

# **THE PLACE OF HUMANISTIC PSYCHOTHERAPY TODAY**

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Where is humanistic psychotherapy now? Is it so deeply connected to an age of change that has now passed that it is no longer relevant? Has the human potential movement ended? Are we left with a distillation of its ideals into a profession that, by its very nature, is antipathetic to its origins? What was happening for a lot of people when the movement began was a genuine search for an alternative to the restrictions of fossilized authoritarian middle-class values, which insisted on rules that had the effect of not trusting people to know what was best for themselves. It established the client clearly in charge of the therapy. It espoused a belief that people come first and systems second. This was in contradiction to the then-current use of psychology for political and commercial ends. Humanistic therapy today exists in what has been described as the 'audit society' in which 'the dominant style of managerialism is derived from accountancy' (Prichett and Erskine-Hill, 2002, pp. 16–17). Has the humanistic approach changed its role as a critique of existing norms or has it succumbed to contemporary norms, or have those norms changed under the influence of the humanistic movement so that it has now served its original purpose and taken a more central part in the process of change?

What has changed?

- The majority of people coming into therapy are no longer looking for a counterculture but the resolution of ordinary everyday problems without necessarily wishing to change their way of life. In my experience, and that of my colleagues, the range of social and ethnic backgrounds has changed. Those who formerly would have had an aversion to therapy, particularly any type that may be emotionally or physically directed, now come with a readiness to explore themselves in depth. Maybe they come more problem centred than the client population of earlier years. However, they are not so easy to put into a social grouping.

- Professional practice has moved a long way since the origins of the human potential movement. The setting up of systems of control - no doubt in the best interests of the public - limits the independence of therapists. True, there need to be professional standards and guidelines. It is important for any professional to be accountable. We all make mistakes, but it is counter to the spirit of humanistic therapy that outside bodies are the main arbiter of what is good. Standards of initial training and continuing development have become more demanding.

- Psychotherapy is much more accessible. Many medical practices have counsellors on their staff. (53% in 1999). Counselling is available and sometimes paid for by corporations, businesses and public authorities such as the police. I have been involved in setting up clinical supervision for nurses, which provides person-centred support for staff. Although the spread of counselling has enabled working relations in organizations to be more humanistic, it can be used to keep people calm and in line with aims of the organization.

- Humanistic values have probably become more circumstantial. The moral and spiritual imperatives that motivated the prime movers of the growth movement have given way to more down-to-earth issues such as professional survival. It was necessary for the free-spirited origins to be more grounded in the everyday concerns of maintenance in order to continue.

Many of those who were my contemporaries twenty years

ago were free from responsibilities. Few were married or owned property. Many had no status to worry about professionally or socially - either because they didn't have any or had left it to pursue their higher aims. Now most of my colleagues do have the responsibilities of family and/or paying a mortgage and need to maintain a practice in a way that only a few were bothered about twenty-five years ago. Practitioners have become more respectable. This is not necessarily a bad thing and certainly nothing to grieve over.

'The times they are a'changing' and many have moved with them. What we have now is a loosely knit group of schools that would place themselves under the umbrella of humanistic psychotherapy. It would be unrealistic and unfair to make any assessment of how any of these has changed from its origins in the growth movement. To the best of my knowledge they are still encouraging experiment, promoting autonomy, trusting the process of self-regulation and welcoming diversity.

What is the present place of humanistic psychotherapy in the context of contemporary society and in the field of psychotherapy and health practice? There are many more therapists in the humanistic field than ever, due to the expansion of training agencies. These work in a wide variety of settings - in private practice, in the health service, in education, social work, the prison service, churches. So the enterprise is thriving in many aspects. Undoubtedly, the humanistic movement has affected the way in which people

deal with each other both in institutions and the community. Most of the methods used in human relations training in the world of business customer relations and management training have been derived from humanistic methods. This has become almost a business on its own. True, in the long run, it is for monetary ends, but the message 'people are important' has become well established. It may be worthwhile noting that making money is not unhumanistic. It is the misuse of power to control people that is the moral issue. Although for a time left-wing activists aligned themselves with the alternative movement, it was to fight against the overpowering use of technology by the big corporations as exposed by Vance Packard in *Hidden Persuaders* (1957) and described with flair by Theodore Roszak (1971) in *The Making of a Counter Culture*.

Most importantly, changes effected by humanistic practice were to be seen in the family therapy movement in the USA, which was responsible for the publication of the *Family Therapy Networker*, a monthly periodical started in 1982 at the height of the growth movement and which has included in its purview the work of a large number of radical thinkers and practitioners including Salvador Minuchin, Carl Whitaker, Ronnie Laing, Virginia Satir, Thomas Szasz, Jay Haley, Milton Erickson, and many others who have been the shapers of family therapy in America and who were part of the outpouring of the alternative approach to therapy. However, by the 1990s this revolutionary fringe movement started by a bunch of rebels went respectably and

successfully mainstream (*Networker*, January/February 1992). As health care plans and insurance boomed, so the therapy generally became more litigious and restrictive in regulating the professions.

Now that humanistic psychotherapy has become more mainstream, has it lost some of its unique impact and idealism at the door of respectability? Its voice as a moral alternative has been somewhat subdued. As noted earlier, the advances in standards for practising have largely been beneficial to the service offered but although this may be reassuring for many, most people today would not know the difference between what was being offered then in a setup that was more self-regulatory and the authoritative regulation that is now in place.

The UK Association of Humanistic Psychology Practitioners (UKAHPP) has taken a middle line. Since its inception in 1980 it has sought to establish high professional standards based on humanistic principles. It was one of the main contributors to the setting up of the Standing Conference for Psychotherapy in 1989, which later became UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP). This association accredits psychotherapists, counsellors and other practitioners in a wide range of categories. Without having any vested interest in any one method, it has sought to give support and backing to those practitioners who have either a wide range of training or who do not ally themselves with any one body of therapeutic training or practice. So although it has espoused the registration route

it still maintains a certain amount of independence.

Although there is an increasingly recognized move to establish humanistic practice in the world of psychotherapy at large, this takes different forms. The large majority of therapists are not registered and may be seen by some as operating in a kind of limbo. This does not make them any less dedicated or competent. It may be that some do not have sufficient training or that some have undergone considerable training but do not choose to go the route of becoming registered. They may have their own network of support, assessment and supervision. This is certainly true of those who are members of the Independent Practitioners Network (IPN), which was set up in opposition to the UKCP. This is organized on a completely different basis. It is self-regulatory, with a network of groups that carry out self- and peer assessment. It is worth noting here the Open Centre is a multidisciplinary co-operative. The Open Centre has been established since 1977 and upheld the original vision of the growth movement of being both inclusive and yet clearly independent in its approach to providing a service based on collaboration and choice. It has practitioners from a range of disciplines who do not necessarily agree or work in the same way, but all have the objective of treating their clients in an equal and growthful way. A similar organization is Spectrum, which has been functioning for a long time as a centre of humanistic practice, although it is not organized on a co-operative basis.

## Groups

One of the distinguishing features of the human growth movement was the widespread use of group work. Although groups are still used by many humanistic therapists, their prevalence seems to have diminished. According to Guy Gladstone (Self & Society 2002), only five out of twenty-seven practitioners listing themselves as humanistic group therapists were running groups. This confirms the general impression that groups are no longer the hallmark of humanistic practice. The possible reasons for this trend are the difficulty of maintaining ongoing groups due to the cost of suitable premises; a reduced demand from the general public; lack of skills, both in organizing and running a group; that groups are too demanding for the therapist; the preference by clients for the privacy of individual therapy; and a fear of exposure to others who are not as safe. Alongside this, it is true to say that, with some notable exceptions, most of the training courses in psychotherapy do not provide training in group work. Although most use groups as means of training, the output is directed to one-to-one practice. Therefore, this is the expectation that graduates take with them. It would be beneficial for all trainees in humanistic psychotherapy to have an ongoing and/or intensive experience of group work outside the confines of the training agency. It is possible, however, that there are just as many groups operating, but fewer compared with the increasing number of practitioners since the early 1990s.

All this, of course, presupposes that group therapy has an equal place alongside individual therapy. It is my contention that in many ways group therapy is a more enriching and growthful arena for change than individual therapy. It provides an environment that more closely resembles relationships outside therapy. People experience a range of different responses in addition to the therapist and a group setting discourages over-dependence on the therapist. It gives people the freedom to learn from the work of others on their problems, and some comfort that they are not alone in their dilemmas. They can be as active as they wish. They do not have to fill the whole of an hour's session by themselves. Groups also have the advantage of providing a wide range of experience in a safe environment. Many people have a problem in relating to others freely in their lives and the group acts as a workshop to experiment with expression of feelings and behaviour. It is also an alternative place to deal with the inherent alienation in society, the break up of families, and the increasing competitiveness of working and social life. Comparatively, individual therapy could be seen as finding in the therapist that special relationship which was missing in childhood. In groups you get both that and peer support.

It is true that groups are demanding for the therapist and initially for the members, but the rewards and outcomes for both are potentially much greater. It is also true that there is a wide range of styles of group work, but most group therapists arrange for an initial interview to deal with these issues. There are

also a number of one-off weekend groups which give anyone a chance to sample the 'flavour'. There are still a number of centres that offer a programme of groups — notably the Open Centre, Spectrum and Metanoia.

## **Spreading the limits**

What is clear is that, since the late 1980s or early 1990s, many of the ideas and methods of humanistic practice have spread into areas that are not clearly identified as being humanistic. The influence of the humanistic movement of the 1960s has been felt without necessarily being distinguished. This is because of those who have recognized the more fruitful ways of working laid out by the humanistic movement, which may have been passed on to them second or third hand and have become normative without any clear label. In almost every area of professional life, including the mainstream world of counselling and therapy, you can see hints of the values of humanistic psychology. Outside of this, there have been considerable changes in practice, from the shop floor to the consulting room. Now there is an emphasis on responding to people's needs rather than deciding what is good for them or what might be politically acceptable. Focus groups have become a norm for political parties and commercial enterprises. The phrase 'retail therapy' has crept into everyday language. This may be seen as a move towards consumer power, but it is close to putting people first - the basis of humanistic belief. It may be debatable as to whether we live in a more egalitarian society, but there has been an evolution in the way that

people's inner motivation and desire to grow have been acknowledged. It cannot, of course, be claimed that all these improvements in people work are due to the humanistic movement, but the genesis of the change of attitude in training and practice in these fields is attributable to the ethos of the alternative movement in which humanistic therapy played a significant part.

In the more immediate field of human growth, there has been the burgeoning, since the early 1990s, of what is known as 'New Age' activity. Although it includes a wide range of 'therapies', it is hard to distinguish these in places from more normative psychotherapeutic practices. They have a clearly spiritual texture and, although many of them have been effective in healing and growth, many have a non-scientific basis, some quite deliberately. Many of those who were and still are part of the humanistic movement have decamped into this territory, which has the benefit of being outside the restrictions of mainstream practice. There is a lot of overlap between New Age ideology and humanistic psychology particularly in the positive attitude to the universe, the belief in the oneness of humanity a 'holistic' model of life that views the world as a living organism with its parts indivisibly related, the recognition of a spiritual dimension in human experience.

Alongside this, there is the increasingly widespread use of complementary medicine. Many are derived from other cultural sources but include many well-established practices such as massage, aromatherapy,

shiatsu, reflexology. The annual festival of holistic living offers a shop window for the whole spectrum of alternative approaches to healing, health and growth. These all make various claims, which, for the most part, are outside the realms of humanistic psychotherapy and yet offer a parallel alternative route to finding peace and enlightenment.

Without making any attempt to cover this field of endeavour here, it is clear that much of the ground of the humanistic movement has been absorbed into the New Age arena outside of the constraints of the professional practice of psychotherapy. Consequently, this is beyond the limitations of this book. Some would argue that, as the schools of humanistic psychology have become more conventional, New Age followers have taken up the alternative role in society. There are many paths through life and whatever helps people on their journey is to be welcomed. At the same time it is necessary to recognize that there needs to be some caution in this whole area. The dilemma is that, whereas humanistic psychology encourages people to choose for themselves, there needs to be some guidance and reference point to avoid fraud. I have heard of people who feel that they have been cheated and not helped by those claiming to provide 'cures'. I also know of a lot of people who have benefited from the influence of alternative forms of healing.

The other major development is the conservation movement. Many of the ideals of the growth movement have inspired this worldwide endeavour to preserve life on our planet.

Concerns about the quality of life, the resistance to technology, multinational greed, and pollution generally, have extended the values of the humanistic movement related to people to the natural and material environment we inhabit. The widespread involvement of people at all levels would have been unthinkable a generation ago. This growing interest in the welfare of the earth is a natural outcome of the values of humanistic psychology. It is the context of putting people alongside all living creatures first. It is the recognition that we are mutually dependent and responsible for how we live.

### **The future**

There seem to be three possible directions for humanistic psychotherapy. One is that it will continue to be a definable and serious force in the therapy field and beyond, with an emphasis on unity within diversity. The second is that it will be consumed into the general maelstrom of psychotherapy leaving a minority of independent practitioners who will call themselves something else - educators, facilitators, life coaches and so forth. The third is that there will be an increasing amount of training and practice that will be integrative and not based in any particular discipline, so that individual methods will cease to have such a clear separate identity.

In the USA a large number of humanistic professionals have become incorporated into the American Psychological Association in a way that seemed unthinkable in the mid-1970s, and they have had an impact on the revision of its policy. In *The Handbook of Humanistic*

*Psychology* (Schneider et al., 2001), produced by the American Association of Humanistic Psychology there seems to be an emphasis on this direction for humanistic psychology, in order to have a greater impact on the wider world of psychotherapy. In Europe, the humanistic endeavour is mainly sponsored by the European Association for Psychotherapy. In the UK it is now a clear and strong element in the Humanistic and Integrative Section (HIPS) of UKCP, of which the UKAHPP is an active member body. But that is only what is happening at an organizational level.

What is more significant is that the practice of humanistic psychotherapy may not need such a definitive profile, but those who endorse its values will continue to maintain them as part of their own personal and professional development. It is more important that what the humanistic movement stands for is perpetuated, rather than any label. The reality is that a name or a structure is probably the best means of continuing and extending its influence, not only in the world of therapy but in the wider realms of social, commercial and political endeavour.

*The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology* (Schneider et al., 2001), produced by the American Association of Humanistic Psychology suggests that, in the USA at least, the movement is still vibrant and identifiable. Over sixty writers, practitioners and teachers were gathered from a wide spectrum of methodologies to produce a contemporary picture of the way in which humanistic psychology has developed. It is very impressive,

covering such a wide range of subjects as gender issues, ecology peace, the arts, research, managed care, education, body/mind medicine, social action, romanticism and morality. The general drift is that the future of humanistic psychology lies in gaining a stronger voice academically and scientifically in mainstream psychology and developing respectability for transpersonal psychology. In the closing statements one of the editors, Kirk Schneider, writes:

'To sum, humanistic psychology as Taylor put it so succinctly, is at a cross-roads, but so is the profession that inspired it. The question is, will these fields find ways in which to cooperate, to transcend their parochialism, and to link their traditions, or will they continue to clash, to go their separate ways, and to further subject the profession to impoverishment and eventual co-optation? For humanistic psychology, this question rides on two essential tracks: the willingness to bolster its scholarly output and the willingness to further articulate its scientific perspective (particularly as it relates to social policy). For organized psychology the question is one of integrity. Will organized psychology return to its original (humanistic) inquiries (what does it mean to be fully experientially human, and how does that understanding illuminate the vital or fulfilled life?), or will it be co-opted by current fashions (e.g., biologism, technicism, nihilism) and atrophy as a result?

I hope that we have shown in this volume that a full and human psychology is an experiential psychology a psychology that

embraces all dimensions of human awareness and subawareness but particularly those that have meaning, impact, and significance for each given person. The challenge is to articulate that meaningful resonance to weave out of it a rich and subtly nuanced theory, philosophy, or guideline — and to apply that understanding to a diverse and hungering populace. This is a populace that has been bombarded by cosmetic fixes but that yearns, I believe, for existential sustenance. (2001, p. 673)'

Many of those who were part of the humanistic movement saw it as a political force, not in any organisational way but by practising in such a manner that is personal, subjective and based on experience. The signs are that this imperative, though still present, has waned. Roszak (1981) believed that the major need for mankind is to recover the sense of the personal — the politics of the person. Many of my peers became involved in therapy not because they wanted to do good or be fashionable or become rich or achieve status and power, although these motives were no doubt present, but because in doing this work they could be involved in something that made sense and gave authenticity to their experience, and because they believed they were involved in something that could and did make profound changes in people's lives and society at large. 'Whether we like it or not, the decision to be a therapist is also a commitment to our own growth' (Kottler, 1990 pp. ix—x). This they found for themselves in humanistic therapy, groups and communities. This way of practising has the integrity to



combat inauthentic behaviour, mechanistic and impersonal forms of dealing with people as entities. The very close encounter in the therapeutic relationship is an antidote to what Roszak (1981) calls 'the myth of objective consciousness' in which 'the mechanistic imperative has been successfully internalised as the prevailing life style of our society' (p. 231).

Without necessarily becoming actively involved in politics, it must be recognized that psychotherapy is a profoundly political activity in itself. The humanistic approach is consciously practising a personalistic lifestyle. Of course, we as therapists are concerned about the big issues of our times, but what we are doing, day by day, is helping people to make sense of their lives and change them so that they are more human, more personal in their dealings with themselves and others, which is just as important a contribution to changing the world.

### **Personal epilogue**

It is this conviction that fuels the enterprise in which I am involved, called the humanistic movement - that it is in the best sense alternative, that it questions the so-called norms of society when they are denying the essential nature of human beings, at the same time ensuring that the professional practice of psychotherapy does not become over-identified with these norms so that it becomes a business more than a practice.

My aim in writing has been to portray in broad strokes the essence of the humanistic approach to psychotherapy for the benefit of those who are

interested, mystified, or those who have never heard of it. My fear is that humanistic psychotherapy can become so rarefied and mystifying that it gives the impression of being accessible or available only to a certain breed of people who can comprehend the complexities / complex processes of psychology or, at worst, to those who have to be so needy that they will not mind.

One of the aims of Eric Berne, the founder of transactional analysis, was to produce a language about personality and relationships that could be understood by an eight-year-old. As a tribute to this, one of the questions in the transactional analysis qualifying exam was based on this assumption. That may be seen as simplistic and naive, but perhaps we have to become little again in order to comprehend ourselves and others better.

It is great to have the learning and the power to help to influence people for their good. Most of us would accept that. It also carries with it the responsibility to be as straightforward as possible - to avoid setting ourselves up as experts on other people rather than help ourselves and the people we serve to see what *is* rather than what we think is. That, for me, is the legacy of the humanistic movement, whose leaders were highly intelligent and also had the desire, will and ability to make direct contact creatively with people. Human experience does not fit neatly into packages. Each individual is unique and sees, hears and feels the world in their own way. Being human and relating to other humans is recognizing that and cherishing it. There is an

enormous amount of suffering experienced by people in this modern world. Much of it is caused by forces outside of us. There is a lot that we create from within. While we all want to resist the evil forces around us, we first need to look inside ourselves. From that self-knowledge we shall be able to see more clearly what requires our attention in the world.

It is my hope that humanistic psychotherapy will continue to be open and accessible to the public, that it will be less concerned about its own internal structure

and more concerned with getting on with the job of being with the people who come for help, so that it avoids the condemnation of a former Archbishop of Canterbury who said of the Anglican Church that it was so busy repairing the boat that it never put to sea! The great achievement of the humanistic movement was that it took psychotherapy out of the closet and moved it out into the social milieu of its time. In our time this may take on a different form, but the spirit of the humanistic enterprise can still remain a powerful force as the leaven in the lump!

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