

## Psychology Review

Prev

Next

in focus

# The humanistic approach to psychology

**Matt Jarvis** and **Anthony Curtis** debate the value of the humanistic approach

Psychology Review

Volume 23, 2017/ 2018

Issue 2

Reductionism/holism

Psychology Review

Debates

Humanistic psychology

Psychology as a science

**Matt Jarvis** and **Anthony Curtis** debate the value of the humanistic approach





---

**H**umanistic psychology emerged in the 1950s as a reaction to the dominance of two key approaches:

- the behavioural approach, which reduced the mystery of human experience to a set of mechanical processes
- the psychodynamic approach, which was criticised for both indulging in complex speculative theory and adopting a negative view of people, sometimes pathologising very ordinary behaviour

For a time, humanistic psychology became a ‘third force’ in psychology, aspiring to be a simpler and warmer approach founded on an optimistic view of human nature and respect for human experience. Humanistic psychologists include Carl Rogers (see pp. 16–17), who developed a set of core conditions underlying both successful emotional development and therapy, and Abraham Maslow, best known for his hierarchy of needs.

This ‘third force’ status is now more open to question.

## **Anthony**

In this increasingly stressful, judgmental, fast-paced, booming, buzzing post-Brexit world of complexity and uncertainty, there has never been a greater need to touch base with our true emotions, feelings, perceptions and needs for personal growth. Humanistic psychology has served as a counter-argument to the traditional dominance of behaviourism, which saw psychology not only lose our minds but also lead us down a blind alley. It has also acted as a sensible counter-weight to the depth-plunging psychodynamic approach.

Humanistic psychology has given psychology several approaches to theory and therapy, including the developmental theory of Abraham Maslow, which emphasised a hierarchy of needs and motivations as humans strive towards self-actualisation (realising one's full potential). In addition, Carl Rogers' client-centred therapy, a non-directive approach involving the therapist actively listening to the client without judgement, helped people discover self-insights about the nature of their psychological problems. Humanistic psychology also influenced the development of Gestalt therapy, which focuses on how our present emotions and feelings may be affected by our past.

More recently it has given us 'compassionate communication', which helps to resolve interpersonal conflicts without expert interventions. Humanistic psychologists have also been actively involved in social change involving social, cultural and gender issues (Hoffman 2009) and even helping corporations become more creative through enhancing emotional intelligence in the workplace (Herrmann 1996).

## **Matt**

I absolutely acknowledge the need for a third force in 1950s psychology, and my intention here is not to disrespect or minimise the contributions of Maslow or Rogers. What I would challenge though is the continuing relevance of humanistic psychology in contemporary psychology. I see several reasons why the humanistic approach might best be seen as an honourable footnote in the history of psychology.

First, humanistic psychology is poor science. It is less reductionist than other approaches to psychology, attempting to study the whole person rather than focusing simply on their behaviour, cognition, neurophysiology etc. This sounds like a good idea, and we often speak of reductionism as a limitation of other approaches. However, science is necessarily reductionist because it simply isn't possible to research all aspects of a phenomenon simultaneously.

A second issue is that humanistic ideas tend to be something of a dead-end. Considering that Maslow's and Rogers' main ideas have been with us since the 1950s, progress in developing and refining these ideas has been extremely limited. This makes humanistic psychology hard to reconcile with most modern psychology (Elkins 2009).

**Anthony** With increasing advances in theory construction, enhanced by significant developments in technologies to study the mind (e.g. brain imaging techniques mapped to states of conscious awareness), a holistic approach is not only possible but desirable if we are to study the inter-relationships between the parts of the mind (e.g. spatially and/or temporarily).

There are different levels of analysis in psychology, each of which may be equally valid in their own way, and if we focus only on the elements (as the behaviourists or biologists do, for example) then we lose the unity of consciousness that makes us uniquely human. To then argue that this 'makes humanistic psychology hard to reconcile with most modern psychology' would seem to strengthen rather than weaken psychology as a multi-faceted, pluralistic branch of a still-emerging discipline with roots in philosophy but branches in several different disciplines.

As the third force in psychology, humanistic psychology never sought to directly compete as a check on mainstream psychology in the first place. Instead, the aim was to fill a much-needed vacuum and put the person back into psychology. The decline in the influence of humanistic psychology is not due to its often reported 'maverick status' as a movement devoted to challenging the mainstream, but rather to the unhealthy dominance of traditional values of science and the scientific method at the expense of alternative approaches and methods.

This is further reinforced by research grants and funding initiatives which disproportionately favour more 'scientific' and 'evidencedbased' research. One only

has to look at the unfavourable (and at times intensely personal) comments made by traditional scientists and medical practitioners in the 'holistic versus traditional medicine' debate — they take a reductionist view and have tried to lessen the status of humanistic psychology.

**Matt** I would blame the decline in the influence of humanistic psychology not so much on its maverick status but on its failed maverick status as a movement devoted to challenging the mainstream.

Actually I think having mavericks to challenge the quite conservative view of science adopted by most psychologists and to keep practitioners on their toes can only be a good thing.



**Client-centred therapy involves the therapist actively listening to the client without judgement**

However, I would argue that nowadays other approaches make more effective mavericks. Critical social psychology, for example, is devoted to deconstructing theory and practice to look for the influence of historical factors and vested interests. This is, for me, a more effective check on mainstream scientific psychology than humanistic psychology.

And if critical social psychologists have taken over the maverick mantle in psychology then what of the holistic study of human potential and wellbeing? I would argue that this is now the domain of positive psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2014). And where humanistic psychologists might study topics like hope, spirituality and creativity, by and large they have done so by abandoning the basics of scientific research. Positive psychologists, on the other hand, have brought a mix of rigorous quantitative and qualitative methods to addressing these issues. If we don't need humanistic psychology either to keep us on our toes or to study positive aspects of human experience, I would say that it has had its time.

**Anthony** Far from humanistic psychology now appearing to be a redundant discipline, with the advent of positive psychology taking over the study of human potential and wellbeing, Brent Dean Robbins (2008) argues that, while positive psychology explicitly distances itself as a new movement, its literature base implicitly references its extensive historical grounding within humanistic psychology.

Positive psychology may have come along by following in the humanistic approach's footsteps, but that doesn't mean we should now ditch the humanistic approach. That would be like social learning theory ditching early behaviourist principles of learning after the discovery of vicarious learning and cognitive expectancies. Each approach has a valid voice, during a time of transitional development in psychology.

**Anthony Curtis** is head of careers and psychology at Stonar School, Wiltshire. He is an associate lecturer at De Montfort University and an editor of PSYCHOLOGY REVIEW.

**Matt Jarvis** is a chartered psychologist and associate fellow of the BPS. He is online editor for PSYCHOLOGY REVIEW as well as teacher of psychology at Totton College, Hampshire and honorary research fellow at Keele University.

## References

Elkins, D. N. (2009) 'Why humanistic psychology lost its power and influence in American psychology: implications for advancing humanistic psychology', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol. 49, pp. 267–91.

Herrmann, N. (1996) *The Whole Brain Business Book*, McGraw-Hill.

Hoffman, L. et al. (2009) *Existential Psychology East-West*, University of the Rockies Press.

Robbins, B. D. (2008) 'What is the good life? Positive psychology and the renaissance of humanistic psychology', *The Humanistic Psychologist*, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 96–112.

Seligman, M. E. and Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014) *Positive Psychology: An Introduction*, Springer Netherlands.

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)

---

## Related articles:



Volume 36, 2024/ 2025

Improve your grade: Writing good decision-making answers