

# Humanistic perspective

At the core of the Humanistic perspective is its most important key concept: the **phenomenological** framework. To be sure, the definition will be reinforced throughout this section, but the shortest way to say what this term means is as follows: it is not reality, it is an individual's *perception* of reality.

Before moving on, it is equally important to state that Humanistic theorists say these individual subjective realities must be looked at under three **simultaneous** conditions. First, they must be looked at as a **whole and meaningful** and not broken down into small components of information that are disjointed or fragmented like with psychodynamic theorists. Rogers said that if these individual perceptions of reality are not kept intact and are divided into elements of thought, they will lose their meaning. Second, they must be **conscious experiences of the here-and-now**. No efforts should be made of to retrieve unconscious experiences from the past. Phenomenological means 'that which appears' and in this case, it means that which naturally appears in consciousness. Without attempting to reduce it to its component parts – without further analysis. Finally, these **whole** experiences should be looked at by **introspection**. Introspection is the careful searching of one's inner subjective experiences.

A more detailed explanation of the **phenomenological framework** is as follows. According to Rogers, we each live in a world of our own creation, formed by our processes of perception. He referred to an individual's unique perception of reality as his or her **phenomenal field**. As we saw when we studied the Cognitive perspective and dealt with the study of memory and Bartlett's cognitive schemata – every individual in the world has their own individual highly personalized schemata. That is, mental representations of things tucked away in our memory banks. In a like manner, Rogers asserted that we also have perceptual processes that structure our experiences of the world according to **highly individual realities**. In many respects our perceptions of reality (subjective reality) match those (objective realities) of the external world. For example, the awareness of being alive is one of the most basic of human experiences that are shared by all. However, in the vast majority of cases, our perception of reality is not totally in synch with external realities. In fact, when someone appears to be 'out of it', we many times engage in the popular put-down: "he just doesn't get it". As Rogers once said, "The only reality I can possibly know is the world as **I** perceive and experience it at this particular moment. The only reality you can possibly know is the world as **you** perceive and experience at this moment. And the only certainty is that those perceived realities are different. There are as many 'real worlds' as there are people! (Rogers, 1980, p. 102). According to Rogers, all people live in their own subjective reality, which can be known in a complete sense, only to themselves. Moreover, it is this individual subjective (phenomenological) *perception* of reality, rather than the physical objective reality of the external world that ultimately determines behavior. In other words, how people interpret things internally is (for them), the **only** reality. As stated earlier, this private reality will correspond in varying degrees to objective reality depending on the individual. It is a patient's singular, subjective perception of reality that the Humanistic therapist must attempt to understand. Stated in as simplistic terms as possible, according to Rogers, the entire goal of Humanistic therapy is to make the incongruent person congruent again – to bring as much as possible, the real self into synch with the ideal self.

If all this '*perception* of reality' vs reality itself seems a little fuzzy, perhaps some examples may help. Very often, misunderstandings arise because two individuals perceive the same situation differently. That is, each is unable to see the other's point of view. A teacher looks at the IB Psychology syllabus and corresponding course material announces that the class will cover one more option than the IB says is required. She wants to challenge the students so as not to let them down educationally. A student feels overwhelmed by the announcement and drops the course the next day. A pregnant woman sees her body changing and fears that her husband will no longer find her attractive. Her husband sees someone entirely different; the mother of their much desired child who, in part because of her mother-to-be change in body, radiates happiness. It never enters his mind that his wife might need reassurance. A friendly smile is interpreted as a flirtatious invitation, etc., etc. Once again, Rogers said we all live **not** by external (objective) reality, but by our *perceptions* of reality, that is (to beg the point), our individual subjective reality. That's what the phenomenological framework is.

To further augment their argument on the value of a person's subjective experiences, the humanistic theorists bring the word **meaning** into the conversation. Before doing so, however, we must remember an earlier point from the larger discussion. Recall that what is considered a **valid understanding** by one perspective may be considered bankrupt by another and that Humanistic psychologists add the point that **no** human activity, including empirical science is truly value-free. Along these lines, Humanistic theorists bring out one of their 'big guns' **meaning**. Meaning is the purpose or value that a person attaches to their actions or experiences. Indeed, the Humanistic perspective is the only one that attaches meaning, purpose, or spirituality to the explanation of behavior. At first glance, this seems strange, since questions of meaning lie at the heart of much of human experience – the myths we create, the stories we tell, the questions we ask ourselves about our lives and so on. So why has psychology not tried to deal with the issue of meaning? The answer seems to be that given the empirical bias that traditional science has, it has never intended and neither is it equipped to talk about such questions.

If this all seems a bit too abstract for you, let's talk about **meaning** in concrete terms. Victor Frankl was an existential psychologist whom we met in the handout on historical and cultural influences on each perspective. As you recall, he survived the Nazi death camps. In his best known work **Man's Search for Meaning** (1992) Frankl tells us about the meaning of having gone through both Auschwitz and Dachau. He said meaning cannot be directly observed and often, can only be inferred. He also said that people can read all the material they desire and attend all the movies they wish on the subject of the holocaust. However, it is only he and his subjective reality, as well as other survivors of death camps in their own subjective realities, than can ever **really know** the meaning of his experiences – and as importantly, how they have impacted his behavior and personality. Humanistic theorists say that questions of meaning and the answers individuals give—are central to the understanding the way people behave. Acknowledging or sympathizing with meaning is far different than **understanding** or empathizing with meaning. It is not enough to say that only 1 out of 28 people survived the camps and that approximately eight million people were killed and there were only about 60,000 Jews left in all of Europe at the end of World War II – and then conclude from an empirical point of view that – 'this was bad'. For the survivors of such atrocities of war, the so-called, 'value-free' stance of traditional science on the holocaust is woefully inadequate. On the contrary, one has to try and understand the subjective reality of a person who watched his elderly parents and infant children being led away to the gas chambers and then be the one who had to put their bodies onto the slab in the crematorium so they could be incinerated. The motivational role of that meaning can only be determined by the individual having that subjective experience. In Frankl's case, the meaning he gave to it was fairly straightforward. He became determined to live by focusing his desire to complete a book about his ideas. He went on to say that people's individual subjective experiences can motivate them in two ways: first, by achievement and second, if one finds him/herself in a circumstance of unavoidable suffering – try and transcend (mentally see beyond) the experience such as when facing a terminal illness. An example of the latter would be when a dying person is 'at peace with himself'. In this case, traditional science is hard pressed to explain in empirical terms this (transcending) individual subjective experience which directly affects behavior.