Wants: A Core Humanistic Construct

Mick Cooper

SYNOPSIS

The aim of this paper is to develop the construct of wants as a core concept for Humanistic Psychology and the broader psychotherapeutic field. Drawing from existential and phenomenological thinking, the paper argues that 'wants' convey a greater sense of subjective agency than 'needs', and are more encompassing of immediate desires than 'goals'. Wants can be understood as existing in a hierarchy: with lower-order wants established as a means of achieving higher-order wants. Wants can also be seen as synergetic, dysergetic and independent of each other; and either effective or ineffective means of achieving higher-order wants. As a fundamentally socio-cultural concept, wants can be seen as forming a potential bridge between psychological and social understandings.

Humanistic Psychology has been one of the most influential psychotherapeutic movements in the past 70 years (see Rowan, 1998; Rowan, 2001). Its principles of valuing and respect for the service user have come to underpin key government health agendas (e.g. Department of Health, 2009), as well as newer forms of therapeutic intervention (e.g. Beck et al., 1979). Yet for Humanistic Psychology to continue to thrive, it needs to grow: to develop new concepts, principles and understandings that can support the innovation of new therapies and interventions. John Rowan, in his work on the transpersonal (Rowan, 2005), has taken this in one direction.

The aim of this paper, drawn from previously unpublished work (Cooper, 2012), is to develop humanistic thinking in a very different direction: to establish *wants* as a core psychological concept. Here, it is argued that wants are a fundamental underpinning of human behaviour, which can help us make sense – and transform – our being-in-the-world. The concept emerges from a humanistic worldview – orientated around existential and phenomenological thinking – but it is argued that the concept of wants has the capacity to serve as a unifying concept for the psychotherapeutic field. Crucially, the concept of wants may also be able to forge stronger links between psychological and social models of change (Cooper, 2006): a key concern of humanistic psychologists. The paper begins by critically exploring the related concepts of needs and goals, goes on to describe wants, and then proposes a structural model for understanding wants.

Needs

In 2010, Flanagan, in the *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, put forward *needs* as an integrating concept that can bridge a broad range of therapeutic models and practices. This concept, as Flanagan (2010) notes, has 'no clear theoretical home', yet is one of the few constructs that is endorsed across a broad range of psychotherapeutic orientations: from Humanistic Psychology (e.g. Maslow, 1943) to schema therapy (Young et al., 2003); and to both traditional (Wolitzky, 2003) and more contemporary relational (Curtis and Hirsch, 2003) psychodynamic approaches.

The concept of needs – along with such related constructs as *drives* or *instincts* – has the capacity to function relatively effectively as a trans-orientation construct because the assumption that human beings

have some basic, inherent requirements is relatively uncontroversial. Debates have raged as to which needs or drives are most fundamental – whether, for instance, for meaning (Frankl, 1984), actualization (Rogers, 1959), or attachment (Bowlby, 1969) – but the basic idea that human beings need certain psychological nutriments just as they need certain physiological ones, and that psychological distress arises when these needs are not fulfilled, is accepted across a broad sweep of orientations.

From an existential perspective, however, the concept of needs has been criticized for invoking an overly deterministic and mechanistic image of human being, in which people are construed as being 'moved' or 'pushed' by forces that lie 'behind' their conscious, in-the-world engagement (e.g. Boss, 1963; Cohn, 1997). In this respect, it has been seen as ignoring the agentic, wilful role that human beings take in constructing their world (Boss, 1979). Moreover, for existential Daseinsanalysts such as Boss (1963), an understanding of human being in terms of needs and drives does not match the phenomenological reality of human lived-existence where, he argues, we experience ourselves as choosing towards possibilities – not impelled by forces and instincts.

There is an additional reason, rarely discussed in the literature, why the concept of needs is somewhat problematic as a unifying construct for counselling and psychotherapy: its ambiguity. This is because any statement of a need also requires a *purpose clause*: an indication of what it is a need *for*. In other words, hypotheses such as 'human beings need meaning' or 'human beings need relatedness' are, in themselves, incomplete, as what is missing is a specification of what will be forgone if the person does not attain this. Generally, it can be taken that the purpose clause is '... for psychological wellbeing', but this is an ambiguous concept that can be defined in many ways. In this respect, it might be argued that needs are not a particularly firm foundation on which to develop psychological and psychotherapeutic theory.

Goals

In developing psychological constructs that can bridge a wide range of orientations, the concept of *goals* may overcome some of the limitations that needs face. Defined as 'internal representations of desired states' (Austin and Vancouver, 1996: 338), goals share the same motivational and dynamic qualities as needs, but are more inclusive of existential and cognitive perspectives, with their emphasis on the agentic, purpose-oriented nature of human being. Indeed, the construct of goals has been of particular interest to those with a more humanistic social science agenda, as they are seen as being distinctively human, differentiating us from machines (Little et al., 2007: 38). Powers (1973: xii) describes this as a concept of the person as *autonomous*, not *automaton*; with William James stating, 'The pursuance of future ends and the choice of means for their attainment are the mark and criterion of the presence of mentality in a phenomenon' (in Austin and Vancouver, 1996: 338). Moreover, in contrast to needs, goals do not require a purpose clause: they simply exist, in and of themselves.

In recent years, the concept of goals has 'begun to see fruition' (Austin and Vancouver, 1996: 338) in both the fields of psychology (e.g. Locke and Latham, 2002) and psychotherapy (e.g. Holtforth and Grawe, 2002; Michalak and Holtforth, 2006). Grouzet et al. (2005: 800) write that, 'Since the 1980s, psychological research on goals has experienced a real renaissance', and this has been in a number of areas: the types of goals that human beings have (e.g. Grouzet et al., 2005; Holtforth and Grawe, 2002), their impact on task performance (e.g. Locke and Latham, 2002), their relationship to psychological wellbeing and distress (e.g. Brunstein, 1993; Elliot and Church, 2002) and their role in psychotherapy (e.g. Cooper and McLeod, 2011; Michalak and Holtforth, 2006). In addition, there has been a wealth of research into closely related concepts, such as *personal projects* (Little et al., 2007), *personal goals* (Brunstein, 1993) and *personal strivings* (Emmons, 1986).

Karoly (1999: 264) argues that the concept of goals can serve as a unifying 'metric' for psychology and psychotherapy, 'capable of integrating a variety of psychological constructs that have been created over the years to address individual differences, the nature of normal and abnormal adjustment, and the nature and meaning of change'. However, while this construct may be more embracing of existential and cognitive perspectives, its orientation towards internal, cognitive representations makes it less inclusive of the more instinctual, unconscious, affective and immediate desires that are central to the psychodynamic and psychoanalytic therapies (e.g. Magnavita, 2008). While it might be quite appropriate to describe, for instance, my desire to 'become fitter' as a goal, it would be less appropriate to use this term for some unconscious desire I might have: such as being deeply accepted by my mother. Similarly, while Austin and Vancouver (1996), like Little (2007), suggest that the terms 'goals' and 'personal projects'

can cover the full temporal range – from the most distal life-long goals to the most immediate, proximal aims – it would not seem entirely appropriate to say that 'my goal right now is to finish typing this sentence'. I *want* to finish it, but 'goal' seems to imply something more distal, planned, further ahead in the future.

Wants

In this respect, a psychological term that may be more embracing of the full range of dynamic constructs is that of *wants* (Cooper, 2006, 2012). These can be defined as 'desires for some state of affairs', and in this respect extend from the most distal personal projects (for instance, 'I want to be an airplane pilot') to the most immediate, short-term cravings (for instance, 'I want a cup of coffee'). Unlike goals, the term 'wants' also covers unconscious, affective desires (for instance, 'I really wanted my mum to be upset, although I didn't recognize it at the time') as well as more consciously planned objectives ('I want to have chicken for dinner').

The term 'wants' has been rarely used in the psychological and psychotherapeutic literature but, as the definition suggests, can be considered synonymous with 'desires' – a term widely adopted within the psychodynamic field (Curtis and Hirsch, 2003), as well as within Buddhist psychology. In everyday speech, however, the latter may be more associated with sexual and relational wants, and with unsatisfied longings (Oxford University Press, 1995), such that the former may be a more neutral and generic term. Wants, like goals and projects, stand on their own – they do not need a purpose clause and, as an *organizing unit* for psychological and psychotherapeutic thinking, have the advantage of being a term that is 'meaningful to professionals and lay-people alike' (Karoly, 1999: 265).

There is also evidence to suggest that wants are one of the most basic psychological phenomena. From birth, babies express wants through such behaviour as crying; and by 10 to 12 months, they show *communicative intent*: actively seeking help from others in order to satisfy their desires (Boyle, 2011, personal communication). By 12 months, as one of their first speech acts, infants will then use language to extend this process: for instance, pointing to a biscuit and saying 'mmm' to indicate that they would like to eat it (Boyle, 2011, personal communication).

It is interesting to speculate on why the term 'wants', so familiar in everyday language, has been so under-utilized within the psychological field. Perhaps, as with Heidegger's (1962) analysis of existence, it is so close to our everyday experiencing that it is easy to overlook – like the air around us. Perhaps, too, its closeness to experiencing and its rawness, basicness – perhaps even vulgarity – means that it has not been considered sufficiently sophisticated for psychological theorizing.

In addition, it might be hypothesized that the term 'wants' has relatively negative connotations in our culture – perhaps in all cultures – with particular associations to selfishness and greed. An example of this is the familiar childhood saying 'I want never gets', which suggests that the more we desire something – or the more we *express* desire for something – the less likely we are to receive it. Indeed, although wants may be central to our phenomenological experiencing, in everyday conversation it might be considered highly inappropriate, rude or childish to directly express this (i.e. 'I *want* x'), without some kind of tempering or apology ('I'm really sorry about this, but *would it be ok to have* x.'). A good example of this is Andy Pipkin in the Andy and Lou sketches on BBC TV's *Little Britain* (played by Matt Lucas), whose catchphrase 'I want that one', or statements such as 'I wanna go to Helsinki', are clearly inappropriate to normal adult communication. One explanation for this negative connotation of wants is that they might be understood as *demands*; that if someone is saying they have a desire for something, they are implicitly stating that they are expecting or requiring it.

In adopting the term 'wants', it is important to emphasize that this is being used to cover our highest level, most fundamental desires (for instance, for relatedness or meaning) as well as our more immediate, conscious and verbally expressible wishes. In fact, as will be discussed later on, these two levels of wants may be in conflict; and this is where much of the humour of Andy Pipkin in *Little Britain* comes from: that what he so adamantly insists he wants at one moment is not (as we know, and he finds out) how he ends up really wanting things to be.

Wants and World

Wants – as Little (2007), Freund (2007) and Salmela-Aro and Little (2007: 201) have argued in relation to personal projects – are not isolated intrapsychic entities, but are fundamentally embedded within a socio-cultural context. Ontologically, as with the phenomenological concepts of intentionality (Husserl, 1960), wants are directional: they reach out – are orientated towards – something that is beyond themselves. In other words, we do not just want (cf. phenomenology's *noetic act*), we want *something* (cf.

phenomenology's *noema*) – though this may be something internal/psychological (for instance, happiness), as well as something in-the-world (for instance, a lover). An important implication of this, as will be discussed later, is that whether or not we progress towards our wants is not only determined by our wants per se, but also by the nature of the socio-psycho-biological context that we inhabit.

Furthermore, the very wanting, itself, can be understood to be infused with a social dimension. For Heidegger (1962), as human beings, we *fall* into a world of ready-made meanings and purposes, such that we take up the wants of our social environment – often unaware that we are doing so. A young girl, for instance, wants to have straight blond hair like Barbie, but this is not a want that has emerged from some biological or psychological necessity, but through an internalization of social norms and expectations. Indeed, for Heidegger, even our most foundational wants (for instance, for happiness or for social wellbeing) are only social constructions, with no ultimate foundation or grounding (Dreyfus, 1997). In this respect, in contrast to the more biologistic concept of *needs*, our wants have the propensity to be complex bio-psycho-social phenomenon, such that a psychological model situated around wants puts our socio-cultural environment into the very heart of human action and experiencing.

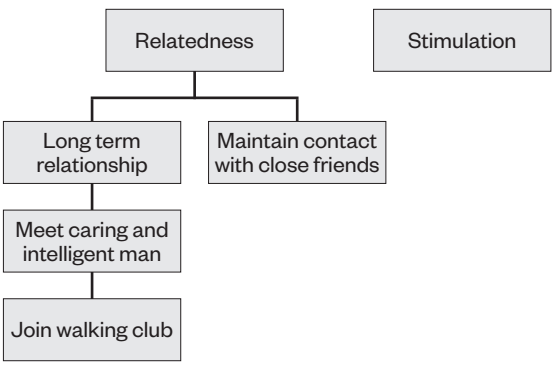
Wants and Ethics

The rationale for orienting a theoretical framework around an individual's goals or wants is not just scientific and psychological, but also ethical (Cooper and McLeod, 2011). More specifically, it can be argued that *an ethical relation to another is one in which we are willing to acknowledge, respect and respond to their wants*. As above, this is using 'wants' in the broadest sense: not just to refer to someone's immediately expressed desires, but to the wants of their whole being in relation to their world. Indeed, in this respect, responding to someone's *holistic* wants-as-a-whole (including, for instance, to lead a meaningful life and to support their children) may mean sometimes going against their more immediately expressed wants (for instance, to help them commit suicide). Nevertheless, in contrast to a more needs-based or utilitarian ethic (e.g. Layard, 2006), the position outlined here suggests that an ethical position ultimately requires us to respect and respond to the other's *particular* wants, rather than some universalized conception of what that other *needs* (for instance, happiness or attachment). This is similar to the pluralistic position developed by the philosopher Berlin (1958), who argues that an ethical standpoint requires us to forego paternalism, and to acknowledge the Other as a human being with the capacity, and right, to self-determination of what is ultimately meaningful for them.

A Hierarchy of Wants

A basic assumption amongst many theorists and researchers in the goals-related fields – and one that can be simply extended to the concept of wants – is that goals, or personal projects, can be conceptualized as existing in a hierarchical structure: from the highest-order life wants to the most immediate desires (e.g. Austin and Vancouver, 1996; Little and Gee, 2007). Much of this is derived from Powers' (1973) 'control theory' and its *hierarchy of purposes*, which has formed the basis for a number of attempts to develop integrative models of clinical practice (e.g. Goldstein, 1990; Mansell, 2005). Here, higher-order wants can be conceptualized as forming the *reference value* for lower-order wants, with lower-order wants forming the means by which higher-order wants may be obtained. As indicated in Figure 1, for instance, an individual may have a highest-order want to experience relatedness (Flannagan, 2010; Ryan and Deci, 2000), and one thing they may strive to do to experience this is to establish a long-term relationship. To achieve that, they may try and meet intelligent and caring men and, with that aim in mind, they might plan to join a walking club.

Figure 1 A Hierarchy of Wants



Multiplicity of Wants

Consistent with the empirical research, this model assumes that people may have multiple wants at any one time (Riediger and Freund, 2004). For instance, right now I want to finish this sentence, and I want to get home to go to the gym, and I also want to close my window as I am getting cold. A basic principle of this model is also *equifinality* (Austin and Vancouver, 1996): the same want can be achieved through a multiplicity of sub-wants. Hence, for instance, a person may strive to attain relatedness through a long-term relationship, but they may also try and achieve it through maintaining contact with their close friends (see Figure 1). A second basic principle is *heterarchy* (Austin and Vancouver, 1996: 341): a want at one level may be a means of trying to attain multiple wants at higher levels. For instance, the desire to spend time with friends may also be a means of achieving stimulation and excitement.

Relationship between Wants

Horizontal Coherence

Three different kinds of relationships may exist across wants in different vertical pathways (Riediger, 2007). First, wants may have a relationship that is facilitative: that is, 'the pursuit of one goal simultaneously increases the likelihood of reaching another goal' (Wiese and Salmela-Aro, 2008: 490). This has also been termed *positive spillover* (Wiese and Salmela-Aro, 2008); and, in the language of the wider social sciences field, can also be termed a *synergetic* (Corning, 1998), *non-zero-sum* (Wright, 2000: 5), *win–win* or *cooperative* (Axelrod, 1984) relationship. For instance, if the close friends of the individual in Figure 1 are in a walking club, then by joining such a club, she can facilitate the attainment of contact with them, as well as hoping to meet caring and intelligent men.

Alternatively, the relationship between wants may *be interfering, competing, win–lose* or what is widely termed *goal conflict* (Austin and Vancouver, 1996; Michalak and Holtforth, 2006; Wiese and Salmela-Aro, 2008). Here, 'a goal that a person wishes to accomplish interferes with the attainment of at least one other goal that the individual simultaneously wishes to accomplish' (Michalak et al., 2004: 84). We can also use the term 'dysergetic' to refer to such relationships – the antonym of a synergetic relationship – in which the whole is *less* than the sum of the parts. For instance, it may be that in trying to establish a long-term relationship, the woman actually ends up spending less time with her close friends. Note, research suggests that the relationship between two goals is not *either* facilitative *or* interfering: in some instances, it may be both (Riediger and Freund, 2004).

Finally, there may be an *independent* relationship between the wants: that is, the pursuit of one want has no effect on the attainment of another.

Vertical Coherence

Although the literature has tended to focus on coherence and conflict *across* vertical streams in a goals' hierarchy, Sheldon and Kasser (1995) also highlight the importance of *vertical coherence*: whether or not the sub-goals actually help someone progress towards the goals that they are aiming for. For instance, a person may join a walking club, but if all the other members turn out to be women, it will not help them to progress towards the ends they are aiming for. Here, rather than talking about synergy and dysergy, we can refer to *effectiveness* and *ineffectiveness*: are the means able to attain the ends.

Coherence and Context

Goal hierarchical theories, such as Powers' (1973) hierarchy of purposes and the TOTE (test–operate–test–exit) sequence that it is orientated around, have tended to focus on intra-personal dynamics: the way in which a persons' goals and wants are 'internally' configured. However, as argued earlier, wants are not isolated psychological entities, but fundamentally embedded within a social, psychological and biological context. Hence, the configuration of a person's wants, and whether or not they are coherent or effective, will be fundamentally related to the 'target' of the wants' orientation. If we take the example of the woman in Figure 1, for instance, who both wants to meet a caring and intelligent man, and also wants to maintain close contact with her friends, whether or not these wants are synergetic or dysergetic will depend entirely on the nature of the environment in which those wants are striven for. If, for example, her friends are also looking to meet caring and intelligent men, then her pursuit of this objective could bring her into closer contact with her friends. However, if they are not, or if they disapprove of her meeting such a partner, then the wants may become dysergetic.

Highest-order Wants

Although this framework posits the existence of highest-order wants – or what have been termed 'terminal values' (Austin and Vancouver, 1996; Little and Gee, 2007),

'core projects' (Little, 2007), or 'original projects' (Sartre, 1958) – it does not specify what these are. This is an important feature of the present model, as the question of our highest-order wants is highly contested, and not one that is likely to be answerable without considerable further research. Nor does it specify whether there is just one highest-order want: for instance, actualization (Rogers, 1959) or happiness (Layard, 2006); or whether multiple highest-order wants might exist: for instance relatedness, autonomy and competence (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Indeed, the model allows for the possibility that there may be no definitive set of highest-order wants: that the socially constructed nature of human being means that we can never claim one want, or one set of wants, as universally 'true'. It also allows for the existential possibility that, ultimately, there are no highest-order wants (Camus, 1955; Heidegger, 1962; Sartre, 1958); that the very meaning of our being is without foundation.

Discussion

The argument developed in this paper is that the concept of wants has the capacity to act as a core construct for the humanistic field, as well as the wider psychotherapeutic arena. There are different models of how these wants should be addressed in therapy – for instance, whether we should help people to acknowledge them, find ways of actualizing them, or transcend them altogether – but the basic concept forms a bridge across a wide range of different psychotherapeutic and psychological modalities. As a fundamentally inter-worldly concept, it also has the potential to create a bridge by which we can conceptualize social, as well as psychological, structures and processes of change (see Cooper, 2012, for further discussion). It is a concept that may help us to take forward humanistic thinking, as John Rowan has done over the past 40 years, and to continue to lead the way in evolving new understandings and practices that can benefit humankind.

Mick Cooper is a Professor of Counselling Psychology, University of Roehampton, and a chartered counselling psychologist. Author and editor of texts on person-centred, existential and relational approaches to therapy, including *Working at Relational Depth in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (with Dave Mearns) and *The Handbook of Person-centred Psychotherapy and Counselling* (with Maureen O'Hara, Art Bohart and Peter Schmid). His most recent book is *Existential Psychotherapy and Counselling: Contributions to a Pluralistic Practice* (Sage, 2015). Mick has led a range of research studies exploring humanistic counselling with young people, and is author of *Essential Research Findings in Counselling and Psychotherapy: The Facts Are Friendly* (Sage, 2008). He lives in Brighton with his partner and four children.

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