

# The History of Positive Psychology: Truth Be Told

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*Martin E. P. Seligman, in his 1998 APA Presidential Address, is said to have introduced positive psychology to the American Psychological Association. However, overwhelming evidence suggests that the principal components of positive psychology date back at least to William James. More recently, Abraham Maslow spoke of a psychology in which attention should be given not only to what is, but also to what could be. Maslow even used the words "positive psychology" for a chapter title in the 1950s. Contemporary positive psychologists seem to have distanced themselves from Maslow's humanistic approach largely because they believe that its experiential methodology lacks scientific rigor. It is argued here that positive psychology will only self-actualize when it embraces its history.*

**Key Words:** positive psychology, Maslow, humanism, humanistic psychology, phenomenology, existentialism, William James

**P**ositive psychology is the study of how human beings prosper in the face of adversity (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Its goals are to identify and enhance the human strengths and virtues that make life worth living, and allow individuals and communities to thrive. Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, its leading proponents, have been accused of not giving enough credit to "humanistic psychology" for the origins of positive psychology (Rich, 2001; Taylor, 2001). As a means of bridging the two, the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* dedicated a special issue (2001 Winter edition) to "re-center the discourse in positive psychology so that the movement recognizes the historical importance of humanistic psychology" (Rich, 2001, p. 8).

## Historical Perspective

The philosophy of phenomenology and existentialism had a significant impact on the development and growth of humanistic psychology (Misiak & Sexton, 1966; 1973); however, phenomenology was more influential to the humanist movement because existentialism was considered to be "overly pessimistic" (DeCarvalho, 1991, p. 68). Many psychologists, unhappy with the disease model that drives much of psychology, maintain that all people have an innate tendency to strive for perpetual growth

and development (Hall, 2003). They feel that the central concerns of psychology should include positive phenomena, such as love, courage, and happiness.

These beliefs led them to turn away from traditional psychology and toward existentialism and phenomenology for a more comprehensive understanding of human development and existence (Misiak & Sexton, 1966). These same psychologists were also in disagreement, with both the psychoanalysts and the behaviorists; especially because of the "mechanomorphic" and reductionistic view of humans held by the latter. In effect, these beliefs robbed man of his essence (Misiak & Sexton, 1973). According to humanists, man is more than the sum of his parts, and can only be studied properly as a whole.

Views that clearly reflect humanism go back to the modern origins of psychology and can be found in the work of William James, John Dewey, and G. Stanley Hall (Rathunde, 2001; Shaffer, 1978). William James, in particular, argued that in order to study optimal human functioning thoroughly, one has to consider the subjective experience of an individual. For that belief, and others, James is considered by some to be "America's first positive psychologist" (Taylor, 2001, p.15). James saw the importance of using a positivistic methodology in science; however, he maintained "good science" must also employ methods grounded in phenomenology. This combination of positivistic and phenomenological methodology was known as "radical empiricism." Not only was James interested in what was objective and observable, but also in what was subjective because "objectivity is based on intense subjectivity" (Gilky, 1990, as cited in Rathunde, 2001).

In his presidential address to the American Psychological Association in 1906, William James asked why some individuals were able to utilize their resources to their fullest capacity and others were not. In order to understand this, he said two more questions must be answered: "(a) What were the limits of human energy? and (b) How could this energy be stimulated and released so it could

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be put to optimal use?” (Rathunde, 2001, p. 136). These questions are a clear demonstration of William James’ interest in the study of optimal human functioning and its relationship to experience, a common thread woven throughout positive psychology literature.

Humanistic psychology, often known as the “third force,” began formally in the 1950’s in Europe and the United States. Maslow believed that humanistic psychology should be based on the study of healthy, creative individuals and attempted to investigate empirically the lives and patterns of self-actualized persons (Moss, 2001). The term “positive psychology” first appeared in the last chapter of Maslow’s book *Motivation and Personality* (1954), the title of which was, “Toward a Positive Psychology.” In this chapter, Maslow maintains that psychology itself does not have an accurate understanding of human potential, and that the field tends not to raise the proverbial bar high enough with respect to maximum attainment. He wrote:

The science of psychology has been far more successful on the negative than on the positive side; it has revealed to us much about man’s shortcomings, his illnesses, his sins, but little about his potentialities, his virtues, his achievable aspirations, or his full psychological height. It is as if psychology had voluntarily restricted itself to only half its rightful jurisdiction, and that the darker, meaner half (Maslow, 1954, p. 354).

## Positive Psychology and Humanism: Similarities

Humanistic psychology is largely concerned with the quality of human experience and can be defined as “...primarily an orientation toward the whole of psychology rather than a distinct area or school...concerned with topics having little place in existing theories and systems: e.g., love, creativity, growth, self-actualization, peak experience, courage, and related topics” (Misiak & Sexton, 1966, p. 454). One must only be slightly familiar with the work of positive psychologists to see the similarities between those areas mentioned above and what Seligman (2002), refers to as signature strengths and virtues.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi have argued that psychology has “forgotten about its roots” when it comes to making the lives of all people more fulfilling and enhancing and identifying human excellence (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). But this argument does not hold true when we review Maslow’s work. Indeed, the three pillars proposed by Seligman (2002), those that serve as guides to positive psychology, are ideas that mimic those of James, Maslow, and other humanists. For instance, William James spoke about the importance of positive subjective experiences (Seligman’s pillar 1) in order to achieve personal growth. Maslow (1954) states that in order for individuals to thrive and excel, a health-fostering culture (Seligman’s pillar 3) must be created.

Apparently, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi have chosen to distance themselves from humanistic psychology because of what they call its use of unscientific methodologies and its inadequate empirical foundation. They write: “Unfortunately, humanistic psychology did not attract much of a cumulative empirical base” (2000, p. 7). However, Taylor (2001) suggests that these remarks, which imply that humanistic psychology is anti-scientific, are actually the result of differing ideas of what constitutes research. Had Seligman not rigidly defined research as solely encompassing positivistic methodologies, he would have discovered that humanistic psychology has an extensive research base that uses both positivistic and phenomenological designs (Misiak & Sexton, 1973).

The suggestion that humanistic psychology ignores rigorous research has been disputed by many. Bohart and Greening (2001) have written that humanism “values research, although this is defined broadly to include both positivistic and qualitative or phenomenological methods” (p. 82). Shapiro (2001) suggests that Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi have ignored the large body of research published in scholarly journals, such as the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (where, by-the-way, some of Csikszentmihalyi’s early works were published) and the *Humanistic Psychologist*. They also have ignored the considerable quantitative and qualitative empirical research that has been completed by members of several APA divisions, including Division 32 (the Division of Humanistic Psychology). In writing about the special issue of the *American Psychologist* (2000) devoted to “happiness, excellence, and optimal human functioning,” Shapiro (2001) says:

In the 16 articles, 178 pages, and over 1,300 references in this issue, I found extremely few (approximately 6, or 0.4%) references to the seminal and foundational works of Rogers, Maslow, May, Bugental, Buhler, Combs, Carkuff, and many others, some of whom have done widely respected quantitative investigations. (p. 82).

## Future Directions and Conclusions

There is a preponderance of evidence that suggests that positive psychology has roots going at least as far back as William James. Furthermore, it is very clear that positive psychology and humanistic psychology share common goals and interests. The main difference between these two “movements” appears to be their partiality to different research methodologies. The humanists tend to opt for more qualitative methods so as to increase the chance they are assessing the “whole man;” positive psychologists, in contrast, tend to employ more rigorous, quantitative, and reductionistic methods.

Maslow (1954) maintained that investigating human potential only through positivistic methods was similar to measuring a six foot tall individual in a room with a five foot ceiling — the conditions have already been set

for the individual not to reach his/her maximum “height” (a.k.a., “low-ceiling” psychology). In order to measure human excellence and potential fully, humanists tend to employ both positivistic and phenomenological research methodologies. As Rich (2001) plaintively asks: “can we understand creativity...or the good life through structural equation modeling” (p. 8)?

Without a doubt, Seligman and his colleagues have worked hard to further the study of human excellence and optimal functioning. As a result of their efforts and influence, several relevant projects have been started to help us understand what makes the lives of all people more satisfying, and to know what areas need improvement, e.g., the Telos Taxonomy Project, begun in July 2000. Subsequently, in 2004, Seligman and Peterson published *Human Strengths: A Classification Manual*. It is an authoritative positive nosology, developed so that concepts such as wisdom, love, and humor can be measured validly and reliably (Seligman, 2002).

It is argued here that positive psychology will not self-actualize itself until it embraces its history and is more accepting of phenomenology. As Rathunde (2001) writes: “Adopting an experiential perspective may help build a more unified psychology of optimal human functioning and avoid misunderstandings concerning the role of scientific research in humanistic and positive psychology” (p. 135). Moreover, using phenomenological-existential methodology is “essential to explore questions about what makes life fulfilling or meaningful” (p. 136). If humanistic and positive psychology can only join together, perhaps psychology will witness the rise of a powerful and important “fourth force.”

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