# The Cultural Rift Dividing Humanistic and Positive Psychology: The Future Possibilities of Reconciliation

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## SYNOPSIS

Humanistic Psychology is often misportrayed as dying or dead, a claim that is especially egregious when made by positive psychologists, who minimize their debt to, as well as co-opt a narrow version of, Humanistic Psychology. This rift rests on a cultural divide that cuts broadly across many sectors of modern life. Through denigration of and distancing from Humanistic Psychology, positive psychology has gained considerable benefits siphoned from Humanistic Psychology. Consequently, a better future for Humanistic Psychology requires making explicit efforts to be more holistic, including in valuing all methodologies, and emphasizing the importance of including both positive and negative phenomena within its purview. This could reclaim largely dormant aspects of Humanistic Psychology, undermining the efforts of positive psychology to assert itself as distinct, and perhaps facilitating an eventual reconciliation.

Dilthey's (1989) collection of essays, written prior to his death in 1911, distinguished between natural and human sciences, with the former focused on material explanations while the latter focused on understanding humans and their unique lives within socio-historical contexts. Later, Snow (1959) bifurcated intellectual culture into two conflicting camps, the sciences and the humanities, a split which many others have attempted since to mend (e.g. Gould, 2003). What Snow identified as disparate cultures (i.e. the sciences seeking universal objective truths vs the humanities seeking particularistic subjective understandings) has resulted in what some have called the paradigm wars. Opinion is divided as to whether these wars continue or have ended (e.g. Oakley, 1999).

Within Psychology, Kimble (1984) applied this cultural delineation, bifurcating research and clinical psychology into scientific and humanistic cultures

respectively. This approach to understanding rifts within Psychology has been revisited a number of times (e.g. Nunez, Poole and Memon, 2003), including recently in relationship to divides within positive psychology (Bacon, 2005). Although some speculate that cultural reconciliation has finally percolated into Psychology, which has been the last social science to resist acceptance of qualitative methods, the jury is still out (Willig and Stainton-Rogers, 2008).

The American Psychological Association, for example, is working hard to advance Psychology as a science-technology-engineering-mathematics (STEM) discipline, which may bring enhanced benefits (e.g. status and money) for Psychology departments (Kurtzman, 2012). Likewise, many Psychology departments are even going to the extreme of renaming themselves to more closely identify with these STEM disciplines. These include the following major US universities: Dartmouth and Indiana (both now called the Departments of Psychological and Brain Sciences); Northern Kentucky, Ball State and Missouri (all three now called the Departments of Psychological Science); Duke (now called the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience); and Brown (now called the Department of Cognitive, Linguistic and Psychological Sciences) (Jaffe, 2011). Evidently much of Psychology is attempting to disavow its humanistic aspects and be seen as a hard science.

One area in which this culture war manifests is in the rift between humanistic and positive psychology. By definition through being labeled wars, such divides are not always peaceful. Seligman (2009), one of the co-founders of positive psychology, has frequently denigrated Humanistic Psychology for supposedly lacking 'mainstream, cumulative, and replicable scientific method' (ibid.: xvii), which he claims to be foundational to positive psychology. He does, however, admit that both humanistic and positive psychology share a common interest in what is positive (e.g. goodness and health), in contrast to the prevailing mainstream focus in Psychology on the negative (e.g. evil and pathology). Positive psychology has often asserted itself as being a distinct approach from its predecessor, Humanistic Psychology, by its embracing of quantitative research, while it evaluates Humanistic Psychology as unscientific for its frequent reliance on qualitative methods (Friedman, 2008).

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In addition to the methodological divide, another major delineation between humanistic and positive psychology rests on the former's emphasis on holism, including the negative, while the latter tends to exclude the negative, which creates an imbalance. Recently I illustrated this problem with the example of the largest applied psychology research study ever, viz. one training resiliency to literally every US soldier (Friedman and Robbins, 2012). In this paper, I argued that such emphasis only on the positive, while ignoring its potentially complementary shadow, could have a very negative backlash, such as resulting in resilient warfighters who could simultaneously be less likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress but more likely to commit atrocities. In a more general way, I argue that to be humanistic involves recognizing the holistic relationship between both positive and negative, and including both. In many other areas of Psychology, this is becoming recognized, such as in the growing recognition of the importance of the understudied emotion of disgust, which is now being seen not just as a negative emotion to be avoided but, rather, one to be embraced as adaptive (Curtis, 2011). Likewise, I am increasingly interested in complex emotions central to humanistic thought, such as awe, which involves a rich intermixture of positive and negative affect (Bonner and Friedman, 2011).

Mruk (2008) provided a good way to delineate the complex rift characterizing the cultural divide separating humanistic from positive psychology. Specifically, he delineated between what he called 'positivistic positive

psychology' and 'humanistic positive psychology'. He outlined their commonalities and differences, while denying that they are separate fields. With the increasing ascendency of positive psychology, claiming its superiority over Humanistic Psychology by supposedly restoring hard-science approaches to positive phenomena, there is both a threat and an opportunity for Humanistic Psychology. Although Humanistic Psychology usually identifies more with the humanities and the softer areas of the sciences, contrary to the tide of STEM disciplines on which positive psychology is rising, Humanistic Psychology does not have to exclude any approach to explaining and understanding any human experience and behavior, including both positive and negative. Humanistic Psychology thus has a strategic advantage over positive psychology, as it can both include and go beyond its rival.

To understand this rift, it needs to be appreciated as having developed from two complementary prejudices, paralleling Snow's (1959) two cultures. Positive psychology seems to have become overly rigid, ignoring its shadow side (Friedman and Robbins, 2012), as well as becoming stuck in a naïve positivistic view of research favoring quantitative approaches, whilst hardly acknowledging the usefulness of qualitative approaches (Friedman, 2008). But Humanistic Psychology is also complicit in having veered in the opposite direction, often denigrating quantitative approaches whilst favoring qualitative approaches (Friedman, 2008). Seeing these opposites as complementary, I think they can perhaps best be viewed as cultural traps (see Bohanon, 1995; Friedman, 2009), which mirror the larger struggles in the culture wars. In regard to Humanistic Psychology, its rebellion against the established forces within the 1960s psychology of behaviorism and psychoanalysis led to an initially adaptive so-called 'third force' but, in accord with how cultural traps work, this stance became increasingly maladaptive. And this led to a lacuna in which the opposite emerged – namely, a positive psychology movement that disavows its connection with its progenitor, Humanistic Psychology. Such is the nature of revolutions, in the sense that they often revolve back to their starting-points, spurring counter-revolutions *ad nauseum*.

Lately, I have been addressing efforts to reconcile the split between humanistic and positive psychology through emphasizing the importance of using mixed

methods, which would not privilege any singular method (Friedman, 2008). To privilege either qualitative over quantitative, or vice versa, exemplifies what can be termed *methodolotry*, the elevation of a method to an object of worship (Friedman, 2002a), and I have noted in past work why it is important not to privilege any singular method (Friedman, 2003). Basically, I argue that there are two traps to avoid: namely, to elevate qualitative approaches, as has been prevalent in many areas of Humanistic Psychology, constitutes an error of *romanticism*, while to elevate quantitative approaches, as has been prevalent in positive psychology, constitutes an error of *scientism* (Friedman, 2002b, 2005). Quantitative and qualitative methods may be delineated in various way (e.g. abstract/grounded, hard/soft, hypothesis testing/speculative, fixed/flexible, objective/ subjective, survey/case study, and value-free/ political; Silverman, 2001), but I conclude that they cannot be valued as good or bad in any absolutist way. However, this contention can be debated (see Franco, Friedman and Arons, 2008).

That Humanistic Psychology is often depicted as dying, or even dead, ignores its continuing importance to Psychology, science, and even humanity (Friedman, 2011). This misperception of its near or actual demise has recently been promoted by positive psychology, which has attempted to co-opt Humanistic Psychology, such as by disavowing its own origins within Humanistic Psychology and by accusing it of being anti-scientific. Through this strategy, positive psychology has gained considerable benefits through attracting scholars and students under its banner, and has achieved many successes (e.g. through funding, media coverage, and publications) (Friedman, 2008).

Brent Robbins and I explored these dynamics within two special issues of *The Humanistic Psychologist* (Friedman and Robbins, 2008; Robbins and Friedman, 2009). We also responded to this need by chairing the positive psychology interest group of the American Psychological Association Division 32 (Society for Humanistic Psychology), as well as offering a symposium seeking rapprochement between leaders of both movements at a recent annual convention of the American Psychological Association.

Essentially, I consider it of paramount importance that humanistic and positive psychology become

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reunited, as either will siphon off energy from the other, to the detriment of both. The future of Humanistic Psychology hinges on its ability to reclaim what positive psychology has co-opted, as well as to reclaim what it has itself abandoned by emphasizing one methodological stance to the detriment of others. The path I advocate to optimally move forward is for Humanistic Psychology to explicitly espouse *epistemological and methodological pluralism*, thus undermining any accusations of being anti-scientific, while building bridges with positive psychology, including advising that it not ignore the negative in pursuit of the positive. It is important to realize that if Humanistic Psychology were to remain primarily wedded to only one method, namely qualitative, it would short shrift its potential to make many important contributions. Humanistic Psychology also needs to actively showcase its numerous successes in having influenced many areas within Psychology, including in its seminal relatedness to positive psychology. That it has been relatively ignored, or even denigrated, by many key forums within contemporary Psychology (e.g. in undergraduate textbooks) requires overt challenge against its being further marginalized. For example, one area of science that could benefit from a more humanistic perspective is neurobiology, which unfortunately is often approached in solely reductionist ways (e.g. equating mind with

brain) that minimizes the role of the human as a whole, including human experience. Humanistic psychologists can demonstrate the importance of understanding consciousness from holistic perspectives that go beyond hard science neurobiological reductionism, an area I have recently been pursuing (e.g. Krippner and Friedman, 2010). It is also important that Humanistic Psychology demonstrate its broader impact on science in general, as well as on how it benefits humanity and many of its social institutions. In these regards, Humanistic Psychology has a great future, but only if past cultural traps are circumvented, starting with resisting its co-option by, and working toward reconciling with, positive psychology. ❺

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