through encounter groups, sensitivity training, and other activities meant to promote personal development, this movement places a strong emphasis on self-actualization. Rogers' lengthy therapy experiences with several individuals served as the foundation for his theory of personality, just like Freud did (Rogers et al 1995). Rogers dubbed his method a person-centred theory since it placed a strong emphasis on an individual's subjective perspective.

The Self

According to Rogers, there is just one construct that describes the structure of personality. Although it is now more commonly referred to as self-concept, he named this construct self. A person's opinions about their own nature, distinctive traits, and usual behaviour make up their self-concept. Your mental picture of oneself is known as your self-concept (Markus et al 1994). It is a compilation of one's own views on oneself. Beliefs like "I am tolerant," "I am clever and clever," "I am pretty," or "I am hard-working" are examples of self-concepts. Rogers emphasised that one's self-concept is subjective. It's possible that your experiences and your self-concept are not totally compatible. To support a comparatively positive self-concept, most people have a tendency to somewhat misrepresent their experiences.

For instance, your academic record may indicate that you are not as intelligent as you think you are. Rogers referred to the discrepancy between one's world and one's self as "incongruence." On the other hand, a person's self-concept is considered to be compatible with reality if it is fairly true (Kelly et al 1981). Everyone encounters incongruity to some degree. How much is the key question. See, too. Too much incongruence, according to Rogers, compromises psychological health.

Development of the Self

Rogers focused on how early experiences shape a congruent or incongruent self-concept in relation to personality development. People have a strong need for other people's love and approval, according to Rogers. The majority of this devotion is given by parents in the early years of life. According to Rogers, some parents condition their love. In other words, it depends on the youngster doing appropriately and meeting standards. Children frequently exclude events that make them feel unworthy of love from their self-concept when parental love appears conditional (Assor et al 2004). They act in this way because they are concerned about the uncertain acceptance of their parents. On the opposite end of the scale, some parents provide unconditional love. Because they have been reassured that they are deserving of love regardless of their actions, your kids are less inclined to filter out undesirable events.

He postulated that people will gradually skew their experiences to feel deserving of acceptance by a wider range of others if they are raised with the belief that other people's attachment is very conditional.

Anxiety and Defense

According to Rogers, the main source of troublesome anxiety is situations that jeopardise an individual's self-perception. As a result, recurring anxiety is more



common in those with strongly incongruent self-concepts. People frequently act defensively to try to reframe their experiences so that they seem congruent with their self-concept in order to prevent this worry (Kernis et al 2003). To preserve and uphold their self-concept, they so reject, disregard, or misrepresent facts. For instance, a young lady who is self-centred but unwilling to accept that fact may blame jealousy of her attractive appearance for her friends' remarks about her selfishness.

Maslow's Theory of Self-Actualization

"To simplify the matter a little," Abraham Maslow (1970), a well-known humanistic theorist, stated, "it is as if Freud had given us the sick half of psychology and now we must supplement it with the healthy half." Maslow made the case that psychology should focus more on the characteristics of healthy personalities rather than the causes of disorders (Peterson et al 1999). Maslow's definition of the healthy personality and his examination of the hierarchical structure of motives were two of his most important contributions.

Hierarchy of Needs

According to Maslow, human motivations are arranged in a hierarchy of requirements, which is a methodical organisation of demands ranked by importance, whereby fundamental wants must be met before less basic ones appear. Typically, a pyramid is used to depict this hierarchical structure. The most fundamental requirements are those at the base of the pyramid, such as physiological or safety demands. There are progressively fewer essential necessities at the top of the pyramid (Cabanias et al 2016). Wants at the next level are activated when an individual is able to fairly satisfy one level of wants (full satisfaction is not required). On the other hand, people may turn their attention from higher to more fundamental demands if their previously met basic needs are under danger.

During the COVID-19 epidemic, many people found themselves unexpectedly unable to satisfy their physiological and safety demands, demonstrating this property of hierarchy. Overnight, higher requirements lost significance while these fundamental wants gained prominence. The requirements for order, knowledge, comprehension, and aesthetic appeal. The urge to reach one's own potential, or self-actualization, is the most significant of them. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it is the most important need.

Maslow encapsulated this idea in the straightforward formula, "What a man can be, he must be." Maslow asserts that if people are unable to completely utilise their abilities or follow their genuine interests, they will get frustrated (Maslow et al 2000). For instance, your drive for self-actualization would be stifled if you are a talented musician but have to work as an accountant. Peterson and Park (2010), instance, a Google search turned up over 760,000 pictures of Maslow's pyramid—more than the photographs of the Mona Lisa and The Last Supper combined.

Paradoxically, Maslow did not think of using a pyramid to illustrate his hierarchy. In the 1960s, a number of business school professors worked to develop a clear and eye-catching graphic depiction of Maslow's concepts, which led to the creation of the pyramid. Although Maslow's notion was also visualised



using images of steps, the pyramid eventually took front stage. Another issue is that Maslow's ideas have been continually modified by subsequent theorists, who have also led to a variety of errors.

For instance, some analyses of Maslow's theory have proposed that humans only concentrate on one level of requirements at a time, that everyone's demands are in the same order in the hierarchy, and that lower levels must be completely met before higher levels are engaged. Maslow's real works do not support any of these assertions.

Most concerningly, empirical research on Maslow's hierarchy of needs has proven to be difficult (Bland et al 2023). Research evaluations as early as the 1970s came to the conclusion that the hypothesis was too nebulous to be proven successfully. Nevertheless, several positive research have been conducted. For instance, Taormina and Gao (2013) assessed satisfaction at different requirement levels in the hierarchy and discovered that happiness at the level immediately below each level predicted contentment at the level above it. Maslow's main argument—that meeting needs at one level triggers needs at the next—is somewhat supported by this study. On the overall, nevertheless, the scientific data is unimpressive. In conclusion, Maslow's hierarchy of needs is likely to be seen as an insightful and intuitively convincing explanation that has been challenging to verify in scientific research.

The Healthy Personality

Maslow studied the characteristics of a healthy personality because he was interested in self-actualization. Because of their dedication to ongoing personal development, he referred to persons with extraordinarily healthy personalities as self-actualized people.

Maslow listed a number of characteristics of self-actualized individuals. To put it briefly, Maslow found that self-actualizing individuals are at peace with themselves and have a keen awareness of reality. He found that they maintain a fresh appreciation for the world around them and are frank and impulsive (Hoffman et al 2022). Socially, they appreciate fulfilling connections with others and are perceptive to their needs. They do not, however, rely on other people's praise or find loneliness uncomfortable. They take pleasure in their sense of humour and love their occupations.

They also have "peak experiences" (high emotional peaks) more often than others, according to Maslow. Ultimately, he found that they successfully balance a wide range of personality polarities. They can, for instance, be both rebellious and conformist, logical and intuitive, and childlike and adult. Maslow was well aware that his depiction of psychological health was based more on his personal values and goals than on factual, objective information (Kendler et al 1999).

One research asked lay participants what self-actualization meant to them—that is, what types of activities would make them feel as though they were reaching their full potential—in an effort to collect empirical data on this issue. According to the findings, there was a significant overlap between the sensations of attaining prestige and esteem and the realization of one's potential. The results also indicated that age, gender, marital status, and parenthood all had some bearing on the components of self-actualization.



Evaluating Humanistic Perspectives

The importance of self-concept as a psychological construct may be attributed to the humanistic approach. There has also been strong evidence to support the notion that an individual's subjective beliefs may hold greater significance than the actual facts. One may say that the positive psychology movement, which is becoming more and more significant today, was made possible by the optimistic, health-conscious approach of humanists (Witmer et al 2013).

Of course, there are drawbacks to the balance as well. Critics contend that more empirical study is required to support the humanistic viewpoint, that humanists have been overly optimistic in their descriptions of healthy personality and in their assumptions about human nature, and that many parts of humanistic theory are challenging to verify experimentally.

Humanistic Application to Education

How Humanism Was First Used in China

In the 20th century, humanism—then seen as an advanced teaching theory—rose in the United States and subsequently extended to China. Many parents and educators acknowledged humanism in the societal context of promoting innovation and growth, and many private schools were completely Westernized, embracing the so-called advanced humanistic teaching philosophy. But because humanism evolved so quickly, the majority of educated groups and educators still harbor the notion of "controlling education." Teachers often vacillate between autonomous creativity and compliance. Teachers frequently let students to innovate within the parameters of their instruction, which severely restricts students' capacity for invention and fosters a "sense of fragmentation" in the classroom. We are yet unable to completely validate every aspect of humanistic teaching approaches. Some children have been cut off from the educational environment of great traditional Chinese culture due to the full westernization of some private institutions. This may also eradicate Black humanism and discourage the public from learning more about it and applying it better (Jianyou et al., 2019).

The Integration of Project-Based Learning with Humanism

As education has advanced and humanism has been further explored, it is now possible to blend humanism with other teaching philosophies in an effort to adjust to the educational environment in China. Rogers' "visitor centered" approach to psychotherapy serves as the foundation for his humanistic education philosophy. In the United States, a long-standing educational practice has progressively given way to a "student centered" approach. This approach to education has faith in students' capacity for self-improvement. It highlights how a teacher's function gradually shifts from that of a teacher to that of a facilitator, offering educational resources to support students' learning. By giving students duties throughout the learning process, teachers may encourage their active engagement and learning. In addition, Rogers supports the "non guiding principle" and urges pupils to select their own learning materials and approaches. Project-based learning places a strong emphasis on student-centered learning, pushes students to learn by doing, and gives them the social tools they need to confront particular issues and develop their problem-solving skills. In addition to adhering to the humanistic education paradigm, this successfully addresses



Rogers' query concerning our willingness to allow pupils to deal directly with real-world issues. By resolving particular issues, students can develop their practical problem-solving skills and improve their social adaptation. Nonetheless, there are still some distinctions between Rogers' humanistic teaching paradigm and project-based learning: A. Rather than serving as learning facilitators, project chemistry learning views instructors as designers and sponsors of learning. B. Project-based learning prioritizes developing students' application skills above information acquisition and problem-solving techniques. C. Project-based learning promotes "conservative progress," whereas humanism calls for "thorough reform." However, because socialism lacks the conceptual transformation and essential elements of Chinese socialism, project-based learning and humanism are both foreign-introduced teaching ideas. Its efficacy requires a great deal of experience and long-term investigation(Xuetao, 2022).

Humanism's Use in Smart Teaching

As technology has advanced, creative teaching has emerged as a new educational trend. As a significant step to raise the standard of living for its citizens, the nation has been elevating the building of educational informatization to the level of development strategy since 2011. The Ministry of Education's "Education Informatization 2.0 Action Plan" outlines the following educational principles: addressing the demands of developing talent in the information age and new era, leveraging information technology to spearhead the development of a new learning ecosystem, attaining equitable and superior education, and encouraging holistic human development. Humanistic learning theory is the foundation of educational informatization as a philosophy. Students are guided to actively investigate via innovative teaching, which offers them a variety of evaluation techniques and extensive educational tools. Additionally, teachers are becoming more like aides than mentors in the students' learning process. These days, information technologies including the Internet, cloud computing, big data, and human intelligence play a major role in the development of intelligent education. A smart teaching platform serves as the closed-loop connecting point for instruction, combining the benefits of online, flipped classroom, MOOC, and traditional classroom instruction. Constructing a smart learning environment that is time and space agnostic through the use of mobile terminals, ubiquitous networks, and smart classrooms; continuously accumulating vast amounts of instructional materials and promoting them to students in a targeted way to satisfy their individual learning needs. In order to thoroughly assess the complete teaching process for teachers, the evaluation concept of creative teaching for teachers simultaneously adheres to the student-centered principle, output-oriented, and data-analysis. This makes it easier for teachers to keep a close eye on their kids and create lesson plans that better reflect the growth of their students. Simultaneously, the creation of the intelligent teaching assessment model adheres to the sustainable development concept, which supports instructors in making timely modifications to their lesson plans, monitoring in real time, and making ongoing improvement. Students' requirements for self-development are met by creative teaching, and improving teacher education is also facilitated by the creation of novel teaching assessment methods. This effectively combines humanism with contemporary technology in educational applications, reflecting China's educational advancements in the



exploration of humanistic ideology(Jingjing et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Humanistic psychology has significantly shaped our understanding of human behavior by emphasizing individuality, personal growth, and the innate drive toward self-actualization. Unlike deterministic perspectives such as psychoanalysis and behaviorism, humanism highlights human freedom, creativity, and the subjective experience as central to psychological well-being. A healthy sense of self, while Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs presents a framework for understanding human motivation, culminating in self-actualization.

Despite criticisms regarding its scientific rigor, humanistic psychology has left a lasting impact on psychotherapy, education, and the broader field of positive psychology. It has paved the way for approaches that focus on personal fulfillment, self-awareness, and the enhancement of human potential. By promoting optimism, resilience, and self-determination, humanistic perspectives continue to inspire individuals and influence modern psychological research. Ultimately, the humanistic approach serves as a powerful reminder that understanding human nature requires acknowledging not only challenges and limitations but also strengths, aspirations, and the endless possibilities for growth.

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