Creativity in the Evolution of Humanistic Psychology

Louis Hoffman, Ruth Richards and Steven Pritzker

...of the song-clouds my breath made
in cold air
a cloak has grown
white and,
where here a word
there another
froze, glittering,
stone-heavy.
A mask I had not meant
to wear, as if of frost,
covers my face. (Levertov, 1987: 42)

SYNOPSIS

Humanistic Psychology in recent years too often has focused on the same themes without bringing forth enough new perspectives, applications and voices. Creativity has two important roles in addressing this issue and advancing Humanistic Psychology. First, creativity is an important emergent theme in humanistic writing with relevancy for theory, research and practice. Secondly, it is important to creatively engage Humanistic Psychology to move beyond a re-telling of the same stories and themes. This article offers several practical suggestions for increasing creativity's presence and influence in Humanistic Psychology.

Humanistic Psychology emerged at a time when change was the Zeitgeist, offering a fresh voice and perspective on the human condition and psychological theory. Since its inception, the creative voices have too often grown into a chorus of familiar themes. If Humanistic Psychology is to retain its status as a force in psychology, it will be necessary to unfreeze its voice, shed its cloak, and find a new voice. This does not require a shedding of the basic principles and values of Humanistic Psychology. Rather, it advocates the need for new interpretations, experiences and applications of Humanistic Psychology that meet the needs and energy of contemporary times.

Creativity is essential to the renewal of Humanistic Psychology. Its very nature is change, adaptation and renewal. It is a vehicle for our higher human possibilities. We are advocating for Humanistic Psychology to embrace the study of creativity, in general, but more importantly to apply it within the humanistic paradigm for the purposes of human betterment and changing the world.

Creativity and Humanistic Psychology

Even today, many see human creativity as an extra. To some, it is not even worthy of serious study – it's a frill, a

lark, an avocation for a rainy Sunday afternoon. Some think it is for a special few, or see it as largely about art (and perhaps science and leadership). It is common to hear phrases such as, 'I can't paint a picture; I am not creative!'. For these people, they cannot do it, and that is the end of it. They have turned their back on their birthright (and ours).

In the future, we see all this changing dramatically. We see creativity, 'the originality of everyday life', becoming ever more obviously about ways of functioning more consciously and fully in all of life – or even as a way of life – relevant to personal change, social change, psychological and mental health, awareness, presence in the moment, a rich attention to our many options, and, for those so inclined, part of a spiritual path. It is 'natural' in Humanistic Psychology. This certainly resonates with Maslow's *self-actualizing creativity.*

Thematic analysis of a recent book, *Everyday Creativity and New Views of Human Nature* (Richards, 2007a) revealed twelve themes, typically process-related, that cut across the chapters: *dynamic, conscious, healthy, non-defensive, open, integrating, observing actively, caring, collaborative, androgynous, developing, brave.* Note also similarities to past writings about creativity by humanistic psychologists including Maslow, Rogers and May. Mike Arons and others have also addressed varied links between aspects of creative process and Humanistic Psychology (e.g. Arons and Richards, 2001; Arons, 2007; Combs and Krippner, 2007; Loye, 2007; Schneider, 2004).

An *everyday creative* product can be identified after Frank Barron (1969) in terms of only two criteria, *originality and meaningfulness*, and it can be applied broadly to individual lives at work and leisure. It is universally available, although often underdeveloped. It is less about *what* ones does than *how* ones does it. Hence, creative process again becomes key.

A highly creative participant in one study (Richards et al., 1988) was an automobile mechanic who devised his own tools. Many have probably known an uncreative car mechanic! One can be creative (or not) in how one teaches a class, organizes an office, landscapes their home, rears a child, or creates a special banquet on a tight budget. Creativity can literally save someone who is lost, starving, endangered, or otherwise at risk. But it is not just about survival or coping; it can also be about learning what one is *surviving for.*

Increasingly, for many in this field, interest is less in the *creative product*, described by these two criteria, than the creative process that leads to this rich ability to change, adapt, and move forward along a path of development, and even cultural evolution. Whenever a person is changing, shifting, flexibly adapting to their environment (or adapting it to us), improvising, or having a hunch or intuition, they are being 'everyday creative'. One becomes a mindful agent of the future, rather than an automaton, running through pre-set routines, habits and duties. One comes alive.

We also believe that we are not looking at only a cognitive skill or set of rules and procedures, but at complex holistic capabilities that engage all aspects of the person, including cognitive and affective functions, intentionality, conscious and unconscious, and at various points in the process different states or alterations in consciousness (see Richards, 2007a, 2011). It is also very much worth remembering that Maslow saw, ultimately, that self-actualizing in general, and self-actualizing creativity, were not all that different (Maslow, 1971).

It can even be asked whether creativity is good for those engaging in it. One finds increasingly more evidence of health benefits, including work on expressive writing (even including boosted immune function!) to a possible protective effect (or 'compensatory advantage') of high creativity in certain persons at risk for major psychiatric problems (Kinney and Richards, 2011; Richards et al., 1988). Highly creative people accept changes of aging more comfortably, and there are initial suggestions that people may actually live longer. One's ability to use mental imagery in creative healing creates a mind–body bridge that, for instance, can change patterns of local blood flow and other parameters. Uses of arts in cancer, HIV and coping with loss and trauma are just a few other examples (Richards, 2007a; Runco and Pritzker, 2011). These are complex topics, but we can see that we are dealing with powerful potentials of mind-body-spirit.

Why, then, are more people not emphasizing creativity, for instance in the schools? Remember, creativity is also about change, and the creator is a threat to the status quo. We are talking new values and new priorities. There is typically a resistance to the new, whether at work, at school, at home or internally, as one defends against the sorts of self-knowledge that can emerge when truly open to unconscious sources (Runco and Pritzker, 2011). It may be, in part, that unacknowledged fear of one's irrational mind, unconscious, or Shadow, may be one factor in pathologizing the highly creative person (Richards, 2011).

It is possible to work for a future that brings a *new*

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definition of normalcy, one that incorporates and cherishes the diversity of inspiration (and of many other things) and that accepts the sometimes odd-ball deviancy as part of the rich human range of possibility, rather than pathologizing it, or displacing a fear of one's depths on to certain vulnerable groups (certain psychiatric patients).

In fact, creativity and psychology have been intimately linked since Sigmund Freud, although the healthier implications emerged later with Humanistic Psychology. Freud proposed that creativity was the result of individuals' 'repression of instinctual libidinal energy' (Lemire, 1998: 109). Jung (archetypes), Kris (primary process), May (the daimonic) and other psychologists made significant contributions to the understanding of creativity in the early twentieth century. Finally, in the 1950s and 1960s, humanistic psychologists brought a fresh perspective to the field by focusing on the individual in an idealistic positive fashion that was symbolic of the optimistic post World War II American ethos.

Humanistic psychologists looked at creativity as a much more common human experience. For example, Abraham Maslow (1962) proposed that creativity was not limited to the traditional arts but could be a part of everyday life. He stated that almost everybody had the potential to be creative in their lives: '... we are dealing with a fundamental characteristic, inherent in human nature, a potentiality given to all or most human beings at birth, which most often is lost or buried or inhibited as the person gets enculturated' (p. 133). Maslow, based on his research, stated that the attributes of a creative individual include being able to be childlike at times, while at the same time having a strong ego that allows the integration of opposing ideas into unity. He discussed the importance of education in art, poetry and dancing, arguing that it could help students learn 'to accept and integrate the primary processes into conscious and preconscious life' (p. 136). Maslow's goal was to encourage the development of self-actualizing, flexible and spontaneous individuals who function in the world in a way that makes them psychologically and physically healthier, as well as attuned to higher needs in a culture. Loye (2007), in a key volume on the overlooked Darwin (regarding Darwin's views on pro-social and collaborative motives for humans), characterized humans as moving from defense to growth and caring (as per *Darwin's Descent of Man*) and on to a meta-motivational stage related to Maslow's (1971) self-actualizing individual.

Carl Rogers (1963), elaborating on Maslow's vision, proposed that a self-actualizing person would be a non-conformist with a strong sense of self who could make valuable contributions to society. Rogers suggested that this ability to continually evolve would provide the opportunity to develop leaders who would be 'likely to adapt and survive under changing environmental conditions... He would be a fit vanguard of human evolution' (p. 23). Rogers' statement appears particularly prescient in view of our current environmental challenges.

Rollo May (1975) argued in *The Courage to Create* that we are living in an 'age of limbo' where constant change requires the courage to 'leap into the unknown' (p. 12). May proposed the theory that artistic creativity is an encounter in which the artist or writer engages subjectively with the objective world. The result is a unique expression that can influence the audience as well as the creator.

Prominent humanistic psychologists, including Rogers and May, along with others including Harvard's Gordon Allport and Henry Murray, attended the 1964 conference in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, now seen as the landmark event in the establishment of Humanistic Psychology as a field and a 'third force' in psychology (Taylor, 1994). Subsequently, several humanistic programs or institutions were established, including The Humanistic Psychology Institute in San Francisco (now called Saybrook University), and *Self and Society* currently celebrating its 40th anniversary. May, whose books include the remarkable *Courage to Create* (1975), taught at Saybrook during the early years.

At Saybrook, today the spirit of Humanistic

Psychology's connection to creativity continues to advance with new graduate programs. Saybrook was one of the first schools in the world to offer a Creativity Studies Certificate, a Masters in Psychology with a Specialization in Creativity Studies, and has just added a Doctorate in Psychology with a Specialization in Creativity Studies. The Creativity Studies curriculum is grounded in Humanistic Psychology, with a commitment to help develop healthy, self-actualizing students who in turn take their skills and intentions into the world to help others. Examples of unique emphases include, from Carl Rogers' daughter Natalie Rogers (2011), a rich program in expressive arts for personal and social change; from Stanley Krippner (Feinstein and Krippner, 2006), work in personal mythology and dreamwork (allowing conscious rewriting of unconscious personal and social scripts); and from Steven Pritzker (2007), work with creative expression and on the receiving end, with 'audience flow', whence we can help people become active creators in what might seem to be passive activity.

Saybrook's various programs are becoming popular with students, as seen in a recent article by a professor and ten students/alumni (Richards et al., 2011); as one sees, our students often want to change something significant in the world – or in themselves. They want to apply innovative approaches to clinical work, education, organizational development, self-improvement and more.

Although creativity can be used for 'evil', all else being equal, creative *process* can further one's openness, lack of defensiveness and general mental health. Indeed, creativity can change everything! Who we are. What we want in life. It can open doors to our higher potential. We hope, increasingly, at Saybrook and in general, to facilitate this journey.

Applying Creativity in Humanistic Psychology

There are some notable examples of creativity in contemporary Humanistic Psychology. Kirk Schneider's existential integrative psychology (Schneider, 2008; Schneider and Krug, 2009) provides a model for existential psychology to work with other psychological theories, including mainstream psychology, utilizing creativity through an integrative process. Schneider's model was praised by Wampold (2008), a leading therapy outcome researcher, who stated that 'an understanding of the principles of existential therapy is needed by all therapists, as it adds a perspective that might... form the basis of all effective treatments' (p. 6). David Elkins (2009), in his book *Humanistic Psychology: A Clinical Manifesto*, took on some of the most important and controversial issues in contemporary psychology with a deeply humanistic voice. In particular, Elkins challenged attempts to narrowly regulate psychotherapy practice in ways antagonistic to Humanistic Psychology, while providing an important evidence-based defense of humanistic approaches to therapy. Mendelowitz (2008), in *Ethics and Lao Tzu: Intimations of Character*, embraced creativity on multiple levels. In his book, he integrated the arts into a story of his work with a client, who was herself an artist. The style as well as the content exudes creativity, while also speaking to the power of creativity to impact the human condition. While these represent important creative contributions to Humanistic Psychology, and show the potential to open possibilities in Western mental health, more applications are still needed.

Diversity, Creativity and Humanistic Psychology

Great opportunities for creativity arise when one opens oneself up to that which is different. In a world that is becoming increasingly diverse, and increasingly international, opportunities for creativity are prominent. Even more, creativity is necessary in order to enter into dialogues that honor the history, traditions and values of cultures while advancing the collective wisdom and scholarship. Too often, as critiqued by Ren (2009), international dialogues quickly turn into attempts to impose one culture's values and approaches upon the other culture. It requires creativity, and a loosening of one's ideals, to engage in international dialogue in a manner that is respectful of differences and allows for something new to emerge.

As an illustration, beginning in 2007 a series of dialogues on existential psychology began in China (see Hoffman et al., 2009). Existential psychology emerged from a Western paradigm and, although it challenged much of the status quo of Western thought, it retained many Western values, such as individualism, that do not fit well with Chinese culture. In order to minimize the possibility of the imposition of Western values, several principles were utilized that encouraged a more creative approach:

1. Prioritizing relationship building as the foundation of dialogue.
2. The sharing of Western approaches to existential psychology was always accompanied by the encouragement of cultural critique, or critically thinking about how these ideas and approaches

did not fit, or needed to be adapted, to be utilized in China in a culturally sensitive manner.

3. The conversations sought to identify *indigenous Chinese approaches to existential psychology*, which were understood as approaches to understanding human nature and change that shared many, but not all, of the values of existential psychology.
4. Encouraging dialogue between indigenous Chinese worldviews and approaches to psychology with the Western existential perspectives (see Yang and Hoffman, 2011).

Relational creativity becomes important here, where creative process is applied to interaction (see Richards, 2007b). These dialogues would not have achieved the success that has been attained without several applications of creativity. First, the relational foundation provided the safety for participants to share different perspectives and openly critique the Western approaches to existential psychology. This created the space for creative new expressions and applications of existential psychology to emerge. Secondly, being intentional in identifying and exposing differences and points of discomfort was necessary to begin exploring creative resolutions to the challenges of using an existential paradigm in Chinese culture.

Moats et al. (2011) provide a beautiful illustration of how growth and creativity can emerge from the natural tension of cross-cultural dialogue. These three authors participated in existential dialogues in China originally as students, and later as professionals. Their article reflects upon how their experiences in China dislodged them from their personal and professional comfort zones, often challenging deeply held beliefs. Partially because of the relationships they were developing, it was not easy to discard the sources of discomfort, leaving the necessity of finding creative resolutions to dealing with their discomfort. The result was a shift in their beliefs that has significantly impacted the way they apply and practice psychology.

As a second example, Cleare-Hoffman (2009) utilized an existential framework to explore the meaning of Junkanoo, a Bahamian festival. This festival originated with the African slaves brought to the Bahamas as a way of retaining aspects of their spiritual and cultural beliefs. Cleare-Hoffman illustrates that Junkanoo began as a celebration of freedom while the celebrants were still bound in slavery. This is a very different understanding of freedom compared to what is commonly held in many Western cultures. This, again, illustrates the potential for new, creative interpretations of foundational humanistic principles and values through engagement with diversity.

Conclusion

Creativity should be recognized as having an honored place in Humanistic Psychology. From its origins, Humanistic Psychology has been open to the humanities, literature and the arts. Many humanistic practitioners have long integrated the arts into the healing and change process. However, what is needed now is broader ways of understanding and applying creativity. Stated differently, there is a need for deeper engagement with creativity that will then permeate throughout Humanistic Psychology, across areas of endeavor and across cultures. These creative engagements have the potential to not only change Humanistic Psychology, but also to begin to transform the world.

Louis Hoffman, Ph.D. is an executive faculty member and chair of the Consciousness and Spirituality Program, Saybrook University. He is president of the Society for Humanistic Psychology (Division 32 of the American Psychological Association) and serves on several journal editorial boards. Dr. Hoffman has five books to his credit, including *Existential Psychology East West* and *Brilliant Sanity: Buddhist Approaches to Psychotherapy.*

Ruth Richards, Ph.D. (Education) and M.D. (Harvard Medical School), is a licensed psychologist (Massachusetts) and Board Certified Psychiatrist, working as educational psychologist and research psychiatrist. Professor of Psychology at Saybrook Graduate School, Ruth won the Arnheim Award from Division 10 of the APA for Outstanding Lifetime Achievement in Psychology and the Arts. She has written numerous papers and chapters, and edited two books – most recently, *Everyday Creativity and New Views of Human Nature* (APA Books, 2007).

Steven Pritzker is Director of the M.A. and Ph.D. Creativity Studies Specializations at Saybrook University. He is Co-Editor-in-Chief of *The Encyclopedia of Creativity* published by Academic Press. Steven is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and President-Elect of Division 10 (Psychology, Aesthetics and the Arts).

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