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## A renaissance for humanistic psychology

The field explores new niches while building on its past.

**BY REBECCA A. CLAY**

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Long plagued by an image problem, humanistic psychology is undergoing revitalization.

Humanistic psychology has, of course, quietly influenced both American psychology and culture over many decades by informing the civil rights debate and women's rights movements, for example. But in recent years, there's mounting evidence of renewal in the field itself.

In 2000, humanistic psychologists convened a historic conference that re-energized the field while revealing that the effects of managed care, psychopharmacology and other trends are resulting in many humanists branching into exciting new practice arenas. Last year, the field published several landmark texts that humanists hope will form the basis of new courses that will attract newcomers to the field. And schools across the nation are reporting that interest among students is already skyrocketing.

"There is room for great optimism about the future of the field," says Larry M. Leitner, PhD, president of APA's [Div. 32 \(Humanistic\)](#) and a psychology professor at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

### Influencing mainstream psychology

Emerging in the late 1950s, humanistic psychology began as a reaction against the two schools of thought then dominating American psychology. Behaviorism's insistence on applying the methods of physical science to human behavior caused adherents to neglect crucial subjective data, humanists believed. Similarly, psychoanalysis's emphasis on unconscious drives relegated the conscious mind to relative unimportance.

The early humanistic psychologists sought to restore importance of consciousness and offer a more holistic view of human life. Abraham Maslow, for instance, developed a hierarchy of motivation culminating in self-actualization. Carl Rogers introduced what he called person-centered therapy, which relies on clients' capacity for self-direction, empathy and acceptance to promote clients' development. Rollo May brought European existentialism and phenomenology into the field by acknowledging human choice and the tragic aspects of human existence.



In 1964, these and other influential figures came together in Old Saybrook, Conn., to consolidate their movement. Over the next decade, humanistic psychology's ideas informed the civil rights, women's liberation and antiwar movements and gained widespread popularity in the wider culture.

In the academic world, however, humanistic psychology's rejection of quantitative research in favor of qualitative methods caused its reputation to suffer and its adherents to be marginalized.

Now that's changing, says Donald P. Moss, PhD, author of "Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology: A Historical and Biographical Sourcebook" (Greenwood, 1998). According to Moss, humanistic perspectives inform much of mainstream psychology.

"When humanistic psychology came to the fore in the 1950s, psychology was restricted to studying observable behavior for the most part," says Moss, a partner at West Michigan Behavioral Health Services in Grand Haven and Muskegon. "Today we're no longer surprised when a psychological researcher wants to study cognitions, thinking and feeling as part of psychological research. Psychology has reclaimed the totality of human experience."

For many humanistic psychologists, the recent positive psychology movement is simply humanistic psychology repackaged. Similarly, crisis counseling's emphasis on empathic listening finds its roots in Rogers's work. In the wider culture, the growing popularity of personal and executive coaching also points to humanistic psychology's success. And Moss believes humanistic psychology's tenets will only become more relevant as the nation ages, creating a culture preoccupied with facing death and finding meaning in life.

In fact, humanistic psychology has been so successful at influencing mainstream psychology and American culture that the field recently suffered what Maureen O'Hara, PhD, calls an "identity crisis." Had humanistic psychology permeated the culture so completely that the movement itself was no longer necessary?

To answer that question, the field convened a conference called Old Saybrook 2 in 2000. More than 300 people gathered at the State University of West Georgia to explore the movement's future.

"Participants concluded that the human needs, hunger, questioning that had inspired our original thinkers were just as urgent today," says O'Hara, a member of the conference steering committee and president of Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center in San Francisco. "People are more interested in questions of spirituality, authenticity and meaning than they have been for a decade or two."

### **Exploring new niches**

Of special interest to conference-goers was humanistic psychology's role in the face of such trends as health-care consolidation,

globalization and technology's ascendancy.

"Psychotherapy is under a great deal of new pressure from managed care on the one hand and the psychopharmacology and neuropsychology revolutions on the other hand," explains O'Hara. "When we all got together, we realized that there are a set of new vocations that have their roots in humanistic psychology ideas, but they're going somewhere new. We're finding ways to work with people in different arenas."

The key, she and others at the conference decided, is to look beyond the medical model of psychology. Instead of focusing on what's wrong with people, humanistic psychologists should find new ways of helping people strengthen what's right.

This nonpathologizing view opens up whole new areas of practice, say O'Hara and others. In the workplace, for example, humanistic psychologists can facilitate dialogues between employers and employees about the meaning of their work. In schools, they can encourage students to identify factors that promote alienation rather than self-actualization. In communities, they can help neighbors resolve conflicts and communicate effectively.

And the opportunities aren't just in this country, says O'Hara. Humanistic psychologists have "waded fearlessly" into dangerous situations to facilitate dialogues between white and black citizens of South Africa, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and Contras and Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

### **Spreading the word**

While the Old Saybrook 2 conference re-energized the movement, several new publications are helping the field counter its long-standing image problem.

"In some ways, we still suffer from our reputation of being touchy-feely, of being soft-hearted and soft-minded," says David J. Cain, PhD, a senior staff psychologist at the counseling center of Alliant International University in San Diego. "Now we're paying much more attention to research. The humanistic psychologist of today is still soft-hearted, but much more tough-minded."

A volume Cain recently co-edited with Julius Seeman, PhD, "Humanistic Psychotherapies: Handbook of Research and Practice," reflects that new tough-mindedness. To counter the field's reputation for sloppy science, the volume draws on rigorous research in its description of various psychotherapeutic models.

But Cain's book isn't the only one. "All of a sudden, there's a plethora of new humanistic books out there," he says.

"The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology: Leading Edges in Theory, Research, and Practice" is another book humanistic psychologists point to as a recent landmark. By providing a broad overview of

humanistic psychology's history, methodologies and applications to current affairs, the volume's editors hope to provide an alternative to the outdated materials that have helped limit the field's growth in the past.

"Mainstream introductory psychology texts have either ignored humanistic psychology altogether or given it token space," says senior editor of the handbook Kirk J. Schneider, PhD, a private practitioner in San Francisco who is also an adjunct faculty member at Saybrook. "Not only are the field's pioneers being neglected but also the field's interest in very contemporary, relevant issues like gender, multiculturalism and ecology. And these do not even begin to encompass the valuable contributions humanists are making in the areas of health care, spirituality and social action."

Schneider hopes that his and other new books will inspire the creation of humanistic psychology courses at universities around the country and help bring a new generation to the field. Attracting fresh blood is crucial, say others, citing the imminent retirement of many humanistic psychologists and the displacement of others into such fields as counseling, religious studies, organizational studies and peace studies.

According to O'Hara, student interest in humanistic psychology is already soaring. The Saybrook Graduate School has doubled its student body in just four years, for example.

Fortunately, O'Hara says, there's plenty of work for humanistic psychologists.

Says O'Hara, "If what you have is a way to help people address the significant questions of their lives, then there are 'Help Wanted' signs all over the place."

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