

Humanistic-Existential Theory: A Group Theory Paper  
Wanda M. Woodward, MS

What is psychotherapy and its goal? For a humanistic psychotherapist, psychotherapy is a qualitative, phenomenological relationship between therapist and client in which the goal of therapy is to provide the appropriate milieu in which the client can activate the self-actualizing tendency. For a humanistic therapist, the quality of the client-therapist relationship is paramount in the facilitation of client growth. Indeed, Rogers (1961) no longer asks the question “How can I treat or cure this person?”, rather now asks the question: “How can I provide a relationship which this person may use for his own personal growth?”. Rogers (1961) believes that “change comes about through experience in a relationship,” therefore, humanistic-existential therapy focuses on the process of the therapeutic relationship and, ultimately, the client’s phenomenological and ontological process. The three primary therapist ingredients in the therapeutic relationship which fosters growth in a person are empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence although Rogers broadened his hypothesis to include these ingredients as necessary for growth in any relationship. When the therapist provides this type of relationship for the client, Rogers believes that “change and constructive personal development will invariably occur” (Rogers, 1961). According to Rogers, psychotherapy should emphasize three aspects of the therapists’ role: 1) the importance of responding to expressed feelings rather than content, 2) the acceptance of the client’s feelings by the therapist, and 3) the clarification of the client’s expressed feelings (Bozarth, Zimring & Tausch, in Cain, 2002). Once change begins, the client will get “behind the mask” and “become more and more himself” (Rogers, 1961). The client will experience feeling more and discover the

“unknown elements of self” (Rogers, 1961). Rogers referred to several dynamics which take place as a person changes and moves closer to a fully functioning person. The person will move away from facades, from “oughts,” away from meeting others’ expectations and pleasing others. The person will be open to experiences, trust self more, be more accepting of others, develop an internal locus of control and become more open to the process of becoming rather than the content of what that means (Rogers, 1961). Rogers referred to this therapeutic process as “person-centered” therapy (Rogers, 1980) and, unlike his predecessors, believed that the therapist’s attitude, not techniques, was central to successful therapy and the client, not the therapist, is the agent for self-change (Bozarth, Zimring & Tausch, in Cain, 2002). According to Maslow, “counseling is not concerned with training or with molding or with teaching in the ordinary sense of telling people what to do and how to do it. It is a Taoist uncovering and then helping. Taoistic means the non-interfering, the ‘letting be’” (Maslow, 1971). Maslow believed the therapist was there to assist the client in being more fully human, in recovering himself, getting to know himself, respecting his inner nature, the being, his essence (Maslow, 1962, 1971). For any humanistic-existentialist therapist, psychotherapy must ultimately be a process whereby the client is facilitated in discovering, uncovering and awakening to their innate potential and moving toward becoming an authentic, fully functioning person. Additionally, unlike cognitive-behavioral therapies which focus primarily on cognition, humanistic-existential therapies emphasize emotions (Cain, 2002).

Rogers focused somewhat less on will and choice than did May who defined himself more of an existentialist whose writings and therapeutic process highlighted the dilemmas facing humankind, i.e., anxiety, guilt, loneliness, and the very real decisions and

choices that everyone must make when consciously deciding to move away from conformity and toward authenticity. Frankl referred to his logotherapy as “healing through meaning” with an emphasis on finding meaning and purpose in life’s situations and experiences, particularly the tragic (Marseille, 1997). Finding meaning and purpose in life is a basic human need according to humanistic-existential theory (Cain, 2002).

Major influences for the authors of this paper were Frankl, Maslow, May, Rogers and Bugental. For one author of this paper, Western and Eastern philosophers hold an equal influence as have major psychologists in understanding human development and in providing a comprehensive and cogent exegesis for the development of the self, particularly with reference to ego transcendence. Major influences for the humanistic-existentialist psychologists were the philosophers Heidegger, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Husserl, Tillich, Jaspers and Sartre. Additionally, Maslow referred to both Plato and the neo-Platonic philosophers in his writings on B-values (Maslow, 1971). Indeed, May was a student of Tillich and Maslow referred to Taoism when speaking of ego transcendence (Maslow, 1971).

As a whole, the humanistic-existential movement arose as a refutation of the mechanistic and deterministic thinking within psychoanalytical and cognitive-behavioral theories. Humanistic-existentialists believe that humans are more than machines and deserve dignity and respect for all mental and emotional aspects of being human. Existentialists went even a step further by bringing to the forefront the very real human drama that exists as humans struggle with the existential dilemmas inherent in life such as life, accepting responsibility, freedom and death. These struggles are fundamentally tied to humankind’s search for meaning and purpose. Humanistic-existentialist theory places

more importance on the conscious than the unconscious since it is the conscious level which must struggle with, and arrive at solutions to, dilemmas. Humanistic-existential theorists believe that all humans have an innate drive toward growth and healing, a self-actualizing tendency. (Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1961, 1980) and humans are born either neutral or good (Maslow, 1962). Once basic physiological needs of safety are met, the human instinctively moves toward higher levels of psychological growth and toward what Maslow termed “self-actualization” or “the fully human person,” “the realm of Being” (Maslow, 1962, 1971) and to what Rogers referred to as the “fully functioning person” (Rogers, 1961). This self-actualizing tendency is biologically rooted and is our highest and deepest nature, according to Maslow. To Rogers, it is “the mainspring of life” awaiting only “the proper conditions to be released and expressed” (Rogers, 1961).

Maslow believed that once the D-needs (deficiency needs) are met (physiological, safety, love and affection and self-esteem in ascending order), the human instinctually moves toward the B-needs (Being, meta or growth needs). Maslow referred to truth, goodness, beauty, perfection, completion, justice, order, simplicity, richness, effortlessness, playfulness, self-sufficiency, wholeness and dichotomy-transcendence as the B-Values, the higher values of the higher, deeper nature of human essence (Maslow, 1971). Near the end of Maslow’s life, he further distinguished between two degrees of self-actualizers: those who are “healthy, but with little or no experiences of transcendence and those in whom transcendent experiencing was important and even central” (Maslow, 1962, 1971). For transcendents, according to Maslow, “peak experiences and plateau experiences become the most important things in their lives” as these “bring clearer vision of the B-Values, of the ideal, of the perfect, of what ought to be, what actually could be,

what exists in potential—and therefore of what might be brought to pass”. Further, they “speak easily the language of Being...of men who live at the Platonic-idea level.” Maslow spoke of transcendence as “the ‘transpersonal’ loss of ego” (Maslow, 1971). Largely concerned with studying what constitutes the “good society,” Maslow believed that “education must be seen as at least partially an effort to produce the good human being, to foster the good life and the good society.” His theory, along with other humanistic-existentialists, emphasized psychological health and well-being, not pathology, in an attempt to provide a whole picture of human development. It is the emphasis on humankind’s innate drive toward higher levels of growth and maturity that distinguish the greatest theoretical difference between humanistic-existential theories and those theories which preceded it.

From the humanistic-existential perspective, therapeutic change processes aim to activate the self-actualizing instinct inherent in human beings, primarily through the establishment of conditions that allow for the satisfaction of certain basic psychological needs (e.g., love, validation, acceptance) which, prior to the therapeutic experience, were not adequately met. When clients experience deficiencies with respect to such needs, the ability of their self-actualizing tendency to unfold may be inhibited. Therapy, insofar as it addresses such deficiency motivated individuals (as most of us are, to some extent), must be interpersonal since such deficiencies are (at least initially) supplied by others (Maslow, 1968, 1999). Thus, the therapeutic relationship itself can be said to be a fundamental process of change from a humanistic-existential perspective. Rogers’ facilitative conditions identify some of the key qualities that the therapeutic relationship must have in order to nurture the self-actualizing instinct. Congruence, empathy and unconditional

positive regard (love, acceptance, and authenticity) are the primary conditions (Rogers, 1980). Therapeutic presence in the sense of the establishment of an I-Thou relationship in which the therapist is open to being affected is implicit in these conditions. Such presence is necessary to the opening up and embracing of subjectivity required for deeper levels of character change (Bugental, 1987). Such a relationship fosters consciousness raising as clients, experiencing the safety and acceptance of the therapist, become increasingly willing to engage in deeper levels of communication which facilitates their capacity to consciously access deeper levels of their own experience. This could include increasing awareness of underlying feelings, behavioral patterns, thoughts or gaining insight into the nature of one's present condition. Cathartic moments may occur as clients begin to access and release long held affect previously too dangerous to admit to consciousness.

The following are some basic assumptions regarding humanity and the therapeutic process:

- Human beings have an innate drive toward self-actualization, and
- Human beings will continually evolve from lower to higher levels of psychological maturity

The previous two assumptions reflect a basic trust that, under the proper circumstances, human beings will find what they need in order to grow. The therapeutic relationship, to be deeply effective, must be one in which the total humanity of all participants, and in particular the subjective world of the client, must be embraced. This does not mean that the therapist must agree that particular attitudes, thoughts, feelings or behaviors of the client are healthy or correct in some objective sense, but rather that such aspects of the client should be accepted as flowing from the client's organization of reality

and reflecting the client's subjective experience of life. Most of all, the relationship must be one which recognizes that people are ends unto themselves (i.e., participants should relate as "I -Thou"). The willingness of the therapist to embrace and be moved by the subjective world of the client regardless of content will influence the ability of the client to embrace his or her own subjectivity. Deeper levels of communication in session (e.g., critical occasions and intimacy) are necessary to produce characterological change in clients (Bugental, 1987). The therapist's ability to open up to, and be moved by, the client is related to the therapist's ability to open up to his or her own subjective experience.

In terms of the authors' *personal* theories, we are largely in agreement with the theoretical underpinnings of humanistic-existential thought, however, we believe that the conspicuous absence in humanistic-existential thought of the spiritual and sacred dimension of human consciousness and human experience which is inherent in Western and Eastern philosophy and psychology renders the theories incomplete. In the last few years of his life, Maslow (1971) perhaps came closer than any other humanistic-existential psychologist to integrating the spiritual into his theoretical works as he studied "self-actualizing transcendents" or those who transcend ego. Indeed, Maslow (1971) referred to Taoism and Platonic and neo-Platonic ontology in his Theory Z and is considered as a philosophical father of both humanistic and transpersonal psychology (Walsh & Vaughan, 1980). The authors of this paper believe that any psychological study of human beings which fails to include the spiritual dimension is an incomplete study of the fullness of ontological existence. We believe Platonic and neo-Platonic theology, along with Eastern philosophies and psychologies of Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism, and Taoism offer more complete pictures of the higher states of human consciousness or simply of what is referred

to by Platonic and neo-Platonic writings as “Being.” It is in that sense that the broad rubric of humanistic-existential theory (with the exception of Maslow and Frankl in their later years), albeit fuller than psychoanalytic and cognitive-behavioral theories, lacks a holistic view of human development because they fail to *explicitly* recognize ego transcendence as a key ontic experience. Understanding humanistic-existential theory as one more step or developmental phase within the “chain” of Being would be a more accurate representation.



## References

- Bugental, J. F. T. (1987). *The Art of the Psychotherapist*. New York: Norton.  
John Wiley & Sons.
- Bozarth, J. D., Zimring, F. M., & Tausch, R. (2002). Client-Centered Therapy: The Evolution of a Revolution. In Cain, D. J. & Seeman, J. (Eds.), *Humanistic Psychotherapies: Handbook of research and practice* (pp. 147-188). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Cain, D. J. (2002). Defining Characteristics, History, and Evolution of Humanistic Psychotherapies. In Cain, D. J. & Seeman, J. (Eds.), *Humanistic Psychotherapies: Handbook of research and practice*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Marseille, J. (1997). The Spiritual Dimension in Logotherapy: Viktor Frankl's Contribution to Transpersonal Psychology. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 29(1), 1-12.
- Maslow, A. H. (1962). *Toward a Psychology of Being*. New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc.
- Maslow, A. H. (1971). *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. New York: Penguin Group.
- May, R. (1953). *Man's Search for Himself*. New York: Dell Publishing Group.
- Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Rogers, C.R. (1980). *A way of being*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Walsh, R. N., & Vaughan, F. (1980). *Beyond Ego: Transpersonal Dimensions in Psychology*. Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc: Los Angeles, California.