

## Humanistic psychology: a brief outline of historical and cultural background

**Humanism:** a philosophy with roots in Ancient Greece, Christianity, Romanticism.

Important representatives: Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Victor Frankl, Rollo May.

**Existentialism/existential psychology inspired by existentialism (Soren Kierkegaard and the French existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus).**

**Rollo May (1909-94)** existential psychologist with his focus on difficult aspects of human condition, for example: loneliness, anxiety, alienation.

**The doctrine of existentialism** holds that human beings have a free will and freedom of choice\_ responsibility for our actions (including the burden of responsibility, a price in anxiety and despair, which is why so many people try to escape freedom into narrow certainties and blame others for their misfortunes). Existential psychologists emphasise the universal struggle to find meaning in life, to live by moral standards, and to come to an understanding of suffering and death.

Existential and humanistic psychologies depart from psychodynamic theories in maintaining that our lives are not entirely determined by our parents, our pasts, or our present circumstance. Humanistic psychology is thus inspired by psychoanalysis (Rogers and Maslow esp. in their conceptual frameworks) but depart from it esp. in their view of personal freedom as a contrast to psychic determinism. We have the power to choose our destinies, even when fate deliver us into tragedy.

It is different from behaviourism in maintaining that humans can choose their own life, and that we are not only determined by our environment. However, humans may be determined, e.g. by conditions of worth so in the humanistic perspective humans are both free and determined.

Humanistic psychologists are also different in that they do not entirely base their theories on clinical observations (contrast to psychoanalysis). Clinical observations are important in gaining insight in human personality and problems but such observations are subjective and uncontrolled. It is also considered to be somewhat problematic to rely on the case study in developing theories since case studies are not representative of a larger population.

**Humanistic Psychology** revived ideas of valuing emotional feeling, trusting intuition, questioning the authority of reason but within a science (psychology) and speaking with the authority of science.

- **Phenomenology** emphasis on how a person's own sense of self exists, and how a person experiences the world, the 'meaning' people put on their experiences and life.

- **Teleology**<sup>1</sup> human beings can choose their own life. They have goals, they have actualising potentials, they are not mere objects of outer or inner forces.
- **Focus on inner life** (like psychodynamic) but not unconscious motives and hidden motives, not a goal to predict and control behaviour. Optimistic view of human beings. Focus on the healthy individual.
- The goal of human development: **AUTONOMY** and this could be gained e.g. through psychotherapy (clients gain insight into their real needs\_ ability to meet them).
- **'Growth'** = openness to change (should be brought about by the therapist interventions)
- Humanistic therapy make **change** a basic human value (the goal of all living)

**Maslow:** The primary cause of psychopathology is the failure to gratify one's fundamental needs: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualisation (Hierarchy of human needs)

### **The role of authenticity important in Rogers' and Maslow's theories:**

**'Authenticity' according to Rogers:** open expression of feelings characteristic of the person after Rogerian therapy

**'Authenticity' according to Maslow:** allowing behaviour and speech to be the true and spontaneous expressions of your inner feelings.

### **Some historical and cultural background of humanistic psychology**

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century toward the 1950s, certain psychoanalysts and psychotherapists met a singularly puzzling phenomenon. Social standards had become far more permissive than in Freud's days, especially with regard to sexuality. The greater liberalism should in principle have helped alleviate troublesome id-superego conflicts and reduce the number of neuroses but in fact, more people than ever were entering psychotherapy. They did no longer suffer from what Freud coined as 'hysterical neurosis' and 'repression'. Instead they suffered from such new and unusual problems as an inability to enjoy the new freedom and self-expression (or for that matter, to feel much of anything), and an inner emptiness and self-estrangement. These patients did not come into therapy in the hope of curing some manifest symptom. Rather, they were in desperate need for an answer to more philosophical questions such as how to remedy the apparent meaninglessness of their lives.

Psychologists within the psychoanalytic movement (e.g. Erik Erikson, Erich Fromm or Karen Horney) had criticised Freud's pessimistic view of humans. Other psychologists had called into question the basic rationale underlying analytic therapy by saying that Freud's idea may have applied well to the Victorian era when an aura of repulsiveness surrounded the topic of sexuality and when it was generally believed that personality was rational and conscious. The argument went that constructs like

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<sup>1</sup> teleology: the study of purposes, goals and ends. Rogers agree that childhood events play a prominent role in forming the adult personality but he prefers to emphasise teleology, i.e. currently active needs and our purposeful striving toward the goal of actualisation. "Behaviour is not 'caused' by something which occurred in the past. Present tensions and present needs are the only ones which the organism endeavours to reduce or satisfy (Rogers 1951).

'psychic determinism', the structural model of personality, and Freud's pessimism about the human nature were aggravating the modern patient's apathy and depersonalisation by depicting personality as mechanical, fragmented, malignant and totally preordained by prior causes.

Some of the most outspoken critics of Freudian pessimism were important founders of humanistic psychology, Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. The two psychologists both contend that human nature is inherently healthy and constructive, but they arrive at this optimistic conclusion from markedly different perspectives. Maslow concentrates his work on well-adjusted individuals, and Rogers who was first and foremost a psychotherapist based his theory on the basis of his clinical observations.

In Europe during the 1940s and 1950s, the **French existentialists** questioned the meaning of life. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, every man or woman is responsible for his or her own life, and the result of the choices they make will determine their lives. God is dead so your destiny is in your own hand. This was illustrated in Sartre's novel: *Les Jeux sont faits* (the dices are thrown) where people are not able to choose their own happiness even if they have a second chance. The burden of life including that humans are mortal is a conditions that all humans share but they are lonely in their quest for meaning, and the burden of responsibility for your own life sometimes makes suicide the preferred option since death is the only thing that's certain. This intellectual philosophical trend was very important in Europe and it influenced Americans in the sense that many European psychologists fled to the USA as a consequence of WW2 and the ideas had some influence on humanistic psychology. Another important influence was Eastern philosophy with its focus on 'inner life' and spirituality.

The American society was troubled in the 1960s with struggle for civil rights, riots, and the Vietnam War. On top of that, the cold war after WW2 resulted in people living in constant fear of the atomic bomb. The young generation generally protested against their parent's society, but especially against the Vietnam War and by that the traditional American foreign policy during the Cold War. Some even refused to serve in the war by deserting to other countries. The Afro-Americans demanded equality and social unrest was the norm in many big cities. Riots became part of the black movement until The Civil Rights Movement with Martin Luther King and his march on Washington in 1963 convinced the politicians that something had to be done, so they finally passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964. However, the problems faced by Afro-Americans were too complicated and deep rooted to be dealt with just by a new law so the social unrest continues. Violent movements such as the one by Malcolm X who publicly said that he was not an American, and that the American dream was an American nightmare for the black population.

Something important in these years was a general feeling in the young people that they had a hunger for personal recognition, a desire to speak frankly and honestly about things that mattered to them. They also had a need for passionate personal involvement in major undertakings. This may not be so unusual for a young generation after all, but they were of special importance to the generation in the late 1950s and the 1960s with the general suspicion of anti-Americanism following the cold war. It was a time during which most of the adult population was trapped in an intricate edifice of social conformity built on fear, suppressed hostility, and the simple

desire to get along. And finally, it was also a time when many adults Americans experienced personal prosperity and some degree of affluence for the first time in their lives; the middle class was expanded in that decade by many millions who could well remember extreme poverty from the depression years, and many had worked hard and waited a long time to get where they were. And once comfortably established, they embraced the values and symbols of middle-class life with all the fervour of religious converts. But somehow the society was radically changing and many conservative could hardly recognise America. Already in the 1950s, the so-called Beats questioned and challenged the conservative, corporate and suburban values in literature and ways of living. Poets like Allen Ginsburg<sup>2</sup> and Jack Kerouac expressed the time in their own search for spirituality and identity.

**Philosophy of the hippies according to Jack Kerouac:**

...see the whole thing is a world full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn't really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars,... and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume, I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad, making young girls happy and old girls happier, all of 'em Zen Lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason and also by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures.

Jack Kerouac, [The Dharma Bums](#), 1958

Ginsburg and Kerouac were extremely critical towards the traditional American society and for that they were suspected to be anti-American. Ginsburg even had a huge file at the FBI. Like many other people at that time, Ginsburg went to India to explore Eastern philosophy and religion and he included this as part of his ideas and writings. A visit to Swami Shivananda had said to him that his own heart was his guru, i.e. he should follow his own inner feelings. In India, all the holy men pointed to the importance of the body, being in balance with yourself rather than searching outside the human form such as the experiences he had with drugs. Eventually, he gave up drugs, and felt that he was 'suddenly free to love myself again' and to come to terms with his own mortality and use that as a basis for a feeling of solidarity and love for those around you. This was exactly the kind of death-defying existential leap that Albert Camus had talked about in his important novel 'The Stranger'.

At the heart of the movement he represented was a return to nature and the revolt against 'the machine', i.e. alienation. According to Ginsburg, the important thing is getting away from under the American flag and marching to a different drummer, basically finding one's own self instead of "the mass-produced self that they keep trying to shove down your throat with their cigarette advertisements and so on..."<sup>3</sup>. Ginsburg took drugs to explore consciousness and he was at certain times admitted to psychiatric institutions. He was often writing under the influence of e.g. LSD, opium, peyote, Benzedrine and amphetamine and he claimed that he it had a liberating effect on him, so that he did not write a poem but just "put down in lines the things he held

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.levity.com/corduroy/ginsberg/home.htm> ; <http://www.naropa.edu/ginsberg.html> ; <http://www.allenginsberg.org/home.asp> material on Allen Ginsburg

<sup>3</sup> Cook, Bruce (1994) The Beat generation. The tumultuous 50s movement and its impact on today. Quill: New York. page 104

back in poems past for fear of embarrassing his father”<sup>4</sup>. He had visions that he described in his poems, e.g. in “Lysergic Acid” he wrote this rather frightening stanza

It is a multiple eyed monster  
it is hidden in all its elephants and selves  
it hummeth in the electric typewriter  
it is electricity connected to itself, if it hath wires  
it is a vast Spiderweb  
and I am on the last millionth infinite tentacle of the spiderweb, a worrier  
lost, separated, a worm, a thought, a self  
one of the millions of skeletons of China.....

The search for some universal existential truth outside the American way of doing it was characteristic for many of the young generation during the 1960s as well and perhaps especially the Hippie movement<sup>5</sup> that could be seen as a criticism of the American conformity and at the same time a quest for autonomy. The Hippies particularly illustrated the generation gap and the problems of communication. They were a counter culture to some extent inspired by the beat culture of the late 1950s. The Hippies dropped out of conventional society and were at war with their social and cultural background. They distrusted reason and valued feelings and tried to live lives unconstrained by intellect or manners also using drugs to explore and express their feelings, esp. LSD (cf. the musical ‘Hair’) and their ‘rock religion’ as it was manifested at the Woodstock festival celebrated like a myth due to the film by Michael Wadleigh who depicts the festival as one long, happy love-in.

The **Hippie movement** began around 1964 and by 1968, the revolt against traditional Western values was at its height. This year brought about the assassinations of Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, riots in the ghettos, growing anti-war movements and general social unrest. Things seemed to be falling apart, and America’s youth lacked all conviction. The Hippies saw themselves as nonconformists but they demanded conformity to their nonconformism. The great sin was to hold to the values of one’s parents and one’s natal culture, to work hard, to achieve, to be emotionally ‘closed’. Humanistic psychology fitted into this pattern since it was a radical critique of conventional values but was it a ‘revolution’s claimed by Rogers when he talked about the third force? At the time, it could be seen as a paradigm shift but basically Maslow and Rogers build their theories on old ideas, for example, Aristotle (scala naturae) and romanticism (cultivation of feelings and intuition and rejection of scientific revolution, i.e. ideas which happened to be part of the Zeitgeist in the USA during the 1960s and in that sense, humanistic psychology reflects an important way to understanding that period from a psychological point of view.

**Maslow:** conformity and adjustment to society \_ to neuroses because people are ignorant of their own needs and try to live up to a cultural pattern that tells them what their needs are, and therefore ‘normalcy’ is the kind of sickness or crippling that we share with everybody else and therefore don’t notice”.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. page 107

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hippy.com/timeline.htm> see more on the Hippie movement here

Humanistic psychology (Maslow, Rogers) proposed new values of '**growth**' and '**authenticity**' for Western civilisation where people traditionally had been taught to control their feelings and to be careful in how they expressed them.

Values concern how one should live one's life + what one should treasure in life.

Humanistic psychologists were at war with traditional Western civilisation and were trying to make a moral as well as a psychological revolution. They were against manners, emotional control and deceptive emotional expressions (= 'phoniness'). Hypocrisy was regarded as a sin, the ideal life was modelled on psychotherapy: The good person has no hang-ups, experience emotions deeply, and freely share feelings with others. (Maslow, 1973)

Criticism: Maslow and Rogers saw themselves as scientists but ignored the conflict between science's commitment to natural law and determinism and their own commitment to the primacy of human purpose (teleology).

Humanistic psychologists, like the Hippies, did not really question the value of adaptation and social control; they just wanted to change the standard to which people had to adapt. (Leahey, 2000)

Rogers and Maslow are criticised for having an overly optimistic and simplified view of human nature.

Not all psychotherapists agree that it is preferable to dispense with interpretations and rely only on genuineness, empathy, and unconditional positive regard.

### **Important Rogerians concepts**

**actualising tendency:** an innate tendency to develop our constructive capacities, and grow in ways that maintain or enhance our total organism; the fundamental motive underlying all human behaviour.

**Self-concept (self):** a learned, conscious sense of being separate and distinct from other people and things.

**Self-actualisation:** the tendency to actualise that portion of experience represented by the self-concept; a subsidiary of the actualising tendency. To the extent that the learned self-actualising tendency remains unified with the organismic actualising tendency, the individual is psychologically well-adjusted.

**Conditional positive regard:** liking and accepting another person only if that individual's feelings and self-concept meet one's own standard; the typical way in which parents behave toward a child.

**Unconditional positive regard:** liking and accepting all of another person's feelings and self-concept; a non-judgemental and nonpossessive caring for, and prising of, another person. One of the three essential characteristics of the successful therapeutic relationship (along with empathy and genuineness)

**Congruence:** a healthy state of harmony between one's total organismic experience and a self-concept free of conditions of worth.

**Incongruence:** a discrepancy between one's total organismic experience and a self-concept burdened by conditions of worth.

**Organismic valuing process:** an innate capacity to value positively those experiences that are perceived as actualising, and to value negatively all those perceived as nonactualising.

**Encounter group (T group):** a group of relatively well-adjusted individuals, who meet with a facilitator to pursue further personal growth.