

PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLUENCE ON AMERICAN HUMANIST EDUCATION

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Abstract: *This paper is meant to outline the modalities in which psychology has influenced humanist education in the USA, starting with a historical background and presenting its major trends: positive psychology, transcendentalism, the trend based on new discoveries in genetics and neurology with special focus on the third force psychology. It encourages self-actualization, enabling students to express themselves, to act, to experiment, to make mistakes, to discover and to self-discover. The major objectives of humanist education work together for free manifestation of human individuality and the elimination of any coercion and oppression which may suppress the individual.*

Key words: *self actualization, humanistic psychology, higher consciousness, self-evaluation, self-criticism.*

1. American Humanist Education

The way in which humanism, in all its aspects, is reflected in American education, is a very complex one, with particularly important consequences for the educational system in the United States.

The protests against the war in Vietnam were accompanied by a profound dissatisfaction against mass culture, bureaucracy, large corporations and industrialism. Individualism, personal integrity, and a human society were new targets of reform. This complex of ideas and feelings were known as the Anticulture [9] or Humanism because it opposes the social control and the supremacy of objects and things. Trying to establish the primacy of the self, especially in emotional and volitional matters, Humanism finds its allies in the philosophical movements from anarchism to Zen. It includes

existentialism, neomarxism, neohegelianism, Maoism, oriental philosophies, and existentialist psychology. Revolutionaries of the third world (Frantz Fanon, Cwane N. Crumah, Ernesto Che Guevara), have contributed to the movement ideology. Humanism has been used in educational theory and school reform by the so-called *romantic reformists*. The reform had two purposes: first, to discredit the public school by calling it a tool of the middle class, of an oppressive society, and by denying that it was motivated by democratic ideals and equality. The second purpose was to finish oppression in schools. The obligation to study, to respect authority, tests, grades, were all considered oppressions against the individual. Humanism is interested in the development of conscience.

It promotes values, subjectivity, emotions, personal identity, self-discovery

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for broadening the human spirit. Regarding science and other subjects, they will be taught for personal significance, because their study contributes to a better understanding of self, and an increase of inspiration and imagination.

As has been mentioned humanism protests against the mechanical theories of mind. For the humanists, humanity lies in letting go inhibitions, gratifying impulses and desire. Taking into account that it celebrates subjectivity, individualism, pluralism and relativity, the psychological impact on humanist education is of great significance. For this reason we are going to present a historical background of humanistic psychology and its dominant trends.

2. A Brief History of Humanistic Psychology

Moss, in *The Roots and Genealogy of Humanistic Psychology*, presents a history of humanistic psychology, from its beginnings in ancient Greece, to its flourishing period in modern times [6]. And so the most representative moments of that period are illustrated.

In the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard demonstrated the role of high individual consciousness. Subjective individualities make personal choices, avoiding dependence on science and objectivity. They go from a state dominated by emotions to a state of understanding the whole humanity, and finally to a state of mystical union with the divinity.

Nietzsche, in the same century, explored ways in which an individual can transcend conventional values and constraints, becoming a 'superman'.

Buber, in the twentieth century, was concerned with the absurdities which individuals are facing because of their inhumanity, objectifying others and building selfish relationships with them. In

exchange, Buber offered another type of relationship, the relationship **I-you**, relationship based on mutual sympathy, empathy, transfer of knowledge and feelings which induce a spiritual value to life.

Heidegger felt that people were able to create their opportunities to live better, starting from the phenomenological theory according to which the individual's vision on the world is influenced by historical events and that there is a need for re-evaluation of this vision by reviewing it permanently, from the past and future perspective.

Sartre added to individual freedom the responsibility of our choices and actions. He considered that nothing can restrict us from reviewing our own visions and becoming what we want to become. Existentialist and phenomenological ideas are found in both confluent education and the education of conscience.

3. Dominant Trends in Humanistic Psychology

In *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology*, where applications of humanist psychology are described in a variety of contexts in which emotions, intellect and body work together for self-actualization, J. Schneider noticed three dominant trends. Firstly, there is a positive tendency launched in 1998, at Martin E.F. Seligman's urge, president of the American Psychology Association, who focuses on what helps people succeed in life, starting from the premise that affectivity is a support in solving existential problems, because it generates hope and optimism.

The second orientation is the transcendentalist one, based on spiritual traditions from Asia (Buddhism), its aim being to achieve high levels of awareness as alternative ways of connecting with the

world. This direction is called the fourth psychological force. Transcendentalists encourage alternative ways of learning and knowledge based on intuition, feelings, thoughts and images, considering that the link between the rational and the non-rational is necessary for creative imagination.

A third trend is based on new discoveries in the field of neurology and genetics which suggest to humanists the idea that consciousness is a chemical and neuronal activity, and elements of personality such as *'sense of humor, romantic love, cooperation, and aesthetics, are genetically predetermined'* [7].

On the other hand, scientists consider that the brain activity is not an isolated one and that the individual does not remain unchanged, but he changes during his interaction with the environment in which he lives. Neural connections depend on experience, which is a basic element of our identity. We do not know exactly how the brain structures correlate their functions in producing experience.

Humanists continue to believe that each personality is unique, with a subjectivity that allows individual interpretation of events and a great potential for exercising responsibility. Psychological and neurological studies regard it as very important to overcome negative emotions by acquiring the power to control emotions cognitively. Therefore, schools develop programs which help students inhibit impulsive tendencies, to identify their feelings and to think about alternative solutions to solve their problems. It is believed that if students understand and identify their own emotions, they will improve their problem-solving abilities, and they will also improve their cognitive flexibility.

Unlike the teaching methods resulting from cognitive psychology, with its

strategies of understanding texts, meta-cognitive strategies of planning, monitoring and controlling cognition, humanist models are centered on motivation and emotion. They include strategies of increasing self-confidence: using encouraging formulas like *'I can do this'*, eliciting interest by making the required task appear like an attractive game, teaching strategies of coping with negative emotions in order to achieve objectives. But the greatest impact on humanist education is exercised by the third force psychology.

4. The Influence of the Third force Psychology on Humanist Education

4.1 The Third Force Psychology

Humanist education has suffered a series of influences from the psychological current known as *'the third force,'* called so because it could not be included either into behaviorism or into Freudian psychology. Psychologists belonging to this orientation considered behaviorism as being mechanical, and student were seen by behaviorists as detached intellects, not taking into account the emotional responses and the superior aspects of their personality (altruism, for example).

Freudian psychology ignores people's motivation and emphasizes on human pathology and unconscious emotional forces. Abraham Maslow, an outstanding representative of the third force Psychology sees self-actualization as having multiple dimensions. He considers it as a process that is carried on during one's entire life, as a momentary state and as a normal process of development, when a person's needs are satisfied and when threats do not appear to trigger defensive reactions. Maslow focuses on the multiple dimensions of self-actualization, considering it *'as a life achievement, a*

momentary state, and the normal process of growth when a person's deficiency motives are satisfied and his or her defenses are not mobilized by threat.' [4]

This kind of psychology represents the basis of humanist education, which encourages self-actualization, enabling students to express themselves, to act, to experiment, to make mistakes, to discover and to self-discover. Maslow believes that we can learn more about our own person, when we confront ourselves with situations that can trigger strong feelings like love, hate, anxiety, depression, joy, and so on. For this, states like fear, mystery, and amazement may represent not only the beginning but also the end of learning.

Humanist education must capitalize on and allow such learning experiences in which personal and cognitive development can occur simultaneously. Considering that the discovery of any person's potential and limits is realized within the context of intense activity, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi began his studies on efficient and pleasant activities, during which there is so much focus on what the person does that he/she forgets about his/her problems and temporarily loses self-consciousness. Such experiences are called experiences of maximum efficiency and, if they are lived at the highest level, they allow those who live them to go beyond their own selves.

The subjects are so involved in what they do that they do not see themselves as a separate entity from their work. *'Those who find their activities to be intrinsically enjoyable (in flow) develop their intellectual ability to the fullest'* [2]. Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi urge us to strive towards the formation of a higher consciousness which can pursue multiple interests and develop complex skills, because our whole future depends on it. He argues that if personal conflicts are not resolved, activities of high efficiency cannot be carried out [3].

4.2 How Can Humanist Education Create Experiences of High Complexity and Maximum Efficiency?

Each person's ability to be effective is different, but some people find it easier to transform routine and overcome initial barriers to action. Increased efficiency can be achieved through learning, meditation, yoga, spiritual discipline.

Yoga exercises can improve self-control, the power of concentration and memory.

One purpose of education may be the students' training in such a way that they can be capable of maximum efficiency, avoiding boredom and anxiety, regardless their living conditions. Towards the end students will learn how to re-evaluate opportunities, transforming what is against them into tasks that must be accomplished with full self-confidence. The complexity of life can be realized during dance, music and painting lessons, which are attractive for students and can be taught to promote not only differentiation but also integration.

Transmission of knowledge in the form of abstract material through strictly targeted channels such as chemistry, biology, mathematics and geography, reduce students' awareness on life complexity and interdependence among subjects of study. Instead of subjects separately taught, Csikszentmihalyi supports a type of education that can help the student reveal the relationship of interdependence among the complex phenomena of life, showing the interconnectedness of causes and effects: *'how physics is related to ethics, how molecular biology can enhance empathy, and how history, can relate ecology, economics, sociology, and the like in understanding human action'* [2]. If students perceive the relationship between causes and their effects, and if their

emotions and imagination are trained, they will realize the complexity of life and they will be provided with opportunities to be effective. Carl Rogers has developed a framework for humanist education. He identified the conditions that make people able to develop and seek self-actualization, showing the importance of emotional relationships, in which participants manifest a positive vision, empathy and understanding for each other. His work provides an example of how teachers can change our view on learning.

Rogers considers that all individuals have the capacity to transform themselves in a positive way up to the level at which they become *'real, empathetic, trusting in their own experiences, and expressing what they truly feel'* [8]. He believes that everyone has the natural ability to learn and to continue learning as long as the experience is positive. His research confirms that the best learning happens when:

- The self is not threatened or external threats are reduced to minimum;
- Students choose and pursue their own projects, selecting resources and procedures, but at the same time accepting the responsibility on consequences;
- Independent thinking, creativity and self-confidence are learning objectives and self-evaluation and self-criticism precede evaluation;
- Emphasis is on learning how to learn, which is more important than learning something specific. Learning how to learn means being open to experience and change.

Rogers sees teachers as facilitators of learning and not as those who direct learning. Humanists *'are willing to trust and to take risks, not afraid to express their own thoughts and feelings'* [8].

4.3 Self-Actualization, the Ultimate Goal of Humanist Education

Humanists believe that each student must have the opportunity to experience what will give him/her an intrinsic satisfaction, to contribute to the individual release and development. For humanists, the goals are linked to the ideals of personal development, integrity and autonomy. Teaching and training of appropriate attitudes towards themselves and towards people were included among their expectations. One of the humanists' main concerns is the sense of self actualization. A person who has this quality will not only have cognitive development, but also a moral and aesthetic one, becoming an efficient person and a character worthy of appreciation. In the humanist vision, self actualization is a basic necessity, each student having a self to be discovered, developed and shaped by learning.

Americans have an inclination towards self actualization. Frequently, parents have expressed interest in their children understanding themselves within an emotionally and physically safe environment, and in their children's acquisition of intellectual skills required for independent thinking. A humanistic education ideal supports American individualism, helping students to discover themselves, not wanting to mould them according to preset patterns.

Humanism focuses on the development of the child's concept of self. If the child feels well with himself, it is a positive start. Feeling good with yourself involves knowing your weak and strong points and trust in the ability of perfecting yourself. Learning is not an end goal in itself but a way to progress to the top of the pyramid, to grow up, which in the terms of Maslow means self-actualization. A child learns because he has an inner motivation and his reward is given by the feeling that he

acquires something from what he has learned. This is different from the behaviorist point of view, which assumes that extrinsic rewards are more efficient. Extrinsic rewards are rewards of the external world: praise, money, high grades. Intrinsic rewards are internal and lead to the fulfillment of some needs. Humanist education starts from creating a necessity which leads to motivation.

The humanist teachers' great effort is oriented to the development of the student's self-respect. It is important for students to have a good opinion about them (high self-esteem) and to feel that they can reach the goals they have established (high efficiency). This form of education is a student-centered education and is characterized by the student's responsibility for his/her own education and learning. The behaviorists may be adepts of repeated praises in case of success or punishment and negative criticism in case of failure. Both praises and criticism are rejected by humanists. Students may become dependent on praise and put a lot of effort in getting praise from their teachers. These students often will work for praise and will not work when their efforts aren't noticed. Taking into account that education is to prepare children for adult life, a humanistic approach is appropriate. The humanist teacher is a facilitator, not just a conveyor of knowledge. The participative and discovery methods will be preferred instead of traditional ones. The teacher is concerned with the child's cognitive needs, but equally with his emotional needs. Thinking and feeling interact. Positive thinking about oneself facilitates learning. The importance given by humanists to human individuality can be seen in the way in which it is presented by CR Rogers:

- Self-actualization is the ultimate goal towards which any human being must aim.

- The reality is phenomenological; each man has his own universe, which cannot be known by anyone else.

- The need for self actualization is the motivation behind behavior.

Self actualization leads to anyone becoming what he wants through means chosen by him. It is a directed process, a maturation increasing competences, meaning survival and reproduction itself. Other thinkers see all these as purposes, but Rogers considers them rather as trends that characterize the process of growth, of self development.

Self actualization involves being self-driven, autonomy and self control, which means something completely different than the control exercised by external forces. Self-actualization should be oriented in a healthy direction, towards a creative function.

- Behavior manifests itself in the context of our own personal realities. In order to understand our own behavior, it is necessary to understand others' points of view, and for this, it is important to have an open communication.

- Self is built by individual. We listen to others and, in agreement with what they say; we can realize how we are. Also, we can observe the efficiency with which, through our behavior, we can obtain information about ourselves.

- We act in accordance with our concept of self. Everything that we believe we are able to do we must also strive to do.

Although the golden years of humanist psychology and the movement in favor of promoting the human potential during the 1950s and 1980s is associated with the work of Maslow and Rogers, they learned from many contemporaries.

An example is Rollo May, who shows the importance of listening to individual perceptions before adopting a change of behavior. Wilhelm Reich focused on reactions against unacceptable feelings and

created techniques to overcome them. Fritz Perls developed therapeutic activities through which people can help an individual to reconcile his divergent perceptions about himself and to reach the desired potential.

In spite of the advantages brought by psychological influences upon humanist education, a lot of critics have appeared against it.

5. Critics of Humanism and Conclusions

There are usually three major accusations raised against humanists. Critics consider that humanists give great importance to methods, techniques, experiments, not paying attention to their consequences upon students. Humanists neglect the long-term effects of their programs. If they applied their methods on a larger scale, they would observe that the practices of emotional loading (enhanced subjectivity and group meetings) may be, from an emotional and psychological point of view, harmful to students. Parents fear that humanist education, which changes attitudes, behavior and values by promoting open decisions, is a dangerous deviation. Some critics assert that *'humanists are not concerned enough about the experience of the individual [...] some programs appear to demand uniformity of students'* [1].

Although humanists believe that they support that education which addresses each individual, students stay in the same classroom and are exposed to the same stimuli. It is expected from each to take part in collective fantasies, games of hostility and awareness exercises. On the other hand, some critics blame humanists that place too much emphasis on the individual and believe that they should be more responsible to the needs of the entire society.

McCarty considers that it is necessary to combat the perception of humanist education as being *'chaotic, lacking in purpose, and bereft of a set of common goals'*, but at the same time, he believes that humanists must be involved *'with the welfare of others and that one should not seek personal pleasure while other slave'* [5]. Maslow wondered if education for self-actualization may be associated with education and training skills. He believes that it is possible that the two may be integrated, but it is a very difficult process. The teacher's role as an evaluator in accordance with standards is often incompatible with his humanistic role. For Maslow, learning the contents should not mean denial of development. He believes that the subjects can be taught based on humanistic principles, the study of a subject being an aid to see the world as it is.

We can conclude that active listening, self-evaluation, creativity, and openness to new experiences are important goals of humanist education. Students are especially concerned with understanding life. Putting feelings and facts together is a beneficial process. It is alarming that studies on the interactions during the classes show that only 1% of the time dedicated to training uses the feelings produced by what students learn. Students also need help to experience new ways of knowledge. Directing to self-actualization can occur only in a climate of trust by increasing students' participation in the decisions about what and how to learn, by increasing trust and self-respect. Humanist educators are concerned with the manner in which a subject can be structured and taught, so that it could help students to overcome the crises that may occur during a period of personal development (identity crises or conflicting relationships with parents).

Students can study science in order to meet their need for coherence and

understanding of the world. Through Arts they express their own feelings and natural desire to be themselves. Also, teachers must pay more attention to motivation and emotional guidance. Intentions, goals, beliefs, influence the students' way of thinking. By stimulating choice, promoting novelty, fantasies and surprises, teachers will create complex personalities concerned with their fellows' problems, but following at the same time their own dreams and ideals without preset paths designed by government or employers. Capitalism and scientism through an institutionalized curriculum aim to fill 'the empty vessels' while many humanist teachers try to light the fire of knowledge and curiosity in their students' souls.

The main objectives of humanism work together for the free manifestation of the human individuality and the elimination of any coercion and oppression which may suppress the individual.

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