CHAPTER 9: HUMANISTIC, EXISTENTIAL, AND POSITIVE ASPECTS OF PERSONALITY

The humanistic and existential aspects of personality are distinct from the other seven perspectives in that students tend to react strongly to these approaches, either appreciating the positive spirituality of these perspectives or finding them unappealing and even unscientific. This chapter explains the origins of these approaches, and points out why they sometimes provokes so much passion.

Most students will relate to Maslow’s concepts of a need hierarchy and of self-actualization, so these are good places to turn if students do not appear to grasp the perspectives offered by the other theorists. Also, many current-day results of the “human potential movement” are good points to provoke discussion and interest. Finally, the new subdiscipline of psychology referred to as “positive psychology” provides modern research to enhance this approach to understanding personality. It is useful to point out this movement in the field to appreciate the potential for human growth and the need to focus on health, happiness, creativity, and hope.

Possible Lecture Outline

1. Existentialism, in simple terms, is an area of philosophy concerned with the meaning of human existence.
   1. It is non-positivist in nature (positivists focus on laws governing reality; non-positivists focus on the subjectivity of “reality”), and as such, it is non-deterministic.
   2. Focus on being in the world: the self cannot exist without a world, and the world cannot exist without a person or being to perceive it.
   3. Much of it is phenomenological in nature.
      1. People’s perceptions or subjective realities are considered to be valid data for study.
2. Humanism is a philosophical approach that emphasizes human worth and the centrality of human values (sometimes called the “third force,” with psychoanalysis and behaviorism being the other two).
   1. Emphasizes the active, aware quality of human beings
   2. Draws from existentialism the idea that our existence is dependent on our reactions to others; I-It monologue of Martin Buber
   3. Foundation of the “human potential movement”: people are encouraged to realize their inner potentials through small group meetings, self-disclosure, and introspection
3. Important Elements in Existential/Humanistic Psychology
   1. Love—Erich Fromm
      1. Fromm argued that love requires knowledge, effort, and experience (contrary to popular belief that it “just happens”).
      2. Love allows us to overcome alienation while maintaining personal integrity: requires us to develop patience, concentration, living actively in the moment, and setting aside narcissism.
      3. Fromm incorporates many fundamental ideas drawn from religion and mysticism into his understanding of personality.

* 1. Dialectical humanism
     1. Erich Fromm’s model that tries to reconcile biological and societal sides of human beings
     2. Neither nature nor nurture exclusively explains human behavior; it is the result of a conscious person with certain needs existing within a network of certain demands.
  2. Responsibility
     1. Rogers believed that people have an inherent tendency toward growth and maturation, but that they are personally responsible for achieving them. Free will must be balanced with inner control.
     2. Maturity principle: As adults age, they become more conscientious, less neurotic, and more agreeable.
     3. According to Rogers, the important issues to be dealt with are defined by the individual; Rogerian therapy is non-directive and empathetic and incorporates “unconditional positive regard.”
  3. Anxiety and dread
     1. Rollo May sees anxiety as triggered by a threat to core values of existence; much of his work has focused on isolation, anxiety, powerlessness, and the individual’s search for meaning in life.
     2. One example of the impact of this type of thinking is the popularity of “support groups” for people dealing with various illnesses and other anxiety-provoking experiences.
  4. Personal choice: Viktor Frankl
     1. Frankl was a Holocaust survivor who survived psychologically by choosing to find meaning in suffering and exercising responsibility wherever he could in his imprisonment.
     2. Logotherapy: the search for the meaning of existence
  5. Self-actualization
     1. The innate process by which one grows spiritually and realizes one’s ultimate potential
     2. Although many psychologists have talked about self-actualization (Jung was among the first), it is most closely associated with Maslow.
     3. Maslow proposed a hierarchy of needs, whereby we must first ensure our survival, then pursue higher aims such as finding security, love, self-esteem, etc.
     4. D-needs (deficiency needs) were at the bottom of the pyramid.
     5. Self-actualization (the top of Maslow’s hierarchy) is characterized by “peak experiences” (experiences where we become completely absorbed by the event or the activity; time seems to stand still).
     6. The Personal Orientation Inventory is one scale that attempts to assess self-actualization; it seems to capture at least some aspects of a healthy personality.

1. Happiness and Positive Psychology
   1. Who is happy?
      1. Happiness is not a function of being in favorable circumstances, but appears to represent a combination of personal traits, optimistic cognitions (i.e., believing that things always work out for the best), and internal psychological processes.
      2. Subjective well-being
   2. Positive psychology
      1. A significant segment of modern personality is now turning toward “positive psychology,” which explores the positive forces of life (including hope, creativity, wisdom, and spirituality); it turns away from a focus on pathology.
   3. The American paradox
      1. Our society embodies progress on many different levels: technology, wealth, and freedom. Yet, we are not necessarily happy; progress comes with a new set of problems often conceptualized as a moral decline.
   4. Flourishing and the PERMA model
      1. Five components—Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment
      2. Over time, those who are flourishing will develop mutually reinforcing activities that serve a worthwhile purpose
   5. Suggestions for increasing happiness (based on several prominent researchers:
      1. Help others
      2. Monitor own wealth seeking
      3. Avoid television
      4. Keep lists of accomplishments
      5. Seek spiritual experiences
      6. Set long-term goals
      7. Recognize that some people seem driven to unhappiness

Classroom Activities, Discussion Topics and Projects

1. Assign several students to different problems and assign several more students to the position of Rogerian therapist. Have the students role play the therapeutic encounter while the rest of the class takes notes on the interaction. Discuss the result.

2. Discuss how the ideas of philosophers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have influenced the humanistic movement.

3. Have students think of the last time they were completely engaged (in an enjoyable way) in an activity. Discuss aspects of these experiences. Do they conform to the criteria of “peak experiences”? Then have students think back over their most enjoyable memories. Are most of these memories of peak experiences?

4. Have students identify themselves on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Discuss what they are doing to achieve the needs of their particular levels and move to the next level.

5. Have students make a list of people whom they believe are self-actualized. (Presumably this will be a more modern list than Maslow’s.) What qualities of these individuals do they admire? Are there any negative characteristics?

6. Have students break into small groups and discuss what they would do if they won a large amount of money in the lottery. Have students share the ideas they come up with—then ask students to decide whether winning the money would make them *happy*. Why, or why not? Discuss their ideas in terms of the American paradox. Do material wealth and technological advances enhance lives, or just create problems?

7. Discuss the suggestions for pursuing happiness that are listed in the text. Do students think these suggestions would improve their well-being? You may want to have students participate in these activities for a day, week, or month and then report on their effectiveness.

8. Have students read all or part of Victor Frankl’s (1984) *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Have the class discuss the reading and the extraordinary circumstances that led Frankl to develop his theory of logotherapy.

9. Discuss what it means to love someone else. Have students list definitions of love, and write them on the blackboard. Are students’ ideas compatible with Fromm’s notion of love as an art? Many other popular ideas about love can be discussed in the context of Fromm’s theory, including: Is love something that must be worked at? Are we destined to find true love? Is there one unique partner for each individual? Must you love yourself before you can successfully love others?

10. Have students read all of Mitch Albom’s *Tuesdays with Morrie (1997)*. Have them consider how a person who is terminally ill and is aware of his or her impending death manages to remain happy, optimistic, and positive*.* Have students consider existential questions such as, “if you had a year to live, what would you do?” Then ask students to consider why they do not actually *do* those things without the threat of dying after 12 months.

Recommended Outside Readings

Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Larson, R. (1984). *Being adolescent: Conflict and growth in the teenage years*. New York: Basic Books.

Frankl, V. E. (1984). *Man’s search for meaning*. (Revised and updated.) New York: Washington Square Press.

Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape from freedom*. New York: Farrar & Rinehart.

Lowrey, R. (1973). *A. H. Maslow: An intellectual portrait*. Monterey, CA: Brooks-Cole.

Maslow, A. H. (1970). *Motivation and personality*. New York: Harper & Row.

Maslow, A. H. (1971). *The farther reaches of human nature*. New York: Viking Press.

May, R. (1969). *Love and will*. New York: Norton.

Myers, D. G. (2000). *The American paradox: Spiritual hunger in an age of plenty*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Ozer, D. J., & Benet-Martínez, V. (2006). Personality and the prediction of consequential outcomes. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *57*, 401–421.

Rogers, C. (1951). *Client-centered therapy: Its current practice, implications, and theory*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person: A therapist’s view of psychotherapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Rogers, C., & Stevens, B. (1967). *Person to person: The problem of being human*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Wexler, D. A., & Rice, L. N. (1974). *Innovations in client-centered therapy*. New York: Wiley.

Films / Videos

*Being Abraham Maslow*. (1972). 30 minutes. PCR: Films and Videos in the Behavioral Sciences: 800-826-0132. Maslow discusses his childhood and school years, talks about his early aspirations, his strengths, and his weaknesses; then he moves on to his adulthood, marriage, and fatherhood, and looks toward the end of life. Addresses his views on Freud and behaviorism.

*Carl Rogers*. (1969). <http://mediasales.psu.edu/Details.aspx?itemNo=40234> and <http://mediasales.psu.edu/Details.aspx?itemNo=50314>. Libraries holding this title can be found at <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/76964521>. A two-part series that compares the humanistic model with other theories of personality. Part 1 looks at motivation, perception, learning, and client-centered therapy. Part 2 has Rogers discussing his views on education and unrest in the 1960s. Each part is 50 minutes.

*Carl Rogers and the Person-Centered Approach*. (2003). 65 minutes. Insight Media: 800-233-9910; [www.insight-media.com](http://www.insight-media.com). An overview of Rogers’ approach.

*The Human Dilemma: Rollo May*. (1988). 90 minutes. <http://www.thinkingallowed.com/2rmay.html>. Also available on official YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HH-9XkjqYHY>. Libraries holding this title can be found at <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/182678186>. In interview format, Rollo May discusses his theory of the human condition. Talks about how happiness results from an appreciation of the hard things in life.

*Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs*. (2007). 22 minutes. Insight Media: 800-233-9910; [www.insight-media.com](http://www.insight-media.com). A profile of Abraham Maslow along with a description relating his theory of a hierarchy of needs to psychology and other disciplines. Examines each of the needs (physiology, security and safety, belonging and love, esteem, and self-actualization).

*Positive Psychology and Psychotherapy*. (2008). Insight Media: 800-233-9910; [www.insight-media.com](http://www.insight-media.com). Dr. Martin Seligman introduces positive psychology, describing a new set of interventions that increase happiness, and explains the influences of Maslow, Rogers, and Beck on his work.

*Rollo May on Existential Psychology*. (1975). 30 minutes. Insight Media: 800-233-9910; [www.insight-media.com](http://www.insight-media.com). In this archival program, Rollo May defines existential psychology and explores concepts of will, freedom, being, anxiety, intentionality, and the ways in which people give meaning to experience. He explains the integral link between love and loneliness.

*Rollo May on Humanistic Psychology*. (1975). 24 minutes. Insight Media: 800-233-9910; [www.insight-media.com](http://www.insight-media.com). In this archival program, Rollo May traces the development of humanistic psychology and describes the American psychological context from which it emerged. May explains that emerging science must be based on normality rather than abnormality. He discusses the idea that psychology deals with the whole person, subjectivity, and values.

*Frankl’s Choice*. (2002). 58 minutes. <http://www.amazon.com/Frankls-Choice-Richard-Dreyfuss/dp/B00EKWTMMQ>. Libraries holding this title can be found at <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/55518774>. Includes biographical coverage of Frankl’s life and discusses his theoretical contribution.