Reflections on Humanistic Psychology and The Person-Centered Approach

Charles Merrill

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show the evolution of myself as a humanistic psychologist and how the influence of Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow and Rollo May were a central part of my learning process. The core values of each theorist have retained potency over more than thirty years of my professional service. As part of this paper, I will endeavor to give a brief overview of humanistic psychology and the person-centered approach as part of the larger impact on more reductive approaches that were dominant at the time.

Keywords: humanistic psychology, Carl Rogers, Rollo May, Abraham Maslow, Person-centered approach

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Introduction

As I consider the place of humanistic psychology and client-centered therapy in modern American psychology, I see these approaches as having been integrated into much of what we consider as relevant for a fully lived life.

Theorizing about what became humanistic psychology began in the 1950s as a strong reaction to the devaluing of the person. Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and Rollo May were strong voices for change in how we conceptualized psychology.

I have observed and participated in the development of humanistic psychology at one of two state universities in the United States that continues to offer both undergraduate and graduate degrees in this foundational area. These state supported colleges are Sonoma State University in Rohnert Park, CA, and West Georgia University in Carrollton, GA. These universities were founded in the mid 1960s during the era when humanistic psychology was in a formative stage.

The Saybrook Institute in San Francisco, that prepares professionals at the masters and doctoral levels has a strong humanistic foundation and offers the student the opportunity to study at his/her own pace with the support and help of a mentor. Saybrook was an outgrowth of the Humanistic Psychology Institute (HPI) at Sonoma State University. HPI began under the leadership of two psychology faculty colleagues (Dr. Eleanor Criswell and Dr. Art Warmoth). They conceived the idea of a humanistic professional school that trusted the person to be mentored in a direction that was congruent with his/her life path.

The Humanistic Psychology Institute experienced a very enthusiastic and timely beginning. It later evolved into The Saybrook Institute, which is privately funded by student fees and endowments. It provides an alternative to more traditional graduate education where a student may adapt his/her learning style to the study of professional psychology with a humanistic, existential and person-centered focus.
I was impressed with the supportive climate of innovation at Sonoma State College (as it was called at that time) when I arrived there in the fall of 1969. The psychology department was an informally organized group of professionals who all came from more traditional institutions. The climate was open and inviting to both students and faculty. All were encouraged to follow the learning goals that were set as part of the psychology curriculum. There was minimal structure and each student with faculty guidance could design a unique program of study.

**Traditional Models**

The schools of psychoanalysis, behaviorism and experimental psychology had quite a hold on what was acceptable in the field. Psychoanalysis was highly valued as an approach to psychotherapy and understanding personality. The approach was predominantly used in large urban areas in addition to private institutions and practices.

Behaviorism (and later cognitive approaches) appealed to medical schools and traditional universities, along with public and private clinics. Measurements on the behavioral outcomes of interventions were recorded, research was conducted and the principles of behavioral practices were taught. Cognitive and behavioral approaches were considered to be straightforward with clear outcomes. Measurable behavior was highly valued by many psychology professionals. Feelings were also valued, but less so than behavior change. Inferences where considered less reliable based on shifts in feeling, than direct observation of behavioral change. In a private conversation between Charles Stuart and B. F. Skinner circa 1970, Skinner stated, “needed emotional change would come from changes in behavior.” (C. Stuart, personal communication, September 2013)

Experimental psychology, although not a direct part of the behaviorism school, has been prized by American academic psychology over many decades because it follows the strict principles of the scientific method. Obviously, experimental...
psychology is more measurable and controllable than more heuristic approaches to studying the human condition.

One common theme with all three of the above models, is that they saw the therapist or researcher as having a direct effect on outcomes. The researcher and psychologist were catalysts for bringing about behavior change toward goals set by the client with guidance and support from the psychologist or researcher. I might add that these psychological approaches are also considered to bring about greater client self-control. While the expert is only a catalyst, he/she is also the one who knows how to proceed. The person or client has the final responsibility but is encouraged to follow the lead of the psychologist.

**Client Centered Therapy**

When Carl Rogers was learning about the inner life of clients and his respect for the person’s right to choose direction, he was formulating what became non-directive counseling. This non-directive approach later evolved into client-centered therapy and finally in the 1980s into the person-centered approach. Rogers viewed the person-centered approach as having broader applications than the non-directive therapist-client relationship. He experimented with small process groups and large groups of from forty to one hundred participants. The large group experiences were in educational, political and community settings.

Client-centered therapy and humanistic psychology were becoming well known in the United States, around the same time. The country had just lived through the tumultuous civil rights era of the 1960s and was also embroiled with the Vietnam War that did not end until 1973. Citizens were feeling discouraged and disregarded by the Federal government. There was a wind blowing in the country that called for greater respect for the individual as a person.
Personal Readiness for Client Centered Therapy and Humanistic Psychology

As a young professional, I well remember a sense of personal enlightenment when I read Carl Rogers’ (1977) book on Personal Power. I felt like his writing was speaking to me and I responded openly to his views about valuing personal autonomy.

I remember when former President Carter was dealing with the animosity and hatred between Egypt and Israel. The Camp David Accords was his attempt to bring the leaders of the two countries together for difficult but much needed talks. I do not know whether President Carter was aware of Rogers’ book On Personal Power (1977), but the book was in line with what he was trying to achieve in bringing peace between Egypt and Israel.

When I began to read about client centered therapy and humanistic psychology in the early 1960s, I thought more about these views as models for development and personal growth. I was less concerned about how to impact the larger social order than how to affect the individual. I was also young and interested in new insights and moving forward with what I learned from my rural Northeast Texas background.

As I read On Becoming a Person (1961) as well as Client Centered Therapy (1951), Rogers’ open, clear and self-reflective writing style had a strong influence and changed my thinking about the human condition. I found his lack of arrogance and willingness to be wrong most engaging. I did not want the book to end. I had already committed myself to becoming a psychological counselor and educator, but was more determined to continue on that path after my discovery of the writings of Carl Rogers.

At that time, Rogers was writing mostly about individual counseling, student-centered teaching and small group work. I was involved with all three in graduate school and felt very open to his ideas and his approach to learning. This may sound odd, but I have not studied a theoretical approach since those heady days that has had as much direct impact on my thinking as did Rogers.
Humanistic Psychology

In graduate school, I was also exposed to the writing of A. H. Maslow and Rollo May. These two theorists were a powerful combination along with my study of client-centered therapy. I found both to be more abstract and relied more on conceptual theorizing (especially Maslow) but less personally satisfying than Rogers. I did, however, find their work very stimulating and complementary to what I was reading by Rogers and I integrated these approaches into my professional work.

Having been raised in a conventional family and community, I found these thinkers to be like a breath of fresh air. There was an acceptance of the person as he/she is rather than trying to shape one to a set of dogmatic principles. One of the strengths of humanistic psychology for me has been the focus on the human potential and openness to change of both attitudes and behaviors. Trusting in one’s own experience has been true for me during my life, and I credit these theorists for affirming life as having intellectual and personal meaning.

A. H. Maslow’s (1962) concept of self-actualization and the peak-experience is related to Rogers’ actualizing tendency when a growth-engendering environment is provided. As Maslow described self-actualizing people, he emphasized that living a life with a mission of service could lead to self-actualization. Maslow theorized that one could achieve self-actualization only indirectly rather than as an identified goal. In other words, self-actualization is more of a by-product of how one lives life.

The peak-experience seems to be part of self-actualization because one cannot will a peak-experience, but is instead surprised when it occurs. It might be an awe-inspiring event; a moment of feeling a confirmation and clarity about one’s self rather than feeling of continued adherence to a social role. An example might be that Rogers (1980) referred to not just growing old, but to becoming older and growing. Rather than becoming rigid, Rogers was an excellent example of a man who valued his work and relationships across the human spectrum. His later work toward world peace is an example of how he remained open to his own experience as well as

attentively listening to the differences being expressed by others in large group settings. Age did not seem to work against him, but may have enhanced his sense of compassion about human potential.

I had never known that the sense of being at one with the world was considered a peak-experience. The closest I ever came to something related to the peak-experience was through religious prayer. I mention prayer with some tentativeness because I do not currently consider myself a religious person, although as a young man, I did practice protestant Christianity. In fact, I was very strong in that faith into early adulthood. There were times during a religious service, where I felt a kind of presence of something beyond my consciousness, but it may have been the emotional stirrings from the preacher or the singing of traditional Gospel hymns. I also felt a closeness with others in the congregation and remember re-dedicating my life to service on two occasions. These religious experiences may have been close to peak-experiences for me since I felt at one with a greater consciousness, my family and personal community.

Rogers' concept of unconditional positive regard and empathy were so meaningful to me, that I began to question the dogmatic religious principles that had been meaningful as a young boy. As time progressed, I turned more to humanism than to religious doctrine and eventually withdrew from the protestant faith in which I had been raised. I did appreciate the community fellowship and have been challenged to find a group of like-minded persons with similar values. For many years, I thought that humanistic psychology and some of my university colleagues might fill the gap of community. The Association for the Development of the Person-Centered Approach has met many of my personal and professional needs for community.

During the earlier years of my professional academic career, I did feel a strong sense of valuing the person without an apriori set of expectations. Of course, working in a framework of an academic setting there were expectations of professional performance in order to move through the hierarchical system of promotion and tenure. The academic process was distancing and at times, I felt more objectified than valued as a person. It seemed that compliance with
formal procedures and peer expectations was more important than being encouraged to discover my own creative expression. I quickly learned that a professional community was very different than one that did not judge performance outcomes. I read how Rogers and Maslow struggled with being innovative thinkers, teachers and researchers in an academic setting, which showed limited appreciation for their efforts. Both men managed to continue their research, writing and teaching in the face of opposition and at times ridicule. I had a much more supportive group of colleagues with which to work and learn, yet there remained the coolness of the academic environment.

Rollo May worked primarily as an author and psychologist in private clinical practice and occasionally as a teacher of professionals. Therefore, he was not confronted with the pettiness that can be present in academia. May was a pioneer in helping to bring existential philosophy to the United States after World War II. May’s (1958) *Existence* was the first major text that introduced European existentialism to professionals in the United States.

**Thoughts About The Future**

Much has happened since the time I first began studying humanistic psychology and client-centered therapy. Practitioners now have managed care. Long-term psychotherapy has nearly been halted altogether, unless the client is able and willing to privately pay. Such moves by insurance companies and government agencies have basically underwritten approaches that are short-term and behavior-based.

Professionals in nonprofit agencies, university settings and governmental clinics have needed to move to more brief-therapy approaches, which has had a less than positive impact on humanistic and client-centered therapy. Since patterns are resistant to change, the client needs time to realize meaningful insights in a climate of caring and acceptance and then decide whether or not to change. There is a tendency in behavioral and cognitive-based therapies to pace the client too quickly. Often, the client may need to feel and consider a new awareness before attempting to make a behavioral

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change. In my view, the new awareness is already a change in behavior.

One factor that has been discussed at length among my colleagues at Sonoma State, is that many of the principles of humanistic psychology, and what Rogers later termed the person-centered approach, have been integrated into American society.

For example, organization development professionals use principles and values of humanistic psychology and have adapted methods that facilitate organizational change. Yes, there is a behavioral component here as well, but business organizations have not been shackled with managed care. A business practitioner may feel awkward using terms like therapy and prefer more accepted terms like process consultant or coach. There is a strong emphasis on open and clear communication among co-workers and between labor and management.

It is my professional opinion, that in the United States, we are very much in need of the additional applications of humanistic psychology and the person-centered approach. The Iraq and Afghanistan wars along with the government’s action towards taking away American citizens’ basic rights have done harm to this country and how we are perceived throughout the World. The Patriot Act of 2001, and the ongoing monitoring of Internet and phone communications are examples of how our rights have been eroded. We say that we continue to value freedom and liberty when threatened by terrorism, but the government has made compromises on human rights. Another example is the ongoing controversy about how the United States will respond to Syria with either a diplomatic solution, or a symbolic show of military power.

A basic respect for the right of the individual person to be trusted to choose the path that is right for him/her has been eroded. The need for a person-centered approach is as important today as it was in the past. One major challenge today is to attract a new generation of graduate students and young professionals to humanistic and person-centered psychology through such organizations as the Association for Development of the Person-Centered Approach. I also want to include the Association for Humanistic Psychology, the Society for Humanistic Psychology

(Division 32 of the American Psychological Association), The World Person-Centered Association in Europe and the British Association for the Person-Centered Approach professional association.

There is also a need for practitioners to become a stronger voice outside of psychology and educational circles and make our expertise available to nonprofit and for profit business, governmental institutions and community organizations. I have had the good fortune of working with colleagues who have shared a similar vision.

I want to do more to further humanistic psychology and the person-centered approach as I near the next step in my own professionally and personal growth. Even after setbacks with managed care and a dehumanizing divisive climate in Washington, I remain hopeful that humanistic and person-centered psychology will continue to be viable choices at individual, group and societal levels.
References


