

HUMANISTIC THEORIES

Directions:

Read the article on Humanism, then answer the following questions

1. What is humanistic psychology?
 2. Have you had someone in your life who accepted you unconditionally? Do you think this person helped you to know yourself better and to develop a better image of yourself?
 3. What does it mean to be “empathetic”? To be “self-actualized”?
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Humanism

[Saul McLeod](#) published 2007, updated 2015

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.

Humanism is a [psychological perspective](#) that emphasizes the study of the whole person. Humanistic psychologists look at human behavior not only through the eyes of the observer, but through the eyes of the person doing the behaving.

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](#).

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**.

Humanistic Psychology Assumptions

Humanistic psychology begins with the existential assumptions that phenomenology is central and 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.

A further assumption is then added - 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.

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. This has been captured by the term self-actualization, which is about psychological growth, fulfillment and satisfaction in life. However, Rogers and Maslow both describe different ways of how self-actualization can be achieved.

Central to the humanistic theories of [Rogers](#) (1959) and [Maslow](#) (1943) are the subjective, conscious experiences of the individual. Humanistic psychologists argue that objective reality is less important than a person's subjective perception and understanding of the world. Because of this, 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.

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.

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.

Humanistic Approach Summary

Key Features

- [Qualitative Research](#)
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- [Idiographic Approach](#)
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- [Congruence](#)
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- [Self Concept](#) (e.g. self-worth, self-image, self actualization)
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- [Holism](#) (e.g. study to whole person)
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- [Hierarchy of needs](#)
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- [Free Will](#)

Basic Assumptions

- Humans have free will; not all behavior is determined.
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- All individuals are unique and have an innate (inborn) drive to achieve their maximum potential.
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- A proper understanding of human behavior can only be achieved by studying humans - not animals.
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Methodology

- [Qualitative Methods](#)
- [Case Study](#)
- [Informal Interviews](#)
- [Q-Sort Method](#) (Stephenson, 1953)
- Open-ended [Questionnaires](#)
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- Inter-rater/coder reliability

Areas of Application

- [Person Centered Therapy](#)
- [Qualitative Methods](#)
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- Abnormal behavior = [incongruence](#) & [low self-worth](#)(e.g. [depression](#))
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- [Education](#)
- [Motivation](#)

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

Strengths

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

Limitations

- Ignores biology (e.g. testosterone).
- Unscientific – subjective concepts.
- E.g. cannot objectively measure self-actualization.
- Humanism ignores the unconscious mind.
- Behaviorism – human and animal behavior can be compared.
- **Qualitative data** is difficult to compare.
- Ethnocentric (biased towards Western culture).
- Their belief in free will is in opposition to the deterministic laws of science.

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 reasons for this lack of impact on academic psychology perhaps lies with the fact that humanism deliberately adopts a non-scientific approach to studying humans. 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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