

# Problems of Development & Learning

## Humanistic Psychology

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION THE HUMANISTIC APPROACH

A world-wide surge of interest in what human beings could be and could become started in the 1940s, grew slowly in the 1950s, grew much faster in the 60s and finally reached its full flowering in the 1970s. Today it is consolidating itself, and becoming much more widely accepted. It is now part of the mainstream, rather than being something new and unfamiliar. It is no longer unfashionable to admit that you are interested in understanding yourself and what you might be or become.

In fact the *'new'* positive psychology movement has much in common with humanistic psychology, and the *'new'* approaches to coaching have taken much from the humanistic tradition, particularly when working with organizations.

In the process of change and development, a number of different names and titles have been used.

Sometimes it has been called *'third force psychology'* (the other two being psychoanalysis and the orthodox academic behavioural-cognitive approach); sometimes the *'self-awareness movement'* (because awareness seemed to be quite a key word); sometimes the *'human potential movement'* (because of its insistence that the average and the normal are actually less than average and less than normal); and sometimes just *'personal growth'*, because of its belief that people could continue to grow beyond their usual limits, if they were allowed to. Today it is less of a movement and more of a tendency or approach within the whole field of self-development. The full story can be followed now in books like de Carvalho (1991), Moss (1999), Rowan (2001) and Whitton (2003).

In the early days, one man was the pioneer of this way of looking at the world: Abraham Maslow. He was an academic psychologist who later became president of the American Psychological Association. He put forward the key idea of self-actualization: the idea that our purpose in life is to go on with a process of development which starts out in early life but often gets blocked later. He was

joined by others such as Carl Rogers (another president of the APA), Charlotte Buhler, Roberto Assagioli, Fritz Perls, Virginia Satir, Kurt Goldstein, Sidney Jourard, Rollo May, Clark Moustakas, Ira Progoff, Jean Houston, Alvin Mahrer and others. It is important to point out that humanistic psychology is not to be reduced to Maslow and Rogers, as if they were the sufficient definition.

One of the most characteristic features of this approach is that it lays a great deal of stress upon personal experience: it is not enough to read about it in books. And so this movement produced a unique kind of institution, which had never existed before – the growth centre. A growth centre is a place where you can go and be encouraged to meet other people and meet yourself. This idea of meeting yourself is unique. No one had ever talked about that before, except in a rather forbidding way connected with illness or personal problems, or perhaps as part of a religious group.

But the growth centre is for everyone who feels that there is more – there doesn't have to be anything wrong with them. And there they find an encouraging atmosphere. If you go to one, you will find yourself in an atmosphere which enables you to open up and trust the situation enough so that you can move forward – maybe even sometimes leap forward – in self-understanding and human relationships. It is open to all – you don't have to be sick or troubled in order to go.

In the USA the Esalen Institute is still going, and so is the Open Centre in England. Today there are fewer growth centres than there were, because the approach has been adopted much more widely. Most courses which teach about dealing with other people now include some emphasis on understanding yourself, and use humanistic thinking and humanistic methods – often unacknowledged. They have to, because any attempt to understand or work with others on any kind of emotional level has to involve some self-understanding, some self-awareness. And this is the heartland of humanistic psychology.

In the year 2000 there was a big humanistic conference, called Old Saybrook 2, and this led to a bursting forth of new books and new thinking about the humanistic approach. The *Handbook of Humanistic Psychology* (2001) put together over 700 pages of new thinking covering vast ranges of the psychological landscape; the very important *Handbook of Action Research* (2001) is not entirely humanistic, but does have important humanistic and transpersonal material there; *Humanistic Psychotherapies* (2002) comprised another 700 pages of research and practice.

In today's world, with its fierce challenges and fast changes and hard lessons, we have to know ourselves much better, and how to relate to others much better, if we are to survive at all. But we can do much more than survive – we can realize our potential. We can be all that we have it in us to be.

## **1.2 DEVELOPMENT OF THE FIELD**

These preliminary meetings eventually led to other developments, which culminated in the description of humanistic psychology as a recognizable "third force" in psychology (along with behaviorism and psychoanalysis). Significant developments included the formation of the Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP) in 1961 and the launch of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (originally "The Phoenix") in 1961.

Subsequently, graduate programs in Humanistic Psychology at institutions of higher learning grew in number and enrollment. In 1971, humanistic psychology as a field was recognized by the American Psychological Association (APA) and granted its own division (Division 32) within the APA. Division 32 publishes its own academic journal called *The Humanistic Psychologist*.

The major theorists considered to have prepared the ground for Humanistic Psychology are Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and Rollo May. Maslow was heavily influenced by Kurt Goldstein during their years together at Brandeis University. Psychoanalytic writers also influenced humanistic psychology. Maslow himself famously acknowledged his "indebtedness to Freud" in *Towards a Psychology of Being*. Other psychoanalytic influences include the work of Wilhelm Reich, who discussed an essentially 'good', healthy core self and *Character Analysis* (1933), and Carl Gustav Jung's mythological and archetypal emphasis. Other noteworthy inspirations for and leaders of the movement Victor Frankl, Erich Fromm, Hans-Werner Gessmann, Amedeo Giorgi, Kurt Goldstein, Sidney Jourard, R. D. Laing, Clark Moustakas, Lewis Mumford, Fritz Perls, Anthony Sutich, Thomas Szasz, Kirk J. Schneider, and Ken Wilber.

A human science view is not opposed to quantitative methods, but, following favors letting the methods be derived from the subject matter and not uncritically adopting the methods of natural science, and advocates for methodological pluralism. Consequently, much of the subject matter of psychology lends itself to qualitative approaches (e.g., the lived experience of grief) , and quantitative methods are mainly appropriate when something can be counted without leveling the phenomena (e.g., the length of time spent crying).

### 1.3 THEORY IN HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

Humanistic theory in psychology is a psychological perspective which rose to prominence in the mid-20th century in response to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and B.F. Skinner's Behaviorism. With its roots running from Socrates through the Renaissance, this approach emphasizes an individual's inherent drive towards self-actualization and creativity.

It typically holds that people are inherently good. It adopts a holistic approach to human existence and pays special attention to such phenomena as creativity, free will, and human potential. It encourages viewing ourselves as a "*whole person*" greater than the sum of our parts and encourages *self-exploration* rather than the study of behavior in other people. Humanistic psychology acknowledges spiritual aspiration as an integral part of the human psyche. It is linked to the emerging field of transpersonal psychology.

Humanistic psychology has sometimes been referred to as the "third force" in psychology, distinct from the two more traditional approaches, which are psychoanalysis and behaviorism. In the context of post-industrial society, humanistic psychology has begun to be seen as more relevant than the older approaches. It is largely responsible for new approaches towards human capital stressing creativity and human wholeness. Previously the connotations of "creativity" were reserved for and primarily restricted to, working artists. In the 1980s, with an increasing number of people working in the cognitive-cultural economy, creativity came to be seen as a useful commodity and competitive edge for international brands. This led to creativity training in-service trainings for employees, probably led by Ned Herrmann at G.E. in the late 1970s.

Humanistic psychology concepts were embraced in both the theory and practice of education and social work, peaking in the 1970s-1980s, particularly in North America. Because all the pioneers of humanistic psychology were very individual people, there is no one single accepted theory which we can lay out and say – this is it. But there are some very consistent themes running through all the material put forward by these people.

The first is that, deep down underneath it all where it really counts, you are OK. This goes against many other and much older theories which say that people are fundamentally bad, selfish, narrow and nasty. By saying that people are

fundamentally OK, we do not at all mean that people are not sometimes destructive, or that there is no evil in the world. What we mean is that if someone will agree to work with us on his or her destructive actions or evil wishes, in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance, that person will discover that the evil and destructiveness are just as phony and just as forgettable as the false niceness of other people, which apparently causes no problems.

In other words, we believe that personal nastiness and personal niceness are most often, in both cases, masks and illusions, put on for reasons which seemed good at the time, but which have now become stuck and rigid, and out of our control. In that sense, if you want to use labels, we are all neurotic. By working on ourselves to unstuck the rigidities and loosen the mask, we can eventually learn how to live without needing masks at all – though it may be still be useful to put one on occasionally, as we might have a dress suit or an evening gown.

So when we talk about *self-actualization*, about getting in touch with what is the deepest truth within us, and allowing that to come out, we are not saying something fearful or dangerous. People often say – “How do I know I won’t hate my deepest self when I come across it?” But this is an unrealistic fear, and we may sometimes suspect that it is really designed to enable the person to avoid the necessary effort.

The second thread which runs all through humanistic psychology is an emphasis on the whole person. If we say that human beings exist on at least five levels – body, feelings, intellect, soul and spirit – then we have to do justice to all five of those levels in all our efforts at realizing human potential. Ken Wilber (2000) spells out all the implications of this more clearly than anyone else. If I want to be that self which I truly am, then I have to be it on all five of those levels – I must not leave any of them out. Any theory, any therapy, which leaves out one or more of these must be inadequate to deal with the full human being who has to be met and responded to.

It was Maslow who taught us to think in terms of levels, and to ignore all this is to live in Flatland. Now today there is much more interest in the body – diet, exercise and so on – but much of that interest seems to us very external. It is as if we were supposed to be somewhere outside our bodies, disciplining them and making them do things, sometimes under protest. But the humanistic approach is to say that I *am* my body. If you touch my hand, you are touching *me*. So I am just as responsible for my body as I am for my thoughts, feelings, mental pictures or whatever – it is me doing it. This total responsibility for our own bodies, feelings, ideas and

intuitions is very characteristic of humanistic psychology, and theoreticians like Mahrer (1989) and Schutz (1979) have made it clear exactly how this works.

This means that we are interested in integration. By integration we mean that the splits in the person can be healed, and that the holes in the personality can be filled. The various parts of the person can get to know each other better, accept each other more, and change in that process. This is not a process of subordinating all the various tendencies in the person to one overall control, like some kind of totalitarian ego – it is more like a harmony of contrasts.

The third thread we can follow all through the humanistic approach is the emphasis on change and development. Human beings are seen not as static victims or villains, but as people in a process of growth, which is natural and needful. All through our infancy, childhood and adolescence we are going through very substantial changes, involving our most basic attitudes and how we see ourselves.

Maslow said that we grow through six main levels of development, and his rather speculative theory has now been confirmed through the research of people like Lawrence Kohlberg (1981), Clay Alderfer (1972) and Jane Loevinger (1976) in many different countries of the world. This process can continue, if we let it, in adulthood, too. We have all seen people we recognize as being further ahead than us, more complete, more evolved, more themselves. What humanistic psychology says is that we could all continue to grow if we did not limit ourselves and sell ourselves short. All the methods described in the next pages are designed to enable us to take off our self-imposed limitations, and continue to grow into our full potential as human beings.

One more idea which is important in humanistic psychology is abundance motivation. Most other psychology says that our actions are basically motivated by deficiency – that is, a lack of something. We may lack food and look for it, or lack safety and look for it, or lack company and look for it. This is to treat human beings as if they were basically something like a thermostat, only acting when something moves them outside their proper limits. But human beings also have an achievement motivation, and a need for varied experience, and an enormous curiosity, which takes them out of this deficiency-oriented realm into an abundance-oriented world of experience. So when we seek to realize our potential, we are not repairing some deficiency, we are entering a world where being can sometimes be more important than having or doing.

Most of us normally think that if we have enough worldly goods, then we can do what we want to do, and then we can be happy. The sequence is **HAVE – DO – BE**. But what we in humanistic psychology say is that it is exactly the other way round. If we can be who we really are, we will find ourselves doing things which genuinely satisfy us and give us enjoyment, and then we shall have all we really want. The sequence for us is **BE – DO – HAVE**. This begins to sound almost religious, and it is one of the characteristics of humanistic psychology, which distinguishes it very sharply from secular humanism, that it has a place for the spiritual.

Maslow always laid great stress on the importance of peak experiences and the experience of transcendence. A peak experience is one of those times, felt by many millions of people, when all the pretence and all the fear drops away, and we seem to be in touch with the whole universe. It is a timeless moment of intense feeling, which comes to some people when they see a sunrise, or a mountain, to some when they hear great music, to some when they look at a child, to some when they are having sex, and to some in a religious ceremony. It is technically known as casual extraverted mysticism (Horne 1978), and it is within the reach of all of us

In humanistic psychology we are very interested in studying this kind of phenomenon, and seeing how in some cases it can change a person's life. In fact, some of us got so interested in the whole area of the transpersonal – the more spiritual aspects of psychology – that a separate Journal of Transpersonal Psychology was set up and is now flourishing.

#### **1.4 A GUIDE TO HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY - GROUND RULES FOR GROUPS**

- 1) ***Awareness of the Body*** - Your body is you. It expresses your feelings, if you will let it. If you suppress your own body, you may be willing to suppress other people. In groups like this we often get rid of chairs and tables so that interaction may take place physically as well as verbally.
- 2) ***The Here and Now*** - Talk about what you are aware of in this group at this moment. If you want to talk about the past, or about events outside the group, find ways of making them present to the group members. This can often be done by action or role-playing.
- 3) ***Feelings*** - Let reality have an emotional impact on you, especially the reality of the other group members. Let yourself feel various emotions - but if they are blocked, be aware of that too. Feel what it is like to experience whatever is happening at an emotional level.

- 4) ***Self-Disclosure*** - Be open about your feelings or lack of them. Let people into your world. If you are anxious, let people know about it; if you are bored, it is OK to say so. Be as honest as you can bear to.
- 5) ***Confidentiality*** - Don't talk about what is said or done in the group outside it.
- 6) ***Taking Responsibility*** - Take responsibility for yourself - do what you want and need to do, not what you think the group wants you to do. If the leader suggests something, it is still your decision whether to go along with it. Be aware of what you are doing to other people by what you say and do: take responsibility for that. Be aware of the "I and thou" in each statement. You are not an impartial observer.
- 7) ***Risk Taking*** - If you are torn between expressing something and not expressing it, try taking a risk. Doing the thing you are most afraid of is usually a good idea in this group. You can reduce the danger of hostile statements by saying them non-evaluatively: instead of saying "You are a cold person", say "I feel frozen when you talk like that". This is more likely to be true, and it makes you more real to the others. In a good group, people support risk-takers.
- 8) ***Safety*** - If at any point you are in danger of going beyond the limits of what you can take, use the code phrase STOP! I MEAN IT! and everything will stop immediately. No physical violence in the group. No physical sex.
- 9) ***Listening*** - Listening to others lets us in to their worlds. But listening is not just about words - it means being aware of expressions, gestures, body positions, breathing. Allow your intuition to work. Really be there with the other people in the group.
- 10) ***Bridging Distances*** - As relationships in the group become clearer, there may be one or two members you feel very distant from, or want to be distant from. By expressing this, a new kind of relationship may begin to appear. Opposition and distance are just as likely to lead to growth as closeness and support, as long as the feelings are owned.
- 11) ***Distress*** - When someone in the group is distressed, encourage them to stay with that feeling until the distress is fully worked through, or turns into some other emotion. There is a "Red Cross nurse" in all of us who wants to stop people feeling distressed, and jumps in too soon. A person learns most by staying with the feeling, and going with it to its natural end, which is often a very good place.
- 12) ***Support and Confrontation*** - It is good to support someone who is doing some self-disclosure, some risk taking, some bridging of distances. It is good to confront someone who is not being honest, who is avoiding all risk-taking, who is diverting energy away from the group's real work. It is



possible to do both these things with love and care. A good group is full of mutual support.

- 13) **Avoidance Don't ask questions** – make the statement which lies behind the question. Address people directly, saying “I” rather than “it” or “you”. Don't say – “I feel” when you mean – “I think”. Ask yourself – “What am I avoiding at this moment?”
- 14) **The Saver** - Don't take any of these rules too seriously. Any set of rules can be used to put someone down - perhaps yourself. In a good group, you can be who you are, say what you mean, and not have to be some particular way.

## **1.5 INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP WORK**

When humanistic psychology first came on the scene, the main emphasis was on group work to help in the process of self-understanding; but today there is more emphasis on individual work. The advantage of a group is that you get a great deal of stimulation from the other people in the group. They are there to work on themselves, just as you are, and by seeing them do it you get more of an idea as to how to do it yourself. Also some of the issues they raise may touch you personally; one of the key findings of humanistic psychology is that the deeper and more personal is the material which comes out, the more universal it is, and the more it connects with other people in the group.

All humanistic groups are experiential, which means that they are based on experience. (One of the standard misprints is to put “experimental” instead, because the correct word is less familiar.) Nobody just sits back and listens, nobody just sits back and takes notes – all are participants. A group may have a designated leader, or it may be run on a self-help basis (Ernst & Goodison 1981).

The advantage of work on a one-to-one basis, on the other hand, is that you have the time all to yourself to go into something in detail and work it through at your leisure, perhaps over a number of sessions (Brammer, Abrego & Shostrom 1993). By having someone who is there just for you, you can have much more choice over what to go into and how to go into it. If you have a crisis, it is ideal to work on it in a one-to-one way, without the distractions of a group. An individual session may last anything from a few minutes to several hours, but the most usual practice is for it to last for one hour. Sometimes this becomes 50 minutes, if the practitioner is heavily booked throughout the day and needs ten minutes between sessions. Or it can be 1 hour or 2 hours if working with primal or transpersonal material (Rowan 1998).

Normally you would sign up for one weekend at a time with group work, or for a limited series (usually six to ten) of evening groups. But with individual work, because of its slower pace, it is more usual to leave it open-ended, and to arrive at a mutually agreed time to stop. It is realistic to think in terms of a commitment to individual work of one or two years (depending on whether the sessions are once a week or twice a week) before getting too impatient about it. Something which took a long time to build up may often take a long time to dismantle. Also sometimes things get worse before they get better, because you are uncovering things you have covered up for what seemed at the time to be good reasons. But most people seem to come to the conclusion that it is worth it, because they come out at the other end feeling much better about themselves and their relationships.

It is a very effective practice to use group work for shaking loose a lot of material, and individual work for working through it more thoroughly. There can be an analogy here with mining for valuable ore. But there will be variations on this depending on which specific approach is taken. It cannot be emphasized enough that the time taken is very variable, and depends in part on what is being worked on. If there is a crisis, this can often be got through quite successfully in three months or so. If there is a persistent symptom, but with an obvious cause, this too can usually be dealt with quite quickly. But for the kind of change of total character or personality which in many cases is needed, a process is involved which may take ten years or so to complete (probably not all with the same person or group). Life-changing does not come easy or cheap.

Sometimes there is a two-phase process, where you come to a therapist with a problem which seems quite straightforward. You get somewhere with the immediate problem in a reasonable stretch of time, but in the process discover other things about yourself which you had not suspected.

In recent years, for example, many people have discovered that they were sexually abused in childhood. These were not conscious memories, because they had been buried in the recesses of the mind as being too horrible. But in the process of opening up in therapy, where a lot of trust is involved in the best cases, these things have come to the surface. These deeper problems may then need to be worked through on their own account. This will be phase two. And this will obviously take longer again. Self-help can also be done on a one-to-one basis (Gendlin 1981).

James Bugental (1987), the first president of the Association for Humanistic Psychology, and a warm and human psychotherapist, used to say that therapy that

intends being life-changing is a demanding undertaking, expensive in terms of time, intrusion upon ordinary life, emotional energy and money. It therefore involves commitment to a degree which is often not understood at first by the person who comes for help. Most people underestimate the amount of time and energy they have to commit to the process, if they want to pursue the matter to its end. Many humanistic therapists do not believe in the unconscious, but equally many do, for the reasons which Grof (1985) explains.

Many humanistic therapists use intuition a great deal (Mindell 1985). This does not mean, incidentally, that the whole job has to be done with just one therapist. It is often a very good idea to spend some time with a male therapist and some time with a female therapist. The two experiences are complementary and may be better than either alone. It has to be said that all therapy is open to abuse, particularly by enthusiastic but untrained people, but also by experienced people who should know better. The safeguard against this is to make sure that the therapist belongs to an organization which has a complaints procedure should anything go wrong. Work can also be done with children, and an inspiring book on this is the one by Virginia Axline (1971).