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Why Humanistic Psychology Lost Its Power and Influence in American Psychology

Implications for Advancing Humanistic Psychology

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Why did humanistic psychology lose its power and influence in American psychology? Previous answers have focused on the historical shortcomings of the humanistic movement, a perspective that essentially “blames the victim.” In contrast, this article suggests that two outside forces—mainstream American psychology and conservative forces in the larger culture—also played a role in undermining the humanistic vision. **The article concludes that humanistic psychology lost its power and influence, in large measure, because it is inherently incompatible with the basic assumptions and values of contemporary mainstream psychology and with the conservative ideologies that have increasingly gained power in American culture since the 1960s. Implications of this analysis for the future of the humanistic movement are presented.**

Keywords: *humanistic psychology; history of humanistic psychology; encounter groups; negative stereotypes; conservatives*

Once upon a time, for a brief and shining moment, humanistic psychology was a dominant force in American psychology. Humanistic psychology arose to power in the 1950s and 1960s as a reaction, in part, to the deterministic and pathologizing nature of Freudian psychology and the mechanistic assumptions and practices of behaviorism. By the late 1960s, humanistic psychology had grown into a major “third force” in American

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psychology (Goble, 1978). In 1968, Abraham Maslow (1954, 1962, 1966, 1971, 1976), a major architect of the new movement, was elected president of the American Psychological Association (APA). Carl Rogers (1942, 1951, 1959, 1970, 1972, 1977), who had earlier served as president of the APA, was widely known as the man who had developed “client-centered therapy” and was regarded by many as the most influential psychologist in the nation. Rollo May (1972, 1974, 1980, 1983, 1984; May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958), who had brought existential psychology from Europe to America and placed it under the umbrella of humanistic psychology, was viewed as one of the major existential psychologists in the world. Other luminaries associated with the early history of humanistic psychology included Gordon Allport, George Kelly, Gardner Murphy, Henry Murray, Otto Rank, Viktor Frankl, Erich Fromm, Charlotte Buhler, Virginia Satir, Thomas Szasz, Alan Watts, R. D. Laing, Kurt Lewin, Fritz Perls, Ludwig Binswanger, James Bugental, Ernest Becker, Aldous Huxley, Paul Tillich, and Martin Buber. (For an excellent overview of the early history of humanistic psychology, see Aanstoos, Serlin, & Greening, 2000. For more complete histories, see DeCarvalho, 1991; Goble, 1978; Taylor, 1999b; Welch, Tate, & Richards, 1978).

Humanistic psychology also had a powerful impact on American culture. Millions of everyday Americans turned to psychotherapy, encounter groups, and other growth-oriented experiences. Schools, churches, colleges, and even corporations embraced humanistic ideals and offered classes designed to enhance personal growth, interpersonal relations, and organizational development. Like a powerful symphony, the humanistic movement built toward a culture-shaking crescendo that reached its peak in the early 1970s.

Today, the symphony hall is notably quieter, and the orchestra plays to a much smaller audience. Maslow, Rogers, May, and so many others in that “first generation” are now gone. Deterministic, mechanistic, and pathologizing models once again dominate clinical psychology—despite the fact that psychotherapy research clearly supports humanistic values and perspectives (see Elkins, 2007; Elliott, 2002; Wampold, 2001, 2007). Strangely, compared to its heyday in the 1960s and early 1970s, humanistic psychology has relatively little power or influence in American psychology. This is especially odd given that many humanistic ideas have infused mainstream psychology (e.g., the power of the therapeutic relationship and the focus on strengths of clients). Unfortunately, many contemporary psychologists know little about humanistic psychology and rely, instead, on negative stereotypes and misinformation. As Taylor and Martin (2001) put it, “Mainstream psychologists, if they have any name recognition at all when asked about the movement, think of humanistic psychology as unscientific, guilty of promoting the cult of narcissism, and a thing of the past” (p. 25).

The Question Addressed in This Article

The question addressed in this article is “What happened?” How did a movement as powerful and culture-changing as humanistic psychology almost disappear in only 30 years? What crushed the humanistic vision and resurrected in its place the same old mechanistic models, deterministic protocols, and pathologizing tendencies of the past? *In short, why did humanistic psychology lose its power and influence in American psychology?*

The question is important because it goes to the heart of whether or not the humanistic vision is viable. For example, if humanistic psychology was nothing more than a “grand experiment” of the 1960s that lost its power and influence because of *inherent* flaws in its values, ideals, and perspectives, then we should cast it on the dump heap of other experiments in the history of psychology that were fatally flawed. On the other hand, if humanistic psychology lost its power and influence because of *outside* forces that wanted to destroy it, then the humanistic vision may still be viable. Indeed, the humanistic perspective may be more needed in American psychology today than in the past.

The question is also important because it has implications for the future of humanistic psychology. If we lost our power and influence because of inherent weaknesses, our future strategy must include focusing on those weaknesses and doing what we can to correct them. However, if we lost our power and influence because of *outside* forces, then we must identify those forces, determine if they are still operative, and do what we can to counteract them. These two strategies are not mutually exclusive, but the answer we give to the question posed in this article will determine our emphasis.

Previous Answers to the Question

The question addressed in this article is not new. Others have raised the question and suggested various answers (e.g., Bugental & Bracke, 1992; Buss, 1979; Cain, 2003; Gendlin, 1992; Giorgi, 2005; M. B. Smith, 1990; O’Hara, 1996, 2001; Taylor, 1999a; Taylor & Martin, 2001; Wertz, 1998).

Cain’s (2003) article is especially worthy of note because it was inspired by Old Saybrook II (see Elkins, 2000; Warmoth, 2001) and is a comprehensive and thought-provoking contribution to the current dialogue about the future of humanistic psychology. As much as I like Cain’s article, I disagree with some of his ideas and, in the spirit of dialogue, I would like to highlight these as counterpoints to my own perspective.

First, Cain (2003) gave several reasons that, in his view, humanistic psychology failed to advance. His list included paucity of natural science research, lack of publications in mainstream journals, lack of effective organization, lack of political savvy, a maverick attitude toward mainstream psychology, and having to contend with negative stereotypes. It is hard to disagree with Cain's list. Clearly, he has put his finger on some weaknesses of humanistic psychology. Nevertheless, I find his list troubling. By focusing almost exclusively on the shortcomings of humanistic psychology, he essentially "blames the victim." In fact, Cain (2003) said that a major intent of his article was "to identify how we undermine our own progress and influence" (p. 11). With regard to mainstream psychology, he suggested that we give up our maverick ways and "invest ourselves less in being adversarial and more in assuming a cooperative attitude and identifying with what is right about psychology" (p. 19).

Our posture toward mainstream psychology is an important issue, and I suspect Cain is right that some of us could use a little "attitude adjustment." However, I have concerns about Cain's suggestion that we give up our maverick ways. It is not that I am attached to the word *maverick*, but I believe it points to something we must not lose as we look to the future of the humanistic movement. *Maverick* is a ranching term that refers to a range animal (e.g., a calf, cow, or steer) that is unbranded or that refuses to be part of the herd. If humanistic psychology had truly transformed American psychology, I might agree that it is time for us to give up our maverick ways and join the herd. However, the humanistic revolution was clearly aborted, and mainstream American psychology is arguably more mechanistic, reductionistic, deterministic, and antihumanistic today than it was before the revolution started. *Thus, in contrast to Cain, I would argue that humanistic psychology should enthusiastically embrace its maverick tradition and become even more outspoken in confronting the disastrous directions of contemporary mainstream psychology.*

Second, Cain (2003) implies that the humanistic movement would have advanced if only we had been better researchers, politicians, organizers, collaborators, and so on. In other words, he believes the humanistic movement committed *suicide*. *I would argue that it was murdered.* Although we may have shot ourselves in the foot a few times, those injuries were not fatal. The real death blows—I will argue in this article—came from *outside* the humanistic movement.

This is not to deny the historical shortcomings of humanistic psychology. Clearly, we must analyze our mistakes and do what we can to correct them as we move into the future, and this is why Cain's article and others like it are so important. But in this article, I want to provide a different perspective

and thus a more complete picture by describing the destructive forces—in both American culture and mainstream psychology—with which humanistic psychology has had to contend. The remainder of this article is devoted to that theme.

Encounter Groups: A Case Study in Negative Stereotyping

Encounter groups were one of the most visible manifestations of the humanistic movement of the 1960s, and their fate provides an illuminating “case study” of how negative stereotypes and misinformation were used to undermine the movement.

Known by various names, including T-groups, sensitivity training groups, personal growth groups, and interpersonal relations groups, encounter groups were pervasive in American culture during the 1960s and early 1970s. Carl Rogers (1970) called encounter groups “the most rapidly spreading social invention of the century” (p. 1). Interestingly, the encounter group movement was a grass roots phenomenon that grew up outside the formal academic and psychological establishments. In 1970, Rogers said,

Most universities still look upon it with scorn. Until the last two or three years, foundations and government agencies have been unwilling to fund programs of research in this area; the established professions of clinical psychology and psychiatry have stayed aloof, while the political right wing is certain it represents a deep-seated Communist plot. I know of few other trends which have so clearly expressed the need and desire of people rather than institutions. In spite of such adverse pressures, the movement has blossomed and grown until it has permeated every part of the country and almost every kind of modern organization. (pp. 1-2)

What drew people to encounter groups? Rogers (1970) offered the following answer:

I believe it is a hunger for something the person does not find in his work environment, in his church, certainly not in his school or college, and sadly enough, not even in modern family life. It is a hunger for relationships which are close and real; in which feelings and emotions can be spontaneously expressed without first being carefully censored or bottled up; where deep experiences—disappointments and joys—can be shared; where new ways of behaving can be risked and tried out. (pp. 10-11)

Despite their popularity, or perhaps because of it, encounter groups generated a great deal of concern in the mainstream psychological community. In 1971, Koch wrote an article that was highly critical of encounter groups. Koch's article, which many thought presented a **distorted view of encounter groups**, set off a firestorm of articles in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (e.g., Apfelbaum & Apfelbaum, 1973; Arbuckle, 1973; Bennett, 1976; Dublin, 1972; Friedman, 1976; Haigh, 1971). Some of the articles seemed to generate more heat than light but others provided helpful insights into the benefits and limitations of encounter groups.

One of the criticisms leveled against encounter groups was that they often harmed participants. In 1975, P. B. Smith reviewed studies on sensitivity training that had been reported in major publications. Because of the allegations of harm, he was especially interested in research findings related to adverse effects. Interestingly, P. B. Smith (1975) found that although a few participants experienced adverse effects as a result of their encounter group experience, the incidence was low. After reviewing the extant literature, Smith concluded, **"No study yet published provides a basis for concluding that adverse effects arising from sensitivity training are any more frequent than adverse effects arising in equivalent populations not in groups"** (p. 29).

In view of all this, one would think that mainstream psychology would regard encounter groups as an important historical phenomenon (at least) and as a potentially useful contemporary vehicle for helping clients and others develop greater self-awareness and more effective interpersonal skills. This, however, is not the case. In fact, if one mentions encounter groups today, the most likely response from mainstream colleagues is a rolling of the eyes and some comment about "nude marathons," "boundary violations," or that "touchy-feely stuff" from the 1960s.

Where did these negative stereotypes originate? Unfortunately, it is impossible to answer this question in a definitive way because stereotypes—like fads and trends—arise from multiple sources, most of which are impossible to trace. Nevertheless, the following information provides a partial answer to the question.

Stereotypes typically contain a little truth mixed with a lot of lies, and this is true of the stereotypes associated with the encounter group movement. For example, with regard to the "touchy-feely" stereotype, it is true that encounter groups encouraged touching and feeling. It was not unusual for group members to give one another hugs, and leaders often encouraged participants to identify and express their feelings. So if it is bad to give hugs or to express one's feelings, then encounter groups were a hotbed of evil. It is also true that a few "nude marathons" took place. (A nude marathon was

an encounter group, typically lasting 24 to 48 hours, in which participants removed their clothing). *Time* magazine, in its February 23, 1968, edition, published an article on nude marathons being conducted in the Los Angeles area by a psychotherapist named Paul Bindrim (“Stripping Body and Mind,” 1968). Although Rogers (1970) estimated that such groups comprised less than 1/10th of 1% of all encounter groups, nude marathons generated a great deal of media attention (for obvious reasons) and became associated with encounter groups in many people’s minds.

And with regard to the stereotype about boundary violations, it is true that a few unethical leaders took advantage of group participants. Leader abuses ranged from using questionable techniques and “exercises” to having sexual and other exploitative relationships with participants. Thus, there were abuses associated with the group movement, and humanistic psychologists should never minimize the seriousness of those infractions. At the same time, it is important to remember that such incidents were rare and that the vast majority of encounter groups were positive, helpful experiences. In fact, for a grassroots movement that spanned more than a decade and involved millions of participants and thousands of leaders, it is remarkable that there were so few incidents of emotional harm. I suspect one would find more unethical therapists, damaging techniques, and incidents of harm in the history of traditional psychotherapy than in the encounter group movement.

Thus, there is little reason to believe that encounter groups were “done in” by their own faults or excesses and that they somehow “deserved” the negative stereotypes that came to be associated with the movement. *So the question remains: Where did the negative stereotypes about encounter groups originate?* To address this question, we must look at American culture and the dark clouds that were gathering as the 1960s came to a close.

In 1970, at the height of the encounter group movement, Rogers (1970) warned that right-wing forces were already at work to destroy it. He wrote,

All types of intensive group experiences have come under the most virulent attack from right-wing and reactionary groups. It is, to them, a form of “brainwashing” and “thought control.” It is both a Communist conspiracy and a Nazi plot. The statements made are ludicrously extreme and often contradictory. It is fair to say that it is often pictured as being one of the greatest dangers threatening our country. (p. 11)

Rogers (1970) documented several attacks from the media of his day. For example, he noted that Alan Stang, a right-wing writer, in *The Review of the News* for April, 9, 1969 (p. 16), asked, “Aren’t our teachers being subjected



to ‘sensitivity training’ to prepare them for the dictatorial control which is the essence of Nazism and all Socialism?” And in the January, 1968, issue of *American Opinion* (p. 73), official organ of the John Birch Society, Gary Allen wrote an article titled: “Hate Therapy: Sensitivity Training for Planned Change.” Allen alleged that sensitivity training was a left-wing conspiracy. Perhaps most ridiculous was a diatribe written by a man named Ed Dieckman Jr., titled “Sensitivity International—Network for World Control” (as cited in Rogers, 1970, p. 11). Congressman John Rarick, a staunch segregationist, was so impressed by the piece that he read portions of it into the *Congressional Record* of January 19, 1970. The part he chose to read attacked Elizabeth D. Koontz, the first African American president of the National Education Association, who had earlier announced a multifaceted education program for urban children that involved Head Start and sensitivity training for parents and teachers. Koontz was accused of trying to involve the community in a “laboratory of groups exactly as in North Vietnam, Russia, and Red China” (as cited in Rogers, 1970, p. 11). It is worthy of note that a few months later this “radical” Ms. Koontz was appointed by President Nixon to be director of the Women’s Bureau of the Department of Labor.

But why were right-wing conservatives so upset about encounter groups? Rogers (1970) gave a thought-provoking answer:



Encounter groups lead to more personal independence, fewer hidden feelings, more willingness to innovate, more opposition to institutional rigidities. Hence, if a person is fearful of change in any form, he is rightly fearful of encounter groups. They breed constructive change. . . . Hence, all those opposed to change will be stoutly or even violently opposed to the intensive group experience. (p. 13)

In 1977, Rogers wrote once again about the fear of change, but this time he focused on the larger American culture and the conflict that was brewing between right-wing conservatives and those committed to change and growth (whom Rogers referred to as “new persons”). Rogers (1977) said,

Change threatens, and its possibility creates frightened, angry people. They are found in their purest essence on the extreme right, but in all of us there is some fear of process, of change. So the vocal attacks on these new persons will come from the highly conservative right, who are understandably terrified as they see their secure world dissolve, but there will be much silent opposition from the whole population. Change is painful and uncertain. Who wants it? The answer is few. (pp. 280-281)

Today, more than 30 years after Rogers made his sobering predictions about the increasing power of conservative forces in American culture, it is clear that he was uncannily accurate. In the last three decades, we have witnessed the rise to power of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, James Dobson, Rush Limbaugh, Rudolph Murdoch, and a host of other right-wing conservatives who attract millions of supporters and who fill the media with narrow, and sometimes bigoted, views. Indeed, wherever one looks today, it seems that conservative forces are exerting devastating influence. The idea that there is a “vast right-wing conspiracy” in our country is no longer a joke. If there was any residual doubt, it was erased by the politics and policies of the George W. Bush administration.

Not only did *political* forces attack humanistic psychology, but *religious* forces also joined the assault. For the past 30 years, the Religious Right has denounced humanistic psychology as dangerous to “Biblical Christianity.” Since the 1960s, conservative Christian writers have produced a spate of books condemning humanistic psychology including *Psychology As Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* by Vitz (1977), *The Danger of Self-Love* by Brownback (1982), *The Emperor’s New Clothes: The Naked Truth About the New Psychology* by Kilpatrick (1985), *Prophets of Psychoheresy* by Bobgan and Bobgan (1989), and *The Road to MalPsychia: Humanistic Psychology and Our Discontents* by Milton (2002). The consensus among such writers is that humanistic psychology is self-centered, narcissistic, anti-Biblical, blasphemous, counterfeit, and godless. Kilpatrick (1985) reflected the attitude of most conservative Christian writers when he said that although humanistic psychology *appears* to focus on positive things, it is actually very dangerous. Kilpatrick (1985) warned, “Humanistic psychology looks more and more like one of those seemingly benign drugs whose harmful effects don’t become apparent until years later” (p. 6).

Maureen O’Hara, who worked with Carl Rogers for 18 years and more recently served as president of Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center, recalled some of her own clashes with conservative forces. O’Hara said,

The turmoil of the late 1960s, which at times appeared as if it would result in revolution, deeply offended and scared the daylight out of the conservatives. . . . They believed—deeply believed—that America and the world were threatened by the ideas then in currency on the campuses and within the various social movements. The Religious Right (correctly from that point of view) identified secularism, progressive movements in general and humanistic psychology as part of that, as forces that were undermining the status quo in American life—the authority of Christian morality, patriarchy, the structure

of families, white supremacy, private property, individual freedom and responsibility, and capitalism.

I remember the first couple of salvos I encountered in that fight when a group of Christians picketed an AHP meeting in Indianapolis at which a “pagan” was speaking. They brought TV cameras to witness their prayers for the souls of those at the conference. I was interviewed by the TV anchor and took a moderate constructivist and “empathic” position. My words were not aired but the chanting and prayers were featured prominently. Another early encounter was the hate-mail we received against “values clarification” and sex education which included an official document of the John Birch Society smeared with “blood” across the page, denouncing our program as decadent and “anti-American.” (M. O’Hara, personal communication, July 12, 2007)

(Note: Throughout her career, O’Hara has emphasized that humanistic psychology is about emancipation and empowerment. Similar to my emphasis in this article, she believes we are involved in a political struggle and must therefore learn to think and act politically.) I especially recommend O’Hara’s [2001] article, “Emancipatory Therapeutic Practice for a New Era: A Work of Retrieval”).

Arthur Bohart, a humanistic psychologist and scholar, was also active in the humanistic movement of the 1960s. In response to my question as to why humanistic psychology lost its power and influence, he made some insightful comments about American culture and mainstream psychology. Bohart said,

I think current cultural values, both inside and outside academia, played a role. No matter how many excesses there were in the ’60s (and there were many), I still look back on that time and marvel at what it tried to achieve. It tried to achieve a time of peace, of love, and of universal acceptance. (For instance, I remember people taking care of their crazy brothers rather than have them hospitalized.) Yet, the ’60s is derided by the mainstream. It is seen as narcissistic, indulgent, and too loose. So a time which had as its ideals people relating to one another in peace and love, which valued freedom, which prized diversity, which valued rich and colorful experience (music was everywhere, as was colorful clothing, psychedelically painted vans, etc.), and which valued things of the spirit, is derided. I think that tells us a lot about the culture we live in.

It is the same kind of culture where mainstream clinical psychology cannot accept the idea that a human relationship by itself can be healing. Sure, the therapeutic alliance is important, but only as a support for the real “potent” healing of interventions. I have seen many examples where the idea that the relationship can be healing is viewed as silly nonsense. In our book

(Bohart & Tallman, 1999) we quote a psychiatrist who makes fun of the idea that one's "bedside manner" can heal. David Burns says in *Feeling Good* that empathy can make you feel better temporarily, but reinforces dysfunctional thinking and in the long run won't help. A psychologist from Scandinavia that I had an exchange of articles with on evidence-based practice made fun of the idea that "con amore" conversation, as he called it, could help. And a colleague said at a North American Society for Psychotherapy Research conference a few years back that he had had an article rejected by a prominent psychology journal because, in part, one of the reviewers made fun of the idea that the relationship can be healing.

What kind of culture makes fun of the idea that relationship can be healing? It is the same culture that, around 1900, chose brutal treatment of schizophrenics over moral therapy, which essentially was healing by love, and had a success rate that is better than what we have today. Who chose that brutal treatment over moral therapy? M.D.s who claimed that moral therapy wasn't "scientific" (see Robert Whitaker's *Mad in America*, 2002).

I think part of the rejection of humanistic psychology is a fear of things that aren't "tough" and "hard." How often do you hear scientists use language such as "hard science," "tough-minded," "unsentimental," "ruthless, cold logic," and "no nonsense" as if they take pride in being hard and unsentimental. Humanistic is too soft, too fuzzy, too warm, too right brain. It doesn't emphasize cold logic (cognitive behavior therapy), things you can observe (behavior therapy), or materials you can ingest (drugs). Look at the current love affair with biopsychology, as if we can now believe in empathy because someone found mirror neurons. And I think this is the dominant ideology in the culture too, or at least in the power sectors of the culture.

And then I suspect that humanistic psychology's emphasis on freedom is threatening to those who value rigid conservative moral values. So on the one hand you have those who find it not tough enough, and on the other hand those who view it as too loose, and it is marginalized. So I'm not sure it is anything we did as much as we are ahead of our time and it will take awhile for the culture to catch up with us. (A. Bohart, personal communication, April 24, 2007)

Is it any wonder that humanistic psychology lost its power and influence in such a culture? Humanistic psychology is inherently incompatible with right-wing ideologies that seek to impose rigid moral values and suppress civil liberties and individual freedom. Humanistic psychology is a psychology of liberation focused on change and growth, a passionate vision that all human beings have dignity and worth. Perhaps because of the unwritten taboo against discussing politics in scholarly venues, humanistic psychologists have been reluctant to explicitly acknowledge their liberal foundations.

Yet, Buss (1979) was at least partly right when he insisted that humanistic psychology and what he called “liberal ideology” have much in common. This is one reason humanistic psychology blossomed in the liberal soil of the 1960s and wilted so quickly in the ensuing years as conservative forces regained their stranglehold on the country.

Thus, I would argue that humanistic psychology did not lose its power and influence because of its shortcomings and mistakes. We would have survived those. Instead, humanistic psychology lost its power and influence, in large measure, because its liberating vision was a threat to those who were committed to conservative ideologies. Humanistic psychology, like the idealism of the 1960s, has difficulty surviving in a culture where social conservatives, fundamentalist preachers, and right-wing fanatics hold the power.

Mainstream Psychology: How It Undermines Humanistic Psychology

The other major reason humanistic psychology lost its power and influence in American psychology has to do with mainstream psychology. Before readers decide that my paranoid tendencies have gotten the better of me, let me hastily add that I have been a member of the APA for many years and have taught in a traditional psychology program for most of my professional life. It has been my experience that mainstream colleagues are just as ethical, professional, and caring as my humanistic colleagues. Thus, what I have to say here is not intended to be a general assault on the personal integrity or motivations of mainstream psychologists.

Nevertheless, I do believe that mainstream psychology has undermined, and continues to undermine, humanistic psychology. This undermining takes three major forms: (a) perpetuating negative stereotypes about humanistic psychology; (b) failing to acknowledge the scholarly contributions of humanistic psychology; and (c) acknowledging, but then minimizing, the contributions of humanistic psychology. I will discuss each of these below. (Note: I use the term *mainstream psychology* to refer to the “power sectors” of American psychology, i.e., to those prominent individuals, committees, boards, councils, and so forth that have the power to determine, or significantly influence, the values and directions of American psychology. Although most of these power sectors are associated with the APA, they are not necessarily synonymous with that organization).

Perpetuating Negative Stereotypes About Humanistic Psychology

Unfortunately, mainstream psychologists sometimes perpetuate negative stereotypes about the humanistic movement, thereby damaging the reputation and credibility of humanistic psychology and those associated with this orientation. Consider, for example, how Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) characterized humanistic psychology in a special issue of the *American Psychologist* dedicated to Seligman's "positive psychology." In an apparent attempt to distance positive psychology from humanistic psychology, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) wrote,

Unfortunately, humanistic psychology did not attract much of a cumulative empirical base, and it spawned myriad therapeutic self-help movements. In some of its incarnations, it emphasized the self and encouraged a self-centeredness that played down concerns for collective well-being. Future debate will determine whether this came about because Maslow and Rogers were ahead of their time, because these flaws were inherent in their original vision, or because of overly enthusiastic followers. However, one legacy of the humanism of the 1960s is prominently displayed in any large bookstore: The "psychology" section contains at least 10 shelves on crystal healing, aromatherapy, and reaching the inner child for every shelf of books that tries to uphold some scholarly standard. (p. 7)

This paragraph is filled with negative stereotypes about humanistic psychology. According to the authors, humanistic psychology (a) has little empirical base; (b) is self-centered; (c) is unconcerned about others; (d) may be inherently flawed or made to appear so by its followers; (e) is associated with crystals, aromatherapy, and the "inner child"; and (my favorite) (f) is even responsible, apparently, for the merchandising and displays at Barnes and Noble!

It is noteworthy that the authors offered no documentation for their criticisms. Unfortunately, negative stereotypes about humanistic psychology have become so ingrained in mainstream American psychology that even respected scholars can appeal to them in a major journal without even bothering to document their allegations!

Tom Greening and Arthur Bohart, two prominent humanistic scholars, wrote a response that was published in a later issue of the *American Psychologist*. Here, in part, is what Greening and Bohart (2001) said:

We wish that Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi themselves had done a more scholarly job of investigating humanistic psychology. Neither the theory nor practice of humanistic psychology is narrowly focused on the narcissistic self or on individual fulfillment.

The *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* has published over 100 articles . . . dealing with topics such as the promotion of international peace and understanding, the holocaust, the reduction of violence, and the promotion of social welfare and justice for all (and no articles at all on crystals or aromatherapy).

As far as research goes, Carl Rogers has often been called the “father of psychotherapy research.” . . . A considerable body of research has been done and continues to be done on humanistic therapies. Six years ago, Greenberg, Elliott, and Lietaer (1994) concluded, based on their meta-analyses of available research, “. . . there is evidence for the comparability of the effects of experiential therapy with those of cognitive-behavioral and dynamic treatments. . . .” (P. 517). More recently, based on an updated meta-analysis, Elliott (2002) concludes “humanistic therapies as a group appear to be effective for helping distressed clients to change . . . for a wide range of problems” (p. 16). Elliott notes that in many cases effect sizes of humanistic therapies equal or exceed those of cognitive-behavioral therapies.

Our general orientation includes not only approaches which value traditional positivistic research, but alternative scientific approaches based in European philosophy such as phenomenology. . . . In sum, ours is a point of view that values connection, dialogue, understanding and promotion of the welfare of others. (pp. 81-82. Copyright © 2001 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted with permission.)

Greening and Bohart could have added that Rogers was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987, an award not typically given to narcissistic individuals or to those whose theories promote self-centeredness. They might also have mentioned that Viktor Frankl (1963, 1978, 1986) always emphasized that self-actualization can only be attained by those who, in self-forgetful service, dedicate their lives to a cause greater than themselves.

Failing to Acknowledge Humanistic Contributions

Mainstream psychology also undermines humanistic psychology at times by failing to acknowledge its scholarly contributions, as the following examples show:

First, Seligman, mentioned above, provides a contemporary example of this problem. Seligman’s positive psychology is, in many ways, a reframing

of humanistic psychology's longtime emphasis on the strengths and potentials of human beings. Yet, when Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) edited the special issue of the *American Psychologist* discussed above in which hundreds of references associated with this "new" approach were cited, only Viktor Frankl and Abraham Maslow made the list. *Carl Rogers, the first psychologist to reject the pathology model and to develop a scientifically supported theory of psychotherapy that focused on the positive potentials of clients, did not appear in any of the reference lists!*

Second, Heinz Kohut (1971, 1977, 1982, 1984, 1985), who created "self psychology," also failed to acknowledge the similarities between his theory and that of Carl Rogers. Kohut, an influential psychoanalyst who served as president of the American Psychoanalytic Association and vice president of the International Psychoanalytic Association, was originally trained as a classical psychoanalyst by Anna Freud. On the basis of his observations of transference phenomena in certain types of clients, he eventually developed self psychology, a therapeutic approach that was widely hailed as a major innovation in the psychodynamic field. Kohut's theory (1971, 1977, 1984) focused on the development of the self in the young child and how that self can be damaged. To restore a client's damaged self, Kohut believed that "empathic attunement" on the part of the therapist was essential. At first, Kohut believed that empathic attunement was effective because it provided the analyst with better access to the client's inner material so that more accurate interpretations could be made. In time, however, Kohut came around to a view that empathy also had healing capacities within itself. As Kohut (1982) put it, "I must now, unfortunately, add that empathy per se, the mere presence of empathy, has also a beneficial, in a broad sense, a therapeutic effect—both in the clinical setting and in human life in general" (p. 397).

Does any of this sound familiar? Carl Rogers's (1951, 1959, 1972) theory of psychotherapy, first formulated in the 1940s, also focused on the development of the self in the young child and made "empathic understanding" on the part of the therapist a centerpiece of therapy. Yet, despite the obvious similarities between Kohut's theory and that of Rogers, *Kohut never mentioned Rogers in any of his writings (Tobin, 1990)*. If Kohut was oblivious to the similarities between his theory and that of Rogers, other scholars were not. For example, Stolorow (1976) wrote about the similarities, Kahn (1984) published an article in the *American Psychologist* comparing the two theories; and Tobin (1990, 1991) published two articles that discussed the similarities. Thus, this is another example of a prominent clinician who failed to acknowledge humanistic contributions.

Third, spirituality has been a major topic in humanistic psychology for 40 years. In his later years, Maslow (1976) wrote a book about spirituality, started the transpersonal psychology movement, and helped launch *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*. Humanistic and transpersonal psychologists have published dozens of articles and books on spirituality. Several graduate schools associated with the humanistic movement include spirituality as part of their curriculum (e.g., Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, California Institute of Integral Studies, and Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center). In recent years, mainstream psychologists have become interested in spirituality and the APA has published several books on the topic (e.g., Shafraanske, 1996; Miller, 1999; Richards & Bergin, 1997; Richards, Hardman, & Berrett, 2007). Yet, with the exception of Shafraanske (1996), these authors give little credit to humanistic and transpersonal psychologists for their groundbreaking and continuing work in this important area.

Other examples could be given, but these are sufficient to show how humanistic contributions are sometimes ignored, even by prominent clinicians and scholars. The truth is, humanistic psychology has made major contributions to the field. The following list highlights some of these contributions:

1. The humanistic movement was largely responsible for turning America into a “therapeutic culture” and helping enlarge the field of psychology from a small guild of about 7,000 in 1950 into a profession of more than 90,000 today (see APA, 2000; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985).
2. The humanistic movement was primarily responsible for changing society’s perception of psychotherapy from a “medical treatment for mental illness” into a vehicle for personal growth and a source of support and guidance during difficult times (see Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Elkins, in press; Maslow, 1962, 1971; O’Hara, 1996; Rogers, 1942, 1951, 1972).
3. The humanistic movement brought spirituality under the umbrella of psychology and helped make it a legitimate area of psychological study (see Elkins, 2001; Maslow, 1976; Taylor, 1999b).
4. Humanistic scholars did groundbreaking work in the area of philosophy of research, writing about the limitations of the natural science model when applied to psychological phenomena and demonstrating the importance of phenomenological and other qualitative approaches in understanding human experience (e.g., Giorgi, 1968, 1970, 1985; Maslow, 1966; Wertz, 2001).
5. The movement helped create and promote encounter groups, arguably the most effective psychoeducational tool ever invented for helping individuals to develop greater self-awareness and more effective interpersonal skills. Relatedly, the movement demonstrated the therapeutic value of group



- processes and laid foundations for the widespread use of therapy groups in clinical settings today (Lieberman, Yalom, & Miles, 1973; Rogers, 1970).
6. Rogers's Person-Centered Approach (PCA) has been the focus of hundreds of research studies that overwhelmingly have confirmed the effectiveness of his "necessary and sufficient" conditions of therapy—empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard (see Barrett-Lennard, 1998; Rogers, 1959).
 7. Recent meta-analyses of psychotherapy research have confirmed that, on the whole, humanistic therapies are as effective as cognitive-behavioral therapy and psychodynamic approaches (Elkins, 2007; Elliott, 2001; Wampold, 2001).
 8. By emphasizing the importance of the alliance, the relationship, the personality of the therapist, and so on in psychotherapy, humanistic psychologists anticipated contemporary meta-analytic studies that have convincingly demonstrated that therapeutic effectiveness is due primarily to contextual factors and not to modalities and techniques (see Elkins, 2007; Wampold, 2001).
 9. Rollo May almost single-handedly brought existential psychology from Europe to America in the late 1950s, introducing American psychology to this important perspective (see May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958; Taylor, 1999b).
 10. Through their writings, existential psychologists have shown the clinical relevance of existential issues such as death, meaning, isolation, loneliness, authenticity, freedom, limitation, and responsibility (e.g., May, 1972, 1983; Schneider, 2008; Schneider & May, 1995; Bugental, 1976, 1981; Yalom, 1980).
 11. The humanistic movement emphasized the importance of the humanities (e.g., art, poetry, literature, and philosophy) for understanding human experience and for healing and enriching one's inner life (see, e.g., Arons, 1994; Arons & Richards, 2001; Elkins, 1998; May, 1984, 1985; Maslow, 1962, 1971, 1976; Schneider, 2004, 2008; Schneider & May, 1995).
 12. Humanistic psychologists who embrace constructivist, narrative, feminist, and postmodern approaches have demonstrated the importance of these perspectives, especially in a postmodern age when clients struggle with the "tyranny of choice" and with multiple realities and selves (see Anderson, 1990, 1998; Leitner & Epting, 2001; O'Hara, 2001; Wadlington, 2001).
 13. Contemporary humanistic thought, which focuses on such postmodern perspectives as alternative epistemologies, the social construction of reality, and the relativity and limitations of abstract theoretical systems, is arguably more attuned to the postmodern age than is mainstream psychology, which often seems stuck in traditional perspectives that reflect modern era assumptions (see Anderson, 1990, 1998; Elkins, 1998; Krippner, 2001; O'Hara, 1997, 2001).
 14. Humanistic psychology has had a significant impact on other fields such as education, nursing, social work, organizational development, and so on (see DeCarvalho, 1991; Goble, 1978; Maslow, 1998; Montuori & Purser, 2001; Thomas, 2001; Welch, Tate, & Richards, 1978).

Minimizing Humanistic Contributions

Mainstream psychologists also undermine humanistic psychology at times by acknowledging, but then minimizing, its contributions. A classic example is the professor who acknowledges that humanistic psychology made contributions to psychotherapy but then summarizes (and minimizes) those contributions by saying, “Humanistic psychology showed us the importance of having a good relationship with the client.” Another example is the clinical supervisor who tells trainees that Rogerian therapy is “a good place to start.” Yet another example is the professor who acknowledges that existential psychology deals with important human issues but then says, “However, existential psychology is too philosophical and unscientific to be of much use to clinicians.”

Minimization is very destructive. In fact, it may be even more destructive than negative stereotypes and failing to acknowledge humanistic contributions. Minimization has a deceptive quality in that it allows one to acknowledge contributions while, at the same time, leaving the impression that those contributions were not particularly important or extensive. Minimization is “damning with faint praise.” It is a “backhanded compliment” that takes away more than it gives.

Humanistic Psychology and Mainstream Psychology: The Deeper Problem

Although the problems discussed above are serious, I believe they are symptoms of an even deeper problem, which can be stated as follows: *The assumptions and values of humanistic psychology are in radical conflict with the assumptions and values of contemporary mainstream psychology.* I will describe two areas where this conflict is especially apparent: (a) philosophy of research and (b) model of psychotherapy.

Philosophy of Research

Mainstream psychology is committed to the natural science paradigm as the “gold standard” in psychological research. Indeed, the commitment is so strong that it sometimes borders on “scientism,” that is, the philosophical position that the methods of the natural sciences should be used in all investigative endeavors. It is easy to forget that human beings choose their epistemological perspectives, which themselves are not scientifically verifiable. *In other words, to say that the natural science model should be the gold*

standard in psychological research is not itself a scientific statement. It is a personal belief, a philosophical position, sometimes even an ideology. Thus, it is appropriate to ask on what basis mainstream psychology has decided that the natural science model is the gold standard for psychological research. Just because the model has been effective in the study of “things” does not necessarily mean that it is the best model for the study of psychological phenomena. Amedeo Giorgi (1968, 1970, 1985, 1992, 2001, 2005), a humanistic scholar and research philosopher, has long maintained that psychology is a unique discipline that requires its own kind of science—what he has termed “human science” (see Giorgi, 1970). According to Giorgi (2005), the discipline of psychology is still in a preparadigmatic state of development, that is, it has not yet defined its own unique domain, clarified its subject matter, or invented research methods appropriate to that subject matter.

Humanistic psychologists are not opposed to the natural science model when it is appropriate to the phenomenon being studied. However, certain types of psychological phenomena (e.g., meaning and relationships) do not easily lend themselves to investigation by this model. Thus, many humanistic psychologists believe that one’s research methods should be adapted to the phenomenon being studied instead of the other way around (see Giorgi, 1970; Maslow, 1966).

Model of Psychotherapy

Mainstream psychology is committed to the medical model. This model imposes a medical schema on psychotherapy and uses medical language to describe therapeutic work. Although thousands of psychotherapists eschew the medical model and know that it does not accurately describe what actually occurs in therapy, the model remains the dominant descriptive schema for psychotherapy in mainstream psychology, held in place by powerful political and economic forces (see Elkins, 2007, in press). In contrast, most humanistic psychologists view psychotherapy not so much as a “treatment for mental illness” as a liberating interpersonal process that helps clients to grow and that provides support during difficult times (Elkins, in press; O’Hara, 2001). For many of us, this is not simply a matter of theoretical disagreement but a matter of respecting the dignity and worth of clients and refusing to endorse a model that tends to pathologize and disempower those who seek our services.

Thus, there is a chasm of “Grand Canyon” proportions between the assumptions and values of humanistic psychology and those of contemporary mainstream psychology. We cannot even agree on how to do research or conduct psychotherapy! *I believe this fundamental divide best explains why the*

two systems are so often in conflict and why some mainstream psychologists undermine humanistic perspectives. At some level, they know that if humanistic psychology were to regain its power and influence, it would represent a major threat to the contemporary psychological establishment—just as it was a threat to the psychological establishment of the 1950s and 1960s.

Implications

Perhaps the most important implication of the analysis presented in this article is that humanistic psychologists must think and act *politically* to advance humanistic psychology. *Simply put, if political forces marginalized us, then we must think and act politically to counteract those forces.*

What kind of action is needed? I would offer two suggestions. First, I believe we should create a think tank composed of a small group of our most talented and *politically astute* leaders who agree to meet on a regular basis for the sole purpose of developing strategies and tactics designed to counteract the destructive forces—in both American culture and mainstream psychology—with which humanistic psychology has to contend.

Second, I believe we should enthusiastically embrace our revolutionary tradition and launch a coordinated campaign to highlight the limitations and failures of mainstream American psychology and to describe humanistic and other progressive alternatives. For example, if we were to “flood the market” over the next 10 years with strategically planned books, articles, presentations, radio programs, television interviews, magazine articles, Internet blogs, and other forms of communication dedicated to this theme, I believe we would (at least) provoke a greatly needed debate about the current state of American psychology, and we might even bring about important changes in our field.

Perhaps the greatest danger the humanistic movement faces at this point in its history is that members of the second and third generations of humanistic psychologists will abandon the radical nature of the humanistic vision. Humanistic psychology is a revolutionary perspective. Rooted in the dynamic humanism that inspired ancient Greece and that ignited the European Renaissance, humanistic psychology has the power to transform individuals, families, groups, organizations, and even cultures. It offers therapeutic and educational experiences that empower and emancipate, setting clients and students on lifelong journeys of self-realization and inspiring them to take action in the world, as May (1983) might have put it. Humanistic psychology offers something that no other psychology offers:

an explicit vision of what it means to be fully human and to create a life of passion and depth.

So if we truly believe that mainstream American psychology is headed in the wrong direction and that humanistic psychology can offer progressive changes, then we have a responsibility—perhaps even a moral obligation—to do something about it. And I know of no other group that is better qualified—by history, training, and experience—to do this than humanistic psychologists. To adapt and paraphrase Hillel: If not we, then who?

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