

# Humanistic Psychology: Possible Ways Forward

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## SYNOPSIS

In this article, I outline and discuss four tasks with which I would like to see this therapeutic tradition engage, the purpose of which would be the strengthening of Humanistic Psychology: a) carry out an inventory of strengths and weaknesses; b) publish up-to date texts on Humanistic Psychology; c) consider whether or not to align with pluralistic developments in the field; d) engage with reality.

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## Introduction

I am perhaps known as a practitioner within the cognitive behaviour therapy tradition and thus, it may seem strange, at first glance, to find me writing about the future of Humanistic Psychology. Actually, it's not that strange. I have quite an affinity with humanistic therapy dating back to 1975 when I did the one-year, full-time Diploma in Counselling in Educational Settings course at Aston University, the core theoretical model of which was client-centred therapy.<sup>1</sup> In retrospect, I was far more drawn to client-centred theory than I was to client-centred practice, which I found quite restricting and with which I did not resonate as a person. So, I embarked upon an exploration of other approaches and settled on what is now known as Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) which enabled me to be more active as a practitioner, but which was also rooted in a humanistic approach which encourages unconditional acceptance of self, others and the world (Ellis, 1973).

Having established my credentials, let me modify the task I have been given before I engage with it. I was originally asked to speculate on the future of Humanistic Psychology. My reaction to doing this was the same as my reaction to doing something similar for my recently published book on different CBT approaches (Dryden, 2012).<sup>2</sup> In the preface of that book I said the following:

I was tempted to write a concluding chapter in the current volume speculating on the likely future direction of CBT. I have resisted this temptation for one major reason. There was no way Bill Golden and I could have foreseen the developments that have taken place in CBT in Britain and in the world over the 25 years since the original book was published. Should I be around to edit this book again in 25 years' time (I will be 86 then!), then my guess is that CBT, as it exists then, will be as unrecognisable to me now as CBT now would have been to Bill and I back then. (Dryden, 2012: xiii)

So rather than speculating on the future of Humanistic Psychology, let me outline a number of tasks with which I would like to see this therapeutic tradition engage, the purpose of such engagement would be the strengthening of Humanistic Psychology. Actually, a lot of what I have to say has been said by Nick Totton in his excellent book entitled *The Problem with the Humanistic Therapies* (Totton, 2010; see Nick Totton's article in this issue).

## Carry out an Inventory of Strengths and Weaknesses

In order to move forward, it would be useful if there were broad consistency about the strengths and weaknesses of Humanistic Psychology. Although not

himself a humanistic practitioner, Totton outlined his view of the strengths and weakness of this therapeutic tradition. These are outlined in **Table 1**. This list might be a good place to begin the dialogue among practitioners of Humanistic Psychology, although as can be seen, each strength can be seen as a weakness and vice versa, depending on one's point of view.

It may be that humanistic therapists may come up with a different set of strengths and weaknesses and may well regard what Totton (2010) sees as weaknesses as misconceptions about the humanistic tradition. That is not the point. Developing an agreed list of strengths and weaknesses will lead the humanistic field to capitalise on the former, and mobilise its resources to deal in an orchestrated way with the latter.

### **Publish Up-to-date Texts on Humanistic Psychology**

While preparing this article I asked for reading suggestions from Richard House (who invited me to write this piece) and looked for up-to-date texts on Humanistic Psychology written by British authors.<sup>3</sup> Apart from the book by Totton (2010), which is a critique of the humanistic therapies rather than a text outlining its principles and practice, the most recent example of the latter I could find was written by Eric Whitton (2003), and this was published by a publisher which is now defunct. The two most recent editions of

major texts written by the indefatigable John Rowan are well over ten years old: *The Reality Game: A Guide to Humanistic Counselling and Therapy*, 2nd edition (Rowan, 1998) and *Ordinary Ecstasy: The Dialectics of Humanistic Psychology*, 3rd edition (Rowan, 2001). While there is a comprehensive edited text entitled *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology: Leading Edges in Theory, Research, and Practice* (Schneider, Bugental and Pierson, 2002), this is written largely for those already committed to the field, and is quite expensive.

If Humanistic Psychology is going to get its message across to professionals from other therapeutic traditions, and particularly if it is going to appeal to prospective practitioners, then it is very important, in my view, for up-to-date accessible texts to be available and consistently updated so that Humanistic Psychology has a current 'feel' to it. If you compare this state of affairs with the plethora of up-to-date books on CBT available, then the size of the problem becomes stark.

I mentioned Totton's (2010) book earlier. This book is an excellent example of someone who is enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the field of Humanistic Psychology, but who does not align himself with it. He writes sensibly, critically and above all empathically about the field. Totton's book was originally published in book form by Karnac Books, but is now available only as a PDF download from Open Mind Books. This development probably means that Totton's manuscript

**Table 1: Totton's (2010) view of the strengths and weaknesses of Humanistic Psychology**

<b>STRENGTHS</b>	<b>WEAKNESSES</b>
› Takes a positive view of human nature	› Demonstrates a Pollyanna complex
› Focuses on growth, not cure	› Tends to deny pathology
› Empowers clients	› Gives undue responsibility to clients
› Adopts a style which is closer to ordinary communicating	› Misses transference issues
› Adopts a contactful way of relating	› Has boundary problems
› Is spontaneous and improvising	› Glorifies impulsiveness
› Demonstrates a positive attitude to embodiment, to emotions	› Has a negative attitude to rationality and theory
› Demonstrates a positive attitude to spirituality	› Is prone to mysticism and 'uplift'
› Offers an inherent social critique	› Is out of the mainstream
› Favours an experiential paradigm of practice and research	› Is weak on research

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will not get the wide readership that it deserves, both within the field of Humanistic Psychology and without.

As Totton (2010) has argued, Humanistic Psychology is a broad and diverse church and yet it is difficult to get a current sense of the field's breadth and depth. I edit a series entitled 'CBT: Distinctive Features'.<sup>4</sup> This series is designed to show the distinctive theoretical and practical features of a number of approaches within the CBT tradition. It is written for people who may be interested in CBT as well as for CBT therapists from a specific approach who want to learn about the distinctive features of other CBT approaches. Each book has the same structure to facilitate comparison.

I had planned to co-edit a similar series on Humanistic Psychology with John Rowan, but our plans did not materialise. I still think, however, that such a series would help to revitalise Humanistic Psychology, both from within and without, and I would encourage interested parties to pick up the publishing mantle here. Failing that, I would like to see one edited text which outlines the main humanistic approaches in Britain. I have edited such a book on CBT (Dryden, 2012), and again authors of each CBT approach have written to a set chapter structure to facilitate comparison. In summary, perhaps the field of Humanistic Psychology needs a Windy Dryden to coordinate these latter efforts!!

## **Pluralism: To Align with or Not?**

In my view, one of the most exciting trends to emerge recently in the field of counselling and psychotherapy has

been that of pluralism (Cooper and McLeod, 2011; House and Totton, 2011; Samuels, 1993). There are three core principles of pluralistic counselling and therapy. These are:

1. There are different pathways to therapeutic change; it follows from this that there is no, one best therapeutic orientation/method; and different clients are likely to have different therapeutic needs at different points in time.
2. If therapists want to know what is likely to be most helpful for individual clients, they should start by exploring it with them.
3. Pluralistic therapists demonstrate understanding of the views of practitioners from other therapeutic orientations, respect for and acceptance of these practitioners even when they disagree with some of their views.


The question for the field of Humanistic Psychology is whether and to what extent it should align itself with pluralism. This development has recently been spearheaded by Cooper and McLeod (2011), who are most closely connected with the humanistic-existential therapeutic tradition. This means that Humanistic Psychology would have less difficulty 'hitching its wheels' to the pluralistic 'wagon' than the psychodynamic and CBT traditions, particularly with respect to the second core principle listed above. In addition, humanistic therapists should be best placed to adhere to the third core principle, at least in theory. Whether they do so in practice is another matter (cf. Loewenthal and House, 2010). Perhaps, it is with the first principle that humanistic practitioners would have the most difficulty. For example, Totton (2010) noted that such practitioners tend to downplay unconscious and rational factors in the change process.

Assuming that obstacles to pluralism can be successfully addressed, the question remains whether or not Humanistic Psychology should align itself with the pluralistic movement. Whatever happens, I believe that it should seriously debate this issue. My view is that it should align itself with the pluralistic movement as long as it promotes simultaneously its distinctive features in a jargon-free way to the rest of the therapeutic world.

## **Engaging with Reality**

One of the challenges for those therapy approaches not represented in the Increasing Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) initiative is how to respond to this programme. Do they criticise CBT

that largely comprises the initiative, do they petition the Government, play politics, or carry out the kind of research that is acceptable to the National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) so that it can become a part of the therapeutic establishment as conceived by the Government? My point here is that whatever stance or combination of stances the Humanistic Psychology movement decides to take, it would be best if it demonstrates the core conditions of empathy, acceptance and congruence in doing so. Thus, it is possible to mount a cogent critical response to CBT that is based on an understanding of CBT from its internal frame of reference and accept and show respect to CBT therapists while criticising aspects of CBT theory and practice to which one objects. In my view, these attitudes were not demonstrated by the majority of contributors to Loewenthal and House's (2010) edited book entitled *Critically Engaging CBT*, which should serve as a model of how not to engage CBT practitioners in a meaningful dialogue.

In summary, the future of Humanistic Psychology is largely within the hands of its adherents – i.e. you! If you practise what you preach while engaging with other approaches with which you agree, if you capitalise on the strengths of Humanistic Psychology and are honest about its weaknesses and address these in a concerted manner, then the future of Humanistic Psychology will be rosy. If not... well let's not go there!! 

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Now known as person-centred therapy.
- <sup>2</sup> This book entitled *Cognitive Behaviour Therapies* (Dryden, 2012) is a British-based update of a book that I edited with Bill Golden called *Cognitive-behavioural Approaches to Psychotherapy* that had British and North American contributors (Dryden and Golden, 1986).
- <sup>3</sup> I am referring here to the broad field of Humanistic Psychology. I am well aware that there have been published more recent texts on specific humanistic approaches.
- <sup>4</sup> There are currently ten books in the series, with more in the pipeline.

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