

What is humanistic psychology and why is it called the third force in psychology?...

[Psychology](#), [Behaviorism](#)



Humanistic psychology is best understood as a reaction to two other early psychological approaches. The first, psychodynamic, was developed by Sigmund Freud as a way of investigating and understanding the human mind (1). Sigmund Freud was the first to suggest that much of our behaviour was perhaps influenced by unconscious desires, which he theorised during his work as a neurological consultant at a children's hospital in Vienna (2). Freud attempted to demonstrate how these unconscious thoughts and desires could surface through parapraxis (3), which are now known as Freudian slips, and studied the mind using techniques such as free association and dream interpretation. Dreams, as he saw them, were said to be "the royal road to the unconscious". Today many psychologists believe that the idea of a conscious/unconscious divide is slightly reductionist and prefer to believe that there are merely different levels of awareness.

Another important early approach to psychology is behaviourism, which attempts to explain all behaviour as being learned from the environment. Burrhus Frederic Skinner, for example, demonstrated how animals can learn by reinforcement with his invention of the operant conditioning chamber (colloquially known as a 'Skinner box'). The box included a loudspeaker, lights, response lever, electrified floor and food dispenser. Using these, Skinner was able to train small animals to accomplish complicated tasks by manipulating their environment. Most famously, he managed to train pigeons to play table tennis (4).

While Skinner was successful in showing how operant conditioning can influence our behaviour, John Broadus Watson and Ivan Pavlov were equally

as successful in demonstrating the potential of classical conditioning (learning by association). During the controversial Little Albert study conducted in 1920 John Watson conditioned an 11 month old child to fear a small white rat by striking a steel bar with a hammer while the child was playing with the rat. Ivan Pavlov conditioned dogs to salivate at the sound of a bell by associating this sound with their feeding over a period of time. Both experiments show how a neutral stimulus can elicit a conditioned response when paired with an unconditioned stimulus.

Psychoanalysis and behaviourism both came about in the 1890's and were for a long time the only major schools of thought in psychology.

Approximately 60 years later, however, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow and Clark Moustakas decided a more holistic approach was required. They believed that the human mind should be studied as a whole unit rather than as the sum of its individual parts and after several meetings in Detroit, Michigan they began to develop a new force that they called humanistic psychology. Humanistic psychology is a modern way of looking at psychological issues and debates that focuses on human aspects and contexts for the development of its theories. It is sometimes referred to as the third force in psychology since it originated as a reaction to Sigmund Freud's aforementioned psychoanalysis theory and Ivan Pavlov, John B. Watson and B. F. Skinner et al's behaviourist theory. Humanistic psychology has been officially recognised by the American Psychological Association since 1971.

Whereas behavioural psychology attempted to explain its theories with empirical studies and experiments, such as Watson's Little Albert experiment and Pavlov's research with dogs, humanistic psychology takes a more qualitative approach. This means that investigative methods such as interviews are therefore preferred as they give richer and more detailed information (albeit from generally smaller samples) that focus on the 'why' and 'how' as opposed to any numerical data that could be expressed with charts or graphs. Qualitative research can help avoid the problem of developing reductionist theories since such in depth data is gathered.

In addition to smaller samples, the samples are rarely random when conducting qualitative research, instead the researcher will usually hand pick the participants of a study trying to purposefully choose those which typify a target sample (for example, a specific social class or ethnic background). However, this does mean that the samples are likely to be biased and therefore the findings from any qualitative research cannot be extrapolated beyond the limited sample, which greatly restricts the usefulness of the research. Freud's work with highly educated middle class Viennese women suffered from the same shortcomings. However, despite the drawbacks of qualitative research it can be a very useful method of collecting data, particularly when paired with quantitative methods to cross examine findings (which is also known as data triangulation).

Aside from differences in the methods used to research these perspectives there are of course differences in the perspectives themselves. The psychodynamic approach for example focuses on inner conflicts and how

these conflicts affect human development, whereas the humanistic approach sees mental and personal growth as “ natural conditions of human life”.

Furthermore, humanist psychologists argue mental growth is subjective rather than shaped by the environments as behaviourists do, or childhood experiences as supporters of psychodynamic theory do.

Another clear difference between psychodynamic and humanistic psychology exists in that Sigmund Freud developed his theories by working with clinically ill patients (which Maslow saw as somewhat foolish as these people would not be a good representative sample). Maslow therefore developed his theories on the study of successful, healthy people. However, the main difference between humanistic psychology and the other schools of thought is that humanism believes all people are fundamentally good. Freud would have strongly contested this opinion as he believed humans to be fundamentally bad, constantly looking out for themselves over others and seeking only to feed and mate. Humanist psychologists of course cannot ignore the facts that murder and thievery are more common today than most would like, but instead explain these behaviours in terms of those people having failed to find meaning in their lives or achieve their true potential.

Despite being born in a very religious society humanistic psychology tried to move away from philosophy and forget about religion in order to focus more on the human aspects of psychology. However spiritual elements do still remain, and the belief isn't atheist, only that the human sides are more important. Humanistic psychology teaches that every human has dignity and

should be respected and treated ethically. According to Abraham Maslow, the father of humanism, we all have a potential that we can achieve and psychology can help bring this potential out. This achievement is known as self-actualisation and Maslow proposed a hierarchy of needs in his paper 'Theory of Human Motivation'. These needs start with basic physiological needs such as water, breathing, food, sex, sleep, homeostasis and excretion then go up to safety needs such as security of body, of employment, of resources, of morality, of the family, of health and of property.

Next the need to love and belong is characterised by friendships, family and sexual intimacy, followed by the esteem needs for self-esteem, confidence, achievement and respect (both of others and by others). Finally, self-actualisation is characterised by morality, creativity, spontaneity, lack of prejudice, acceptance of facts and problem solving. Maslow studied people who he saw as having self-actualised such as Albert Einstein, Jane Addams, Frederick Douglass and Eleanor Roosevelt. The main problem with the hierarchy of needs is that it is quite clearly a typology, whereas humanistic psychology claims to be against reductionist typologies. Furthermore, since there is always room for people to improve themselves, can we ever be fully self-actualised? Maslow later suggested that there was another level above self-actualisation which he referred to as self-transcendence (5).

Clinical psychology is a branch of psychology that has been constantly striving to become more useful to people in helping them with their problems (such as phobias or mental illnesses) since the opening of the first clinic at the University of Pennsylvania in 1896. Naturally the three forces of

psychology all have different ways in which they attempt to achieve this same goal. Firstly, with his psychodynamic theory Freud devised what he called 'the talking cure' (also known as psychoanalysis) which was intended to get to the root of problems by exploring the unconscious mind. At the time of his writing many people believed dreams either to be messages from the gods or to have no meaning at all, however Freud argued that they were in fact a window into the unconscious mind. The manifest content of dreams was what was overtly presented and the latent content was the unconscious motivation, Freud tried to identify what the latent content could be so that his patients could deal with the underlying problems in their waking life.

Although having some success this treatment was limited in that it required the patient to have a somewhat erudite vocabulary so that they would be able to express themselves well enough for Freud, or another psychoanalyst, to understand the full experience and meaning of the dream. Secondly, behavioural therapies have been shown to work well for the treating of phobias, depression and anxiety disorders. They work simply by positively reinforcing the desirable behaviour and/or negatively reinforcing the undesirable behaviour. In the case of flooding as a treatment for phobias, a patient will often be locked in a room with the stimulus he or she is afraid of. Initially there will be much anxiety, however after a while the patient will begin to calm down and re-associate the stimulus with this feeling of calm as opposed to the original fear.

Rather than study the behaviour of an individual in an attempt to understand their motivations, humanistic psychologists would simply interview the

individual and ask them what was wrong. Maslow's reflective listening therapy for example focuses on feelings and experiences, and is a common humanistic therapy for depression. It involves simply listening to a patient and occasionally repeating or rephrasing their own words in a quiet and neutral voice tone, while avoiding asking questions. The idea being that this would give them time to clarify their feelings and reassure them that they were being listened to in a non-judgemental way.

They would feel that they were being understood and that there was someone going through their thought processes with them. Reflective listening has gained a fair amount of support recently however as a therapy on it's own it could become extremely frustrating for the patient who isn't getting any helpful advice. Reflective listening has its roots in person-centered therapy (also known as client-centered therapy) which was developed by humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers. Much like reflective listening, PCT involves showing empathy and " unconditional positive regard" towards a person in order to create a supportive environment in which the patient can reach their full potential.

In conclusion, humanistic psychology has thus been extremely useful as an additional way to look at the world of psychology. It is more qualitative than behaviourism and was developed from better samples than Freud's psychodynamic theory. Humanistic research has produced new therapies that have offered much to the areas of self-help and counselling and Maslow's hierarchy of needs is generally seen as an improvement over previous theories of personality. In conclusion, the third force of psychology

has been just that – another force driving psychology forwards to new and better discoveries.

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