

# Humanistic Psychology at the Polytechnic of North London and the SW London College in the 1970s

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## SYNOPSIS

The following account offers a history of the use and development of Humanistic Psychology at the Polytechnic of North London and also at South-West London College in the 1970s – with some thoughts about the present. My purpose is to show how, in these courses, we tried to combine two things: the principles of self-awareness and self-determination that would seem to be basic to Humanistic Psychology; with a developed structure within which self-aware and self-determining individuals would relate to other aware individuals. The purpose of this was that within such a structure, a co-operative organisation – i.e. the courses – could be developed and experienced. I think we succeeded in doing this. And I think that our project has relevance to our current social and political and economic difficulties. At the end, I try to say something about this also.

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When I first came into contact with Humanistic Psychology, started thinking about it, started working within its framework (this was several decades ago now of course) and when I first got to know its concepts and its ideology, it was connected with the 'Growth Movement'. And the basic precept of this movement, as I understand it now (and did at the time) is the value given to the development of each individual: which meant, primarily, self-development. There were slogans such as 'You create your life', there was the Gestalt therapy rule, 'Take responsibility for yourself' (with the sometimes silent addition 'and not for anyone else'), there was Carl Rogers' precept that 'Behavior is basically the goal-directed attempt of the organism to satisfy its needs as experienced, in the field as perceived' (one of his

'propositions'). The emphasis being always on the 'Self'.

I was a practitioner of a sort – by which I mean that I used some of it and took part in some of it, but was also critical of some of it.

When I think about Humanistic Psychology now, I see it in a much longer historical perspective. Actually, I see it as starting with Martin Luther translating the Bible! A special education was no longer needed to relate to the word of God, and each person could take the words and begin to shape his or her morality and life. And the next big step was the Enlightenment, which took moralistic discourse out of the hands of the Church. And now we have humanism as a non-religious value-system, and we have 'human rights'.

On the way there was a huge set of paradoxes,

most disturbingly displayed in the USA by the American Declaration of Independence, which blazoned forth certain 'inalienable rights' and then totally denied those rights to the Natives of that country, often fatally; and to the Blacks who, in one way or another, had been transported there. The 'American Dream' and 'you can do whatever you want', even 'self-actualisation', seem rather to have imploded too. Indeed, America seems to be rather a land of paradox, where the human condition is concerned.

So what is the most fruitful way to see this road? How do we understand its present? And perhaps, then: how do we enable ourselves to guide its future? Because it's pretty clear that the world is in something of a dire state just now. Of course it has been before, and perhaps it was those few decades ago, but it is clearer to see now.

We could almost say that what started as Luther's enabling of individual human intelligence and was reinforced by the Enlightenment has, for now, ended in gross inequality: huge salaries and bonuses for the service wizard-bosses, and deep poverty for the increasing billions who put together the pieces of their (and our – we being their privileged sort-of-assistants) digital clickers, and sew their (and our) suits. Even 'democracy', which is put forward as the way to run a country (although Bertrand Russell labelled it the 'least worst system'!), is in serious trouble. To take a recent example, in Kenya the elected representatives of the people voted themselves amounts of money that are grotesquely huge in relation to the poverty of the people who put them in power. So the difference between a representative democracy and a participatory (or 'direct') democracy has to be considered, and what structures a participatory democracy needs – and what the relation is between these structures and 'Humanistic Psychology'. I believe that there is one, and that certain experiences are needed to enable people to function in a way that could make this work.

That is all by way of introduction. I shall now try to describe my own involvement in this story, especially by relating the history of the Polytechnic of North London course and what led to a 'Diploma in Applied Behavioural Science' – also variously known as the 'Dabs Course' or the 'Poly Course'.

This course ran in a unit of the Management Studies department of the Poly – itself something of a paradoxical situation, as we shall see. My first connection with it was that John Southgate (who headed this unit) asked me to come and work with his staff. I had been working in the theatre in the area of improvisation and had formed

a performing group composed mainly of students doing an Art Teacher's Certificate course (run by Tony Collinge) at Goldsmith's College, with a few actors I brought in, plus two other students, a sociologist and a film-maker. We were doing very way-out stuff for the time – 'happenings', mainly derived from the Abstract Expressionist movement in New York, as expressed by John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Jean Tinguely, Robert Rauschenberg and others. I don't recall how John and I first met; it may have been to do with his interest in improvisation, as he was (is) an accomplished jazz pianist. These developments in the field of art did, I believe, reflect developments in the field of both psychology and politics, in a way that can be seen as relating to Humanistic Psychology.

Anyway, the workshop with John's staff led to my working there a few times, and soon getting an appointment at the Polytechnic as a lecturer. The work of the department as a whole, and of this particular unit, was derived from the principles developed at the National Training Laboratory (NTL) in the USA, originating with Kurt Lewin at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. They got to the Poly via the group working at Leeds, and by this time a more 'humanistic' element had been added, largely through the influence of Carl Rogers, well-known for his development of a person-centred therapeutic and counselling approach, which (as most people reading this will know) believed that each person has within them their own best way forward for their own development, and for their recovery if disturbed.

However, the basic purpose of the work at NTL,

"..each person has within them their own best way forward for their own development.."



and subsequently at Leeds, was to help management in organisations get better at managing! And when I arrived at the Poly, the primary tool for doing this was the T-group (the 'T' stands for training). This was for managers to develop their personal skills, at getting on with each other and at running the department or whatever, for which they were responsible. It is sometimes referred to as a sensitivity training group: but clearly the 'sensitivity' learned in such a group in this context had as its purpose the development of better managers.

The structure of the T-group is interesting. The leader (or 'Trainer') does not participate on an equal basis, but has the function of making process comments – and sometimes of setting an exercise. Very good training for the trainer! You really learned how to handle silence, hostility, projections. You learned how not to be nice or understanding. You learned, too, what interventions worked and which ones didn't – you certainly knew which it was; so you did learn intervention strategy, that you had to strategise, to make your own internal decisions, and therefore you learned about immediate design, and therefore also about planned design. And of course you discovered that this certainly was not a non-directive group, that you were constantly reinforcing your position as leader by not leading!

Not very much Humanistic Psychology there, you could say. Except that it was still (already) based on the ground of 'self-development'. But this was always within the context of conventional management. For commercial organisations, or the civil service, or local administrations – any organisation where hierarchies were desired and established and where managers were required to manage – learn how to take initiatives and communicate etc. within this context.

But John and I wanted to change the world. And we certainly changed the work of this particular unit of this Management Department. We no longer worked primarily with established commercial and otherwise hierarchical organisations who sent us teams or individuals to develop their managerial skills. We designed, and managed to set up, a large-group situation – 60–80 students, mature students, many of them enrolling through their own initiative; with the structure that they not only chose their own path of study (with a broad range from, say, Gestalt therapy to facilitation of groups), but also (and definitively) that the group as a whole, students and staff together, decided on the use of resources. That is to say, time and space (both important in the confines of the building); skills, whether or not these were those of the

staff, were bought in from outside or (importantly) were available amongst participants; and activities such as sharing and exchange of knowledge. We brought in two new colleagues, Troy Langley and Gary Robins, both of whom, like John, were politically active (John was actually a member of the Socialist Workers Party). And for me, though I wasn't a political activist, it was possible to bring a more directly political perspective into my work. I believed then, and still believe now, that whatever we say or do has a political dimension – defining that as relating to the ownership and control of resources and the structures through which people relate to each other, so that the use of these resources has a truly co-operative basis, giving value and (to use a Humanistic Psychology term) unconditional positive regard to all. I have to add that I am not an anarchist, any more than I am a communist. I do not believe in a free for all; nor in a controlling elite.

When I look back at this course now, I deeply believe that it did indeed work towards, and to an extent embodied, these principles. The history and structure of this course is detailed on my website,<sup>1</sup> in the articles called 'Emergence'; and 'The British experience'. And the detailed structures which we used in another course based on the same principles, the Counselling Skills courses at South-West London College, run by Brigid Procter and with myself again closely involved in the design and running, are described in 'Planning a student-directed programme'; and 'Peer-assessment'. These articles were originally published in *Self and Society* at the time.<sup>2</sup> People who came on these courses were involved in a situation where they learned collective responsibility and how to utilise co-operative structures. At any rate, we certainly changed the work of this particular unit.

I should bring in some details here. We were influenced by Roger Harrison, a progressive organisation trainer from the USA; by Charles Handy, at a bit of a distance because he was English perhaps; and especially by the Danes, by Gunnar Hjelholdt and his mini-society model (described on my website in the article 'Structure'), and Ulla Ehrensköld, who came over and ran a lab with us. And I worked several times in Denmark, mainly with Erik Andersen.

The course acquired Diploma status, a 2-year, part-time course. It was very radical for a Polytechnic course at the time. There are some nice bits to this story that bear repeating here. I became a member of the Academic Board, representing the Management Studies Department, of which our unit was quite a small part, my purpose being to help get the proposal for the

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course through. This appointment itself happened in a paradoxical way. Academic Board Representatives were elected, and at my election there was no other candidate. The rest of the department couldn't be bothered to nominate anyone else. They liked me well enough personally, and they were glad that someone else would be doing the work involved.

Actually the course was surrounded by paradoxes. Here was a course based on the ideology of the collective use of resources, taken as far as we could take it. Also, there was no selection: there were some formal requirements to meet the demands of the College, but no-one was ever refused entry – extremely unusual in England. And there was collective management and collective decision-making. But the predominant aim for people coming on to the course was to obtain a professional diploma to help them in the job market!

Of course, this raised huge problems over assessment. It was supposed to be done by students themselves, in their work groups. They were to assess each other by giving credits (or refusing credits) when they judged people had achieved competence in their chosen areas. However, this evaluation process, based on the principle of management by objectives and self control, was never fully confronted (and still has not been?). Well – the problem of standards and excellence seems to be very central in any political change programme. It only reflects the reality.

There were some other paradoxes – some of them quite funny. In our unit, we, the staff, were informally (badly?) dressed, we had beards, we supported the student Union against the central authority of the

Polytechnic, and we were suspected of joining in the smoking of marijuana and promiscuous sexual relations on our courses. Yet, as it happened in terms of degrees and so on, we were the best qualified; and we, interestingly and importantly, were the most successful in the market for attracting students.

Director Miller – who was against what we were doing and whom we opposed, the Director privately and without any constitutional authority – sent our Diploma Proposal to a friend of his in the Education Department at London University. At the Academic Board meeting where our proposal was considered, and was arousing opposition from some members, he got fed up with the discussion and suddenly explained that he had done this, hoping to get the reply from his academic friend that our proposal was rubbish – but in fact the answer had come back that it was rather good. So he suggested that it be given a try. And the proposal immediately went through, because of course the people who had been opposing it, being authoritarians like himself, obeyed his word without question. So in fact he used his autocratic style to push through this radical educational proposal, put forward by a group of people who were active politically, and who had openly sided with the students who had occupied the college more than once for several weeks to try to get him out!

The students own position was also paradoxical. They wanted Miller out because he was an educational elitist who declared he was going to run the Polytechnic like a University, and so not geared to their needs. Yet their needs were to get a competitive professional training which would help them in the job market!

I am personally proud of having been a part of these courses with their co-operative structures at the time, and regard them as an important achievement in my life. What happened? The simplest, and perhaps the simplistic, answer is that the economic neo-liberal forces took over. Thatcher and Reagan were elected into power and took on the theories propagated by Friedrich Hayek. It was as if the principle that the 'self' makes the world, the very central principle of Humanistic Psychology, became corrupted: into a pretty much universal selfishness. Of course there were real economic forces at work also, this is not a simple psychological issue. But certainly, the result was economic disaster, once in the late 1970s, and then in 2007/8, when the worst depression since the late 1920s caused havoc and hugely increasing levels of inequality and despair.

In terms of the Poly course and the South West London course, they simply could not survive in that new

climate. The new criteria that were set up were to do with management structures and league tables, as opposed to educational experiences in which people would learn how to live together better.

So to me the question now is this: what is the future of Humanistic Psychology? And how, if my view is right that the 'self' on its own is not enough, can it develop to move us through the present crisis? My view is made up of several features. Some are personal. Some are political. And some are to do with values. Myself, I am a humanist. And for me the connection between Humanistic Psychology and humanism has to be alive and active. It is not my purpose in this article to develop the theme of humanist values as such, only to draw attention to the connection. Anyone who wants to pursue the issue of humanist values could well start by connecting with the link.<sup>3</sup>

So Humanistic Psychology. The feature I want to put first is the concept of 'self'. It is central to Humanistic Psychology, and I want to move it into a new light, so that all of the rest follows. So:

We have to see and encourage the 'self' in others.

We have to learn to listen to one another.

We have to learn to value and understand differences (these three features were always emphasised on the courses).

We have to learn to share what is there in the world.

We have to learn that there are limits to what is there in the world and an unbridled pursuance of 'self' is going to breach those limits, and eventually destroy the world for everyone.

We have to see our own 'self' as connected with the 'self' of nature, and as being a part of that.

We have to devise situations where people can learn to do all this and have experiences of it.

We need to structure local communities that jointly control and own their resources by means of a direct democratic assembly-style meeting.

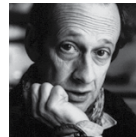
We need to learn this from an early age – thus at school, where children would learn to make collective decisions about resources, time-tabling, employment of teachers even perhaps.

We need to embody this in a political system, based on localisation rather than globalisation, with a genuine connection between politicians and the general population – some form of controlled representation will be necessary where the size of a social organism is too large for all of its members to engage in an assembly, such as a nation.

We live at a time where there is a huge chasm between commercial market values on one side, and central control on the other. I find it deeply disappointing that no political party seems able to articulate structures that would begin to heal that gap. There is plenty of hot air (e.g. the bloated rhetoric of Prime Minister David Cameron's 'Big Society' or, in another framework, the 'digital revolution'), but nothing really tangible. It is as if everyone has some kind of fear of constructing a conceptual framework – as if they would be thought guilty of trying to 'educate' people, or something.

My own political leaning these days is closest to the Green Party. They write about these matters in books (e.g. *Green Alternatives to Globalisation* by Michael Woodlin and Caroline Lucas; and *Prosperity Without Growth* by Tim Jackson)<sup>4</sup> – but even they seem to fall shy of fully and clearly articulated structures in their election material.

So far as the future of Humanistic Psychology is concerned, I believe that unless we can embrace the features I have listed above, it is in danger of terminal decline – as indeed is our globe! 🌍



In a long life, **Thom Osborn** has been a doctor and psychiatrist; theatre director, translator, and occasional writer and performer; formed and ran a 'happenings' group; worked with organisations and on courses for mature students wanting to improve their group skills; been a trapeze artist (amateur!); made two short films; done a solo show. He believes that all these activities pretty much contribute to what he says in this article and those referred to on his website. He has been married and has three children (grownups!) and four grandchildren. Both his parents were classical pianists, and he plays too.

#### Notes

1. See <http://www.thomosborn.co.uk>
2. See my 'The British experience', *Self and Society*, 4 (8), 1976, pp. 1-7.
3. See <http://www.humanismforschools.org.uk/pdfs/HUMANISM%20-%20a%20summary%20for%20teachers.pdf>
4. Michael Woodlin and Caroline Lucas, *Green Alternatives to Globalisation: A Manifesto*, Pluto Press, London, 2004; and Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*, Routledge, London, 2009.