

Humanism

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Humanistic, humanism and humanist are terms in psychology relating to an approach which studies the whole person, and the uniqueness of each individual. Essentially, these terms refer the same approach in psychology.

The humanistic approach in psychology developed as a rebellion against what some psychologists saw as the limitations of the behaviorist and psychodynamic psychology. The humanistic approach is thus often called the “third force” in psychology after psychoanalysis and behaviorism (Maslow, 1968).

Humanism rejected the assumptions of the behaviorist perspective which is characterized as deterministic, focused on reinforcement of stimulus-response behavior and heavily dependent on animal research.

Humanistic psychology also rejected the psychodynamic approach because it is also deterministic, with unconscious irrational and instinctive forces determining human thought and behavior. Both behaviorism and psychoanalysis are regarded as dehumanizing by humanistic psychologists.

Humanistic psychology expanded its influence throughout the 1970s and the 1980s. Its impact can be understood in terms of three major areas:

- 1) It offered a new set of values for approaching an understanding of human nature and the human condition.
- 2) It offered an expanded horizon of methods of inquiry in the study of human behavior.
- 3) It offered a broader range of more effective methods in the professional practice of psychotherapy.

Basic Assumptions

Humanistic psychology begins with the existential assumptions that people have free will:

Personal agency is the humanistic term for the exercise of free will. Personal agency refers to the choices we make in life, the paths we go down and their consequences.

People are basically good, and have an innate need to make themselves and the world better:

The humanistic approach emphasizes the personal worth of the individual, the centrality of human values, and the creative, active nature of human beings.

The approach is optimistic and focuses on noble human capacity to overcome hardship, pain and despair.

People are motivated to self-actualize:

Self-actualization concerns psychological growth, fulfillment and satisfaction in life.

Both Rogers and Maslow regarded personal growth and fulfillment in life as a basic human motive. This means that each person, in different ways, seeks to grow psychologically and continuously enhance themselves.

However, Rogers and Maslow both describe different ways of how self-actualization can be achieved.

The subjective, conscious experiences of the individual is most important:

Humanistic psychologists argue that objective reality is less important than a person's subjective perception and understanding of the world.

Sometimes the humanistic approach is called phenomenological. This means that personality is studied from the point of view of the individual's subjective experience.

For Rogers the focus of psychology is not behavior (Skinner), the unconscious (Freud), thinking (Wundt) or the human brain but how individuals perceive and interpret events. Rogers is therefore important because he redirected psychology towards the study of the self.

Humanism rejects scientific methodology:

Rogers and Maslow placed little value on scientific psychology, especially the use of the psychology laboratory to investigate both human and animal behavior.

Humanism rejects scientific methodology like experiments and typically uses qualitative research methods. For example, diary accounts, open-ended questionnaires, unstructured interviews and unstructured observations.

Qualitative research is useful for studies at the individual level, and to find out, in depth, the ways in which people think or feel (e.g. case studies).

The way to really understand other people is to sit down and talk with them, share their experiences and be open to their feelings.

Humanism rejected comparative psychology (the study of animals) because it does not tell us anything about the unique properties of human beings:

Humanism views human beings as fundamentally different from other animals, mainly because humans are conscious beings capable of thought, reason and language.

For humanistic psychologists' research on animals, such as rats, pigeons, or monkeys held little value.

Research on such animals can tell us, so they argued, very little about human thought, behavior and experience.

The History of Humanistic Psychology

Maslow (1943) developed a hierarchical theory of human motivation.

Carl Rogers (1946) publishes *Significant aspects of client-centered therapy* (also called person centered therapy).

In 1957 and 1958, at the invitation of Abraham Maslow and Clark Moustakas, two meetings were held in Detroit among psychologists who were interested in founding a professional association dedicated to a more meaningful, more humanistic vision.

In 1962, with the sponsorship of Brandeis University, this movement was formally launched as the Association for Humanistic Psychology.

The first issue of the Journal of Humanistic Psychology appeared in the Spring of 1961.

Clark Hull's (1943) *Principles of Behavior* was published.

B.F. Skinner (1948) published *Walden Two*, in which he described a utopian society founded upon behaviorist principles.

Humanistic Approach Summary

Basic Assumptions

Humans have free will; not all behavior is determined.

All individuals are unique and are motivated to achieve their potential.

A proper understanding of human behavior can only be achieved by studying humans - not animals.

Psychology should study the individual case (idiographic) rather than the average performance of groups (nomothetic).

Limitations

Ignores biology (e.g., testosterone)

Unscientific – subjective concepts.

Behaviorism – human and animal behavior can be compared

Ethnocentric (biased towards Western culture)

Humanism – can't compare animals to humans

Their belief in free will is in opposition to the deterministic laws of science.

Strengths

Shifted the focus of behavior to the individual / whole person rather than the unconscious mind, genes, observable behavior etc.

Real life applications (e.g., therapy)

Humanistic psychology satisfies most people's idea of what being human means because it values personal ideals and self-fulfillment.

Qualitative data gives genuine insight and more holistic information into behavior.

Highlights the value of more individualistic and idiographic methods of study.

Critical Evaluation

The humanistic approach has been applied to relatively few areas of psychology compared to the other approaches. Therefore, its contributions are limited to areas such as therapy, abnormality, motivation and personality.

A possible reason for this lack of impact on academic psychology perhaps lies with the fact that humanism deliberately adopts a non-scientific approach to studying humans. Humanistic psychologists rejected a rigorous scientific approach to psychology because they saw it as dehumanizing and unable to capture the richness of conscious experience. In many ways the rejection of scientific psychology in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s was a backlash to the dominance of the behaviorist approach in North American psychology. For example their belief in free-will is in direct opposition to the deterministic laws of science.

Also, the areas investigated by humanism, such as consciousness and emotion are very difficult to scientifically study. The outcome of such scientific limitations means that there is a lack of empirical evidence to support the key theories of the approach.

However, the flip side to this is that humanism can gain a better insight into an individual's behavior through the use of qualitative methods, such as unstructured interviews. The approach also helped to provide a more holistic view of human behavior, in contrast to the reductionist position of science.

References

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