Four Psychologies: Humanistic, Existential, Critical, and Zapffean

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SYNOPSIS

To help sharpen the distinctiveness of Humanistic Psychology, as well as bringing more critical edge to it, it is here compared with three other psychologies: existential, critical and Zapffean. The first of these is close to but not identical with Humanistic,; the second takes a critical umbrella form,; and the third is frankly oppositional. I argue that the Zapffean is the most difficult for Hhumanistic Ppsychologists to address, confronting as it does their essentially positive attitude. Some consideration is given to why we individually adopt certain approaches and what the limits of our judgement and openness are.

One way of elucidating the distinctiveness of Humanistic Psychology is to compare it with others. Traditionally, this would mean comparisons with the 'host' discipline of generic academic (scientific) psychology, and psychoanalytic and cognitive-behavioural pPsychologies. Here I propose an alternative comparison. But first I want to clarify my usage of the term 'psychology', which does not belong to the British Psychological Society or any other establishment. 'Psychology' can refer to any system of ideas about the human mind or psyche, about human values, feelings, behaviour, purpose, worldviews, and so on. In its most liberal sense, psychology can be appropriated by Christians, Muslims, scientologists, secular humanists, astrologers, political thinkers of all stripes – indeed, by anyone, including those we may not agree with or even (to be honest) respect. It is a pity that 'anthropology' is also 'possessed' by certain groups of academics, since its human condition flavour is clear.

Humanistic Psychology

Humanistic Psychology is what it is at least partly by virtue of its comparison with psychologies perceived by its adherents as wrong-headed; primarily the contemporaneous scientific, behavioural and psychoanalytic psychologies. It is regarded by its proponents as more comprehensive or holistic, embracing much more than the observable, measurable, pathological, manipulable, and limited aspects of being human. It is inclusive of ideas and beliefs about subjectivity, positive feelings, the body, sexuality, dreams, joy, spirituality, meaning, authenticity, self-actualisation, social transformation and eco-awareness.

As a product of mid-20th century California and the West, it unintentionally marginalises other cultures and religions (notwithstanding its 1960s absorption of some Zen Buddhist concepts) and promotes the autonomy of the self. It has often seemed to happily incorporate, or cohabit with, phenomenology and existentialism, as well as the transpersonal. But we can see in criticisms of Rogers' naivety, for example, that willingness to face creaturely savagery, evolutionary determinism, and historical facts, human aggression, deceit and greed, therapeutic and social policy failures, and ageing and death (Feltham,

2013) is generally limited in Humanistic Psychology. Does 'humanistic' have to mean positive, and if so, how positive?

Existential Psychology

Existentialism is quintessentially European, philosophical, and contains a great deal of serious and often dark thinking; not surprising, given the primarily war-torn times in which it evolved. Key figures like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Sartre concentrated on the experience of the individual, believing that we have no given essence, but rather, that we are 'thrown into existence' and must decide for ourselves what values and purposes to adopt. On encountering our inner worlds, immediate circumstances, other people, the spheres of politics and religion, and the cosmos itself, we are each free to make of it all what we will. Indeed, we are in Sartrean terms 'doomed to freedom'.

Existentialism and existential therapy (henceforward Existential Psychology) seem to emphasise thought, choice and action. An inner dialogue takes place, similar to CBT thought-monitoring and Socratic dialogue with oneself. (See Sartre's *Roads to Freedom* trilogy of novels.) One is bound to reflect often on matters of being and non-being, alienation, angst, absurdity, authenticity, death, courage, choice, freedom. Breaking free of 'bad faith' and the clutches of our facticity takes constant conscious effort.

Although American existentialism and phenomenology have a more upbeat character than European (compare May, Rogers, Yalom, Bugental, Mahrer, et al. with Binswanger, Jaspers, Frankl, Laing, et al.), they all appear to share a way of being that is more serious and cognitive than playful and emotional. While existential psychology departs from psychoanalytic psychology in dismissing unconscious determinism, it resembles it in being heavily self-analytical. Gestalt therapy may incorporate some existential principles (choice, authenticity), but it is more committed to spontaneous experience. Buber's 'I–Thou' hardly sits well with Sartre's 'hell is other people'.

Existentialists may engage in individual meaning-making following theologians like Bultmann and Tillich, or like Sartre, in political activism. But in many ways existentialism is regarded by most contemporary philosophers as a spent force, a movement that was left behind decades ago. Laing and the anti-psychiatry movement peaked many years ago, and some even speak of a post-existentialism (Loewenthal, 2011). Despite modest interest in existential therapy in the UK (primarily in London), and in the development of the International Collaborative of Existential Counsellors and Psychotherapists, it is questionable whether this movement has either sufficient conceptual and clinical fecundity or appeal to thrive in the long term. The same questions of vigour and anachronism also face Humanistic Psychology.

Critical Psychology

The origins of critical psychology lie in Germany with authors such as Klaus Holzkamp. Its ancestry can also be traced back to radical psychology, red therapy, community psychology, anti-psychiatry and critical psychiatry. And also to Marxism, to the critical theory of Marcuse, Fromm and others, to Foucault, and feminist writings. It now has some worldwide support, and is promulgated by Fox et al. (2009), Sloan (2000), Parker (2007) and others. Critical psychology is explicitly politically -oriented and draws attention to ways in which traditional psychology promotes certain values, power structures and class interests. It focuses on notions of surveillance and control (Rose, 1999), collective resistance and counter-constructions.

In its very title and publications we can see how critical psychology differs from humanistic and existential psychologies. It is rooted in the established psychology; that is, most of its practitioners are clinical or academic psychologists, and it critiques and hopes to transform psychology. It draws on a distinctive literature base, on what some would regard as an overly intellectualised body of concepts. Although opposing much of what Humanistic Psychology opposes (medical dominance, psychiatric abuse, psycho-diagnosis, psycho-pharmacology), it is also somewhat at odds with the individual focus of most talking therapies. Some practitioners make use of a social materialist model of distress and response (Midlands Psychology Group, 2012 ; Smail, 2005). Despite its socially critical bent, however, cCritical pPsychology is hardly anarchistic or revolutionary in any visible sense.

Zapffean Psychology

Few will know the work of the Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe (1899–1990), mainly but not only due to a lack of English translation. I hope to show that his work has profound implications for any serious consideration of the human condition. I won't pretend that I expect readers to like his views, which are bleakly pessimistic, indeed nihilistic. Zapffe was influenced by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Freud. Interestingly, although his views are bleak he was also a humourist, a mountaineer and an environmentalist.

Zapffe's main work, *On the Tragic*, remains untranslated, but his key essay 'The Last Messiah' (1933/2004) is available, and is a primary source. Thomas Ligotti's (2010) *The Conspiracy against the Human Race*

is also an excellent, albeit extremely bleak, secondary source. According to Zapffe, humans have a tragically over-developed consciousness which seeks meaning in a meaningless universe. We rely on four defence mechanisms to ward off our terrible anxiety about our circumstances: isolation or denial of the bleak facts of existence; anchoring ourselves in various religious, political, psychological and other myths and belief systems; distraction via entertainment, the arts, sex, substances, etc.; and sublimation or transforming awareness of the bleak facts into literature and other media (see Samuel Beckett and others YEAR?).

Zapffe's implied challenge to Humanistic Psychology must be roughly this: the universe is indifferent to us; there is no God whatsoever; death is real and inevitable and there is no resurrection or reincarnation; life is suffused with suffering, absurdity and tragedy; our minds are chronically over-busy and dissatisfied in the manner of Buddhist Dukkha; ageing itself is a slow, disfiguring death. In order to cope, we invent causes and credos, we defend indefensible systems of belief and hope (including Humanistic Psychology), which serve to anchor and distract us. We fail to notice the irrationality of our sustaining beliefs, which are often ridiculous and always subject to exposure and entropy, like all things. We agonise over optimal child-rearing practices when we might better consider an anti-natalist position. This resonates with Philip Larkin: if your Mum and Dad fucked you up, and you are likely to repeat such damage, why not desist from having kids yourself?

Although humanistic psychologists (particularly those self-labelling as person-centred) generally dislike diagnostic categories, it is easy to regard Zapffe as belonging in the group of 'depressive realists' who have dark views on the human condition. These include writers and philosophers like Arthur Schopenhauer, Giacomo Leopardi, E.M. Cioran, Samuel Beckett, Michel Houellebecq, Thomas Ligotti, David Benatar and Ray Brassier. I assume that cognitive-behavioural proponents like Aaron Beck will regard all these as projecting their personal depression on to the world. It is interesting to question how far any psychology can go in the direction of supporting a negative or nihilistic worldview, even if Freud is often considered pessimistic. The relative neglect of Eduard von Hartmann's (1869/2010) *Philosophy of the Unconscious* (except partly by Jung) is perhaps one suggestive 'road not taken'.

Discussion

We do not wish to see that our own chosen and cherished models and practices are often (perhaps always) faddish, time-limited enthusiasms. All psychologies (I suggest even more so than medical models) erupt as creative, panacea-promising, attention-seeking, follower-gathering enterprises, before passing into oblivion within decades. Like fading religions, denominations and cults, they are often reformed and resuscitated, especially by energetic and charismatic psycho-gurus, but they cannot ultimately stand the test of time. In Zapffean terms they are all forms of anchoring and distraction, all defence mechanisms. In Zapffean Psychology, we might say that the more we feel threatened by ontological meaninglessness, the more desperate we become in our resuscitation efforts to maintain our familiar 'anxiety buffers'.

'You're on earth, there's no cure for that', says Hamm in Samuel Beckett's play 'Endgame' (Beckett, 2009). Yet we persistently seek a cure. Or a new cure, or a form of discourse that appears cleverly to sidestep any talk of a cure. Humanistic psychologists don't really feel there is anything, deep down, that is awry or needs curing. Or some, perhaps along primal and deep eco-therapy lines, think they have the remedy. Existential psychologists insist that we can always choose how we respond to life and its many challenges, we can always re-define matters. Critical psychologists believe that some new bricolage of linguistic prestidigitation, faith in human nature, and opposition of psychiatric bogeymen will make things all right. Perhaps true, pessimistic Freudians, following the master's dictum that psychoanalysis renders hysterical misery into common unhappiness, understand the modest value of a therapy that dis-illusions us into a position where we can tolerate the everyday tragedy of an ultimately meaningless life.

A fuller version of this article might include Evolutionary Psychology and post-humanist psychology, the one spelling out our severely determined limits and the mismatch between our animal and human selves, the other stretching us well beyond ourselves into forms of artificial intelligence. Ultimately, the challenge to Humanistic Psychology is that it confines itself to a small radius of what is convenient to consider. It is looking uncomfortably aligned with the positive psychology of CBT and solution-focused therapy, and the associated suspicion of dark, problem-saturated thinkers. It isn't clear whether Humanistic Psychology has an alternative vision of the 'real world' (beyond well-meaning local/personal politics and arguably fantastical Wilberian schemes), or whether its main therapeutic products are consolations and distractions for humans living in a bleak world.

One way of looking at all this is to insist that some

psychologies are better than others – epistemologically more rigorous, clinically more effective, politically more empowering and spiritually more uplifting. Another is to try and claim that they are all, in postmodern or phenomenological terms, true in their own ways. The most basic and familiar way is the mudslinging, pathologising approach: humanistic psychologists are hopeless romantics and Pollyannas; existentialist psychologists are jargon-mesmerised people who deny obvious limitations of free will; critical psychologists want their psychologist status and pay while talking psychobabble and posing as radical heroes; and Zapffean psychologists (if there are any) misanthropically and unhelpfully project their own misery on to society and the cosmos.

Something we have not shown much interest in is the question of the relationship between personality and chosen psychological ideologies. Why, exactly, is one person thrilled to discover Rogers, say, while another is altogether untouched? Why do some devote decades to psychoanalysis, critical psychology, or whichever orientation, and remain uninterested in or hostile towards, for example, Transpersonal or Evolutionary Psychology? There is an assumption that we are each equally well-informed and intelligent, perhaps sampling everything on offer and making a reasoned choice. But our choices may be accidental (we stumble on a bestseller or meet an enthusiast) or dictated by the limitations of our time, culture and epistemological acuity. We probably wouldn't expect to see Zapffean Psychology emerging from California, or Gestalt therapy from Scandinavia. Something we can never discuss (surely a strict taboo against objectification and judgementalism in Humanistic Psychology) is the possibility that some (the dullards, the masses) are less discriminating than others, and are satisfied with uncritical pulp psychology.

My guess is that most of us gravitate towards whatever appeals to our personality on the basis of the 'affect heuristic' (Kahneman, 2012), and indeed we may even defend intuitive and passionate choices above reason. Few of us trawl through dozens of heavy tomes or attend multiple courses, classes and workshops before deciding that one or another psychology has more merit than others. Some of us attempt to be eclectic, integrative or pluralistic, or charitable towards psychologies we do not like. It is also quite possible that we lean towards and against others defensively, avoiding those that challenge us too much. Across a lifetime, it also happens that some of us discard previous beliefs, and even admit that a prior passion was ill-adopted. And some of us may experience a kind of bipolar switching back and forth, say from Rogerian hopefulness to Zapffean terror and resignation. Interestingly, although we may freely speak about bisexuality, we seem more wary of confessing to fluctuating states of psychological belief, or of psychological agnosticism. But the most prevalent pattern seems to be anchoring: we tend to stay with, deepen commitment to, and defend what we like.

Few sceptics and nihilists are found in the ranks of therapists, a phenomenon of adherence similar to that found in most religions. The Hindu *neti neti* (neither this nor that) seems to have no real equivalent in psychology or psychotherapy. Practitioners like Jung and Laing may have had their maverick aspects, but these fell short of nihilism. And one finds little in the psychological or psychotherapeutic literature that takes seriously the Zapffean principles stated above. Larry Davidson emphasises Humanistic Psychology's 'rigorous study of human experience in all its complexity, richness and meaning' (2013: 15). But there is little mention of the denied aspects of cosmic indifference, chronic socio-economic injustice, senescence, thanatophobia, meaninglessness and vulnerability to brute tragedy and suffering. Post-traumatic growth is OK, but prolonged suffering or suicide presumably are not. Surely assumptions of Western assertiveness, optimism and hubristic progress here eclipse all consideration of our imminent nothingness.

Critical psychology, albeit with a different focus, has very circumscribed parameters. Here, let's look at devious language use, cultural bias and institutional power structures. But let's not look at our evolutionary inheritance or human history, cosmic habitat or personal and species entropy and mortality. Instead, let's do protracted academic battle with the parent, 'official' psychology.

Existential pPsychology comes closest to looking at scary ultimate concerns, with Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927/2010) and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943/2003) as kinds of bible. Otto Rank's early existentialist formulations are also important historically. The development of terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 2004) comes close to Zapffe's focus on our natural fear of death. But existential psychologists want to create an edifice, found institutions, do therapy, convert people, belong in society, earn money, refute Sisyphus. As they should know, only the individual authentically experiencing ('Kierkegaardian') dread, probably alone in the middle of the night, is free from the suppression of dread. Existentialism is a form of

anchoring and distraction, and sometimes sublimation.

One potential way forward is dialogue (rather than patriarchal, solipsistic, theory wars in print) along Bohmian lines, in which individual perceptions are exchanged, empathically considered, and constantly re-worked (Bohm, 2004). Encounter groups may appear to offer dialogue but passionate authenticity is always likely to trump other expressions of belief. In Yalom's (2006) novel *The Schopenhauer Cure,* for example, this very triumphalism of passionate expression of feelings and warm rapport (in American humanistic-existentialism style) is inevitably promoted over felt or rational pessimism. The committed person-centred psychologist, however empathic, would struggle if her faith in the actualising tendency were challenged by the Schopenhauerian concept of Will, which is a malignant version of the actualising tendency.

Of course, there is nothing new under the sun and these themes have appeared before in various guises; Freud's death drive; Frankl's meaning-making in the face of the Holocaust; and Yalom's writings on death, for example. It is also hardly a revelation to suggest that what 'sells' best is that which fascinates, inspires and gives most hope and comfort. This is certainly true in the self-help market but also applies to some applied psychologies more than to others. Humanistic Psychology generates a warm buzz, critical psychology struggles to show solidarity with the underdog, and existential psychology corners the deep-and-meaningful market. Zapffean Psychology is ignored and pathologised, mainly because it is cold comfort. Supposing that one hasn't conceded to the now dominant 'there is no truth' camp, what is true and what gives comfort are sometimes quite different things.

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