

The humanistic approach: the basics

What assumptions do humanistic psychologists make?

Humanistic psychologists start from the assumption that every person has their own unique way of **perceiving** and understanding the world and that the things they do only make sense in this light. Consequently, the kinds of questions they ask about people differ from those asked by psychologists from other approaches. Whereas other approaches take an **objective** view of people, in essence asking about them, ‘what is this person like?’ humanistic psychologists’ priority is understanding people’s **subjectivity**, asking ‘what is it like to be this person?’ As a result, they reject the objective **scientific method** as a way of studying people. Humanistic psychologists explicitly endorse the idea that people have **free will** and are capable of choosing their own actions (although they may not always realize this). They also take the view that all people have a tendency towards **growth** and the fulfillment of their potential. Much of their research has focused on how people can be helped to fulfill their potential and lead more contented lives.

How do humanistic psychologists explain behaviour?

Carl Rogers’ idea about behaviour centre on the **self**, which is the person’s consciousness of their own identity. Rogers believed that people could only fulfill their potential for growth if they had a basically positive view of themselves (**positive self regard**). This can only happen if they have the **unconditional positive regard** of others – if they feel that they are valued and respected without reservation by those around them. The problem that most people have, as Rogers saw it, was that most people don’t perceive the positive regard of others as being unconditional. Rather, they think they will only be loved and valued if they meet certain **conditions of worth** (e.g. behaving well, passing lots of exams etc.) These conditions of worth create **incongruity** within the self between the **real self** (how the person is) and the **ideal self** (how they think they should be). The person tries to close the gap between the real and idea self but most people do this in unhelpful ways, possibly by chasing achievements that won’t actually make them content or by distorting their view of themselves or the world. For example a student who believes they are only worth anything if they get perfect exam scores may deal with a grade ‘B’ either by dismissing it as outright failure, thereby robbing themselves of an achievement, or by blaming their teachers, thereby preventing themselves from taking action that might improve their grades.

Abraham Maslow’s view of human needs was more complex than Rogers’. Whilst Rogers believed that people needed unconditional positive regard, Maslow acknowledged that people have a variety of **needs** that differ in immediacy and which need satisfying at different times. He arranged these needs in a **hierarchy**, whereby the more basic needs towards the bottom take precedence over those higher up (e.g. everyone needs to have their achievements recognized, but will put this need to one side if they are starving hungry). Maslow believed that those who satisfied all their needs might become **self-actualisers**: rare, remarkable people who fulfill their potential completely. However, he also thought that prolonged periods where a particular need was not satisfied could result in a sort of **fixation**. For example, a person who grew up in poverty might continue to be dominated by anxiety about food even if they were lucky enough to escape poverty later.



How do humanistic psychologists study human behaviour?

Humanistic psychologists favour research methods that will allow them to understand other people's subjectivity. Consequently, they avoid methods that study people objectively, including experimentation and non-participant observation. They generally think that reducing people's experience to numbers robs it of its richness and meaning, so they also avoid quantitative approaches. Therefore, **qualitative** methods are preferred, particularly **unstructured interviewing** as it allows access to other people's views and experiences without imposing on them the researcher's ideas about what is important. Where observation is used it is likely to be **participant observation**, with the researcher taking part in what they are studying in order to understand how the participants perceive it. Humanistic psychologists may also analyse all sorts of other qualitative materials that allow them insight into how people understand their world, including **diaries, letters** and **biographies**.

An example of this type of research is Maslow's (1973) analysis of the characteristics of **self actualisers**. He selected probable self-actualisers from public and historical figures and used biographical and other documentary evidence to analyse what they had in common. He found that they tend to be unconventional and original, accepting of themselves and others, capable of deep and intimate relationships and that they have a wonder at and enjoyment of life.

Evaluation of the humanistic approach

The apparent **lack of objectivity** and rigour in humanistic methods is a significant criticism of the humanistic approach. Other approaches would regard their methods as **unscientific**, vague and open to **bias** and their attempt to 'get inside' other people's way of perceiving the world as misguided and quite possibly pointless. Humanistic psychologists would reject these criticisms because they, in turn, would view the objective, scientific method as inappropriate for understanding people. Other critics take issue with the **positive view** of human nature that the humanistic approach endorses. Whilst it is flattering to view ourselves as basically good entities striving to fulfill our potential, the humanistic approach is at a loss to explain the horrors that people are capable of inflicting on each other. Faced with a world afflicted with warfare, genocide, runaway greed, domestic violence and so on, humanistic talk about potential, growth and positive regard seems trite at best. Some would even say that, with its focus on meeting *our* needs and fulfilling *our* growth potential, the humanistic approach reflects an **individualistic**, self-obsessed outlook that is part of the problem, not the solution. On the other hand, the **counselling** approaches developed by Rogers and other humanists have helped many people overcome difficulties they face in life, which is a significant contribution to improving people's lives.

The humanistic approach and key debates

The humanistic approach explicitly states that people have **free will**, which sets it apart from other approaches (with the possible exception of some cognitivists). It could be suggested, however, that their position on free will is incoherent, since at the same time as insisting on people's ability to choose their actions, they explain how our behaviour is determined by our treatment at the hands of others and an innate set of needs. In the nature-nurture debate, humanists favour **nurture**, because of the influence of experiences on a person's ways of perceiving and understanding the world, but also acknowledge the influence of biological drives and needs. Their belief in the uniqueness of each individual inclines them toward an **ideographic** approach to psychology. Because they believe that human experience must be engaged with as such, humanistic psychologists do not attempt to break behaviour down into more fundamental processes. As such, their approach to psychology is explicitly **holistic**, rather than reductionist.