
The History and Future of Humanistic Psychology

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Abstract

Since much of humanistic psychology's agenda has been taken up by mainstream psychology and culture, the question of whether humanistic psychology is relevant today is critical. This article draws on Maslow's description of "sickness of the soul" to argue that a psychology that stresses connection and embodied experience, meaning and ethics, creativity and dreams, resilience and self-actualization is needed now more than ever.

Keywords

humanistic psychology, relevance, changing world, future



When I think about the problems of today's world, it seems to me that humanistic psychology is more relevant than ever, even though cries are being heard that it is now obsolete. For sure, managed care and the changing health system are eroding the heroism of the individual psychological journey. Yet in the world of increasingly impersonal technology, disconnection, and disembodiment, a psychology that stresses connection and embodied experience is needed more than ever. In a world of meaningless work and random violence, a psychology that stresses meaning and ethics

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is needed more than ever. In a world of increasingly sanitized conformity, a psychology that stresses creativity and dreams is needed more than ever. And, in a world in which children no longer hear bedtime stories of universal myths, a psychology that bases itself in the arts and culture, as well as in science, is needed more than ever.

Psychology is no longer imaginative, soulful, or beautiful, but instead produces mechanical, technical, uniform training, and procedures. Philosophers, postmodernists, and cognitive scientists are calling for a new model of the human being, one who is complex, adaptable, and multiple. Most of the paradigm shifts are happening outside of psychology, except that humanistic psychologists were calling for these paradigm shifts a long time ago.

For example, Abraham Maslow described what he called “the sicknessness of the soul,” or “metapathologies,” which result from a deprivation of “metaneeds” such as a need for beauty, meaning, or joy. The task of a psychologist would be to function as a “metacounselor,” or “older brother,” who would remind people of their metaneeds and of their interconnectedness (Maslow, 1971, p. 43). People who fulfill these needs are called “self-actualizers,” and experience life fully with total absorption, make growth choices in an ongoing process, have a self, take responsibility, are as good as they can be, experience peak moments, and are willing to give up their defenses. Maslow noticed how the self-actualized individual is similar to what he called the “creative” individual. Since creativity is the opposite of dissociation, it also connects us to ourselves, to others, and to the world around us. The most powerful way to encourage such self-actualization and creativity is through art education, since art makes better people, not better products.

Finally, Maslow’s self-actualized person would not just be a self-absorbed navel gazer, a stereotype that is so often leveled against humanistic psychologists, but would, as a result of the process of self-actualization, become interested in improving the world. In this image, the self-actualized person would integrate the intrapersonal, interpersonal, social, spiritual, and aesthetic levels of experience. The self-actualized person would CREATE, create meaningful experiences, create and discover beauty, and live with grace and courage in a constant confrontation with the anxiety of nonbeing. For Maslow, who taught at Brandeis and was Jewish, self-transcendent spirituality meant living as a “*mensch*,” with integrity and devotion to “*tikkun olam*,” or repairing this world.

The ideal of a whole human being, not just a “psyche” or “mind” or “behavior,” who takes responsibility for cocreating the world with God is what it meant to be fully human.

Rollo May also saw the soul sickness of his day as an emptiness, despair, anxiety, inauthenticity, and stressed the role of art in the creation of a meaningful life. Creativity is an “encounter with the world that undercuts the subject-object split, an encounter of the intensively conscious human being with his or her world” (May, 1975, p. 56). Art is defined not primarily as a product, like a painting, but as the emergence of form from chaos. Art is necessary for the elegance of a theory, the harmony of internal form, and even as a foundation for the science and scientific creativity that creates meaning out of experience.

A concern with beauty also characterizes James Bugental’s search for the authentic human life. He says, “It sees beauty and wonder in the common birthright of all human beings: the will to actualize what is latent” (Bugental, 1989, p. xiii). While humanistic psychology does, in fact, concern itself with concrete phenomenological experience and real persons, it does, and must, also concern itself with the symbolic, the ecological, the spiritual, and the aesthetic. Affirming the importance of meaning-making, nonreductive art in psychology, Bugental (1989) explains, “I do so because I believe that psychotherapy is more an art than a science” (p. xvi).

In their 1994 article in the *American Psychologist*, Bevan and Kessel call for a psychology that bridges science and the humanities and argue that the last 100 years have seen a confusion of science with technology. They recommend what Sigmund Koch called “indigenous methodology,” which respects a range of methodologies reflecting the full range of human experiences or what Oliver Sachs has called “romantic science.” The new humanistic psychology must also align itself with paradigm shifts in biology and ecology. Instead of seeing human beings as having “dominion over the earth,” humanistic psychology must see humans as only one species living, hopefully respectfully, in an interconnected interdependence with all sentient beings.

The old enemies have shifted. Humanistic psychology began with a much-needed rebellion against psychoanalysis and behaviorism. Not only is psychoanalysis no longer what it was in the 1950s, but we are now allies with psychoanalysis in such important matters as the template and managed care. A humanistic psychology relevant for the 21st century would recognize new trends growing in psychoanalysis and behaviorism, in biology, and in religion. While the spirituality from which Rollo May shielded humanistic psychology may have been a 1950s traditional “opiate of the people”; certainly now, the hunger for intrinsic spirituality is impossible to ignore. Humanistic psychology does not need to be as defensive anymore and can continue to grow and explore new edges.

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