Erich Fromm’s Impact on Humanistic Psychology

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Abstract: Humanistic Psychology (HP) includes several psychological movements such as Client-centered therapy, Gestalt therapy, and Theme-centered Interaction. It is based on a “holistic” view of man emphasizing awareness of bodily expressions, creativity, a self-actualizing tendency and spiritual needs. Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Fritz Perls and others called it a “third branch” in psychology setting it apart from orthodox Freudian theory and behaviorism. Erich Fromm is often considered as a founder of Humanistic Psychology because he was the first one who used the term “humanistic” to make a distinguishing mark from Freudian psychoanalysis. He wrote about a “self-actualizing tendency” in human life and said that therapy should be a “core-to-core-relationship” between two adult persons. Fromm was very influential in HP through his “humanistic” ideas but he remained a psychoanalytic therapist who tried to unveil the unconscious. So we can say that he never was in the center of the humanist movement, but he held a key position on its periphery.

Introduction

“Humanistic Psychology” is a generic term used to describe several psychological movements such as Client-centered Therapy (Carl R. Rogers), Gestalt Therapy (Fritz and Laura Perls), Existential Therapy (Rollo May), and Theme-centered Interaction (Ruth C. Cohn). These movements agree
in a view of man which emphasizes creativity, responsibility, self-actualization and psychological health. In the 1960s and 1970s, Humanistic Psychology was very influential in America and later on in Europe. Abraham Maslow and James F. Bugenthal, two important members of the *American Association of Humanistic Psychology*, called it a “third force in psychology” distinct from both traditional psychoanalysis and behaviorism (cf. Johach 2009, pp. 23–26).

Erich Fromm is often considered a founder of humanistic psychology, although he was never a member of the *American Association of Humanistic Psychology* nor was he ever present at the meetings. In the decade between 1955 and 1965 he used the term “humanistic” to delineate the difference between his own thinking and Freud’s orthodox version of psychoanalysis. Twenty years earlier, in a paper on “Man’s impulse structure and its relation to culture” (Fromm 1992e) he had made it very clear that he no longer agreed with Freud’s biological libido theory and with his concept of “Todestrieb”. Critical comments on Freud’s “naturalistic” and “pessimistic” view of human beings were common to all humanistic psychologists. Fromm was one of the first authors in the United States who brought these views to the public. Nevertheless, he never gave up his fundamental psychoanalytic orientation.

Karen Horney, Harry S. Sullivan and Erich Fromm were called “Neo-Freudians” because of their revisionist interpretation of Freudian theory. It was very important that Fromm widened the psychoanalytical theory of character formation by historical, socio-economic and cultural factors. Humanistic psychologists consider human organism to be a “holistic” and an active center of biological, intellectual, emotional and social activities which are fostered by the world around us. Freedom to choose makes a difference to conditioned reflexes which are the basic explanation of human behavior according to naturalistic scientists. Man should also be free from social constraints. Fritz Perls and other “humanistic” psychologists transformed Fromm’s critical category of “alienation” into a more rebellious or even an anarchist practice. Instead of adapting to social rules or roles, everybody should “do his own thing”. This misinterpretation of Fromm’s idea, under the slogan of “self-actualization”, occasionally led to an excessive individualism (cf. Johach 2012).

Fromm was not only a psychological theorist, but also a reformer of...
practical therapeutic treatment. Following Sándor Ferenczi’s variations in psychoanalytic “techniques,” Fromm no longer made use of the couch but preferred a “face-to-face-relation” with his patients and a more “active” mode of therapy. He was convinced that the therapist should learn about his own feelings as well as of the patient. There should be a “central relatedness” (cf. Fromm 1992g, p. 104) between two adult persons instead of interpreting transference from the patient’s childhood. Fromm was not the only one who criticized Freud’s rule of “abstinence” in therapeutic treatment; most of his practical postulates were shared by humanistic psychologists.

It is worth noting that, in later years, Fromm went beyond the traditional frame of therapeutic treatment by proclaiming some way of “trans-therapeutic” psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis should not only help people get free from neurosis in everyday-life but also show a way to become richer as a human being and more self-congruent by self-analysis outside of the therapeutic relationship. As Fromm suggested in *Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism* (Fromm 1960a), self-analysis and Buddhist meditation aim to could reach the same spiritual goals by different means. Many protagonists of Humanist Psychology were also convinced that spiritual needs were in-dispensable for human growth.

When he wrote the sections of *To Have or to Be?* (Fromm 1976a) which were published only after his death, Fromm said that he had decided against speaking of “humanistic” psychoanalysis because this attribute was adopted by a group of psychologists with whom he did “not agree” (Fromm 1989a, p. 64). Although there was some convergence, he could not share all assertions and practices of Humanistic Psychology. One key difference is the function of *unconscious* thoughts, wishes and emotions which Fromm tried to reveal, according with Freud and other psychoanalysts. In contrast to Fromm, some protagonists of HP declared that one could neglect the unconscious if awareness was extended beyond daily routine. In the following paper, I first will describe some biographical connections between Fromm and other founders of Humanistic Psychology, and then I will deal with what were the similarities and differences in their theories and practices.
Biographical Connections

Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) was a visionary psychologist and the main protagonist of the Humanistic Psychology Movement. In 1962, he called the American Association of Humanistic Psychology into being, assisted by Carl C. Rogers, Rollo May, Charlotte Buehler, James Bugenthal and others. He also was the editor of the Journal of Humanistic Psychology which has been published to the present day. He famously suggested in Toward a Psychology of Being (Maslow 1962), that psychologists and therapists should give more attention to a “health-and-growth-psychology” than to a “deficiency psychology” which has its focus on disturbances and faults impeding the development of a “fully functioning” person. Maslow was primarily a theorist and researcher, not a practical therapist. The most famous part of his writings is the “hierarchy of needs” which he described in his book on Motivation and Personality (Maslow 1954). It begins by fundamentally “physiological” needs like eating, drinking, sleeping, then moves to “higher” and “specifically human” needs like love, self-esteem and support by others, and ends with the “self-actualization” of persons wishing to fully realize their human capacities.

Maslow spoke of a “new humanistic world-view” represented by a “Third-Force-Psychology” that should widely differ from behaviorism and orthodox Freudianism. In his last publications, after having studied many accounts of “peak experiences”, he announced the need for a “Fourth Psychology” which should extend to spiritual needs.

Abraham Maslow was influenced by Erich Fromm and other neo-Freudian therapists, but he was not analyzed. Between 1935 and 1940, he came to know and study with Alfred Adler, who at that time lived in New York. He had many conversations with Erich Fromm, Karen Horney and other psychotherapists who promulgated a more “culturalist” interpretation of psychoanalysis, and with the anthropologists at Columbia University, especially Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead. At the same time, he became acquainted with Kurt Goldstein and Max Wertheimer, which were two representatives of Gestalt psychology. Like Fromm, they were Jews and left Europe because of the persecution by the Nazi regime. Kurt Goldstein was a psychiatrist and pioneer of a “holistic” brain research approach. In his famous book The Organism. A Holistic Approach to Biology derived from
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Pathological Data in Man (Goldstein 1939), Goldstein spoke of a “self-actualizing tendency” in the human organism – an expression which was taken over by Fromm, Maslow and Rogers. I do not know if Fromm ever met with Goldstein when both were living in New York, but I am sure that he knew his book and would have held the work in esteem.

Erich Fromm, in my opinion, was the first philosophically reflecting therapist in the twentieth century who made use of the term “humanistic” to point to a certain psychological position. In Man for Himself (Fromm 1947a, pp. 8–37) he wrote about “humanistic ethics” and in The Sane Society (Fromm 1955a, p. 22) and The Heart of Man (1964a, p. 15) he used the term “humanistic psychoanalysis” as a distinguishing mark from orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis. Abraham Maslow was very impressed by Fromm’s books. In his own writings he referred to Fromm, especially to his idea of a self-actualizing tendency underlying human growth and productivity. Maslow’s decision that the “Third Force” in psychology should be called “humanistic” was a tribute to Fromm.

Another pioneer of Humanistic Psychology was Rollo May (1909–1994) who was better known as a founder of “Existential Therapy”. May started his career as a theologian who was influenced by Kierkegaard and Tillich. In the early 1930s he studied with Alfred Adler who at that time lived half a year in Vienna and the other time in New York. May began to practice as a therapist and, in the late thirties, he decided to contact Erich Fromm in order to be analyzed. In the beginning, it was a fruitful connection, but after some months, May felt uncomfortable. He said that Fromm was not empathizing sufficiently – when May e.g. was infected by tuberculosis Fromm did not mention that he had been infected too a few years earlier. Fromm was upset by the fact that May took notes from their therapeutic conversations and made use of them in his own writings. In 1943, the therapeutic connection was ended.

Some years later, Rollo May joined the teaching staff of the William Alanson White Institute. As colleagues, they could better get along with each other. May said that Fromm’s contributions to the discussions of the staff were “refreshing” because Fromm went beyond therapeutic techniques and spoke with verve of the “meaning ground” of human life (cf. Friedman 2013, pp. 131–132). Nevertheless, the distrust resulting from his failed therapy did not cease totally. And there were theoretical differences between them,
as May’s therapeutic system was based more on existential philosophy than on “neo-psychoanalysis.” Buber and Tillich were more important for him than Fromm. There was clearly a rivalry between Fromm and May, even if they respected each other as colleagues who shared a “humanistic” theoretical background.

A third founder of Humanistic Psychology, to whom Fromm referred several times, was Carl R. Rogers (1902–1987). Rogers began as a practical theologian; after his studies he worked in child guidance. Rogers’ ideas had some connection with psychoanalysis, especially with the theories of Otto Rank who emphasized the problem solving capacities of the client and the importance of trust and security in therapeutic relations. In his first book Counseling and Psychotherapy (Rogers 1941) Rogers described his method of “non-directive” counseling which later on was widened to Client-centered Therapy (Rogers 1951). Rogers was never trained as a psychoanalyst and he did not deal with “the unconscious” and “transference” or “counter-transference” in therapy, but his work was clearly stimulated by the ideas of Rank and Buber concerning “lived experience” and the relation of “Me and You” in therapy.

In 1961, Rogers published his most influential book On Becoming a Person (Rogers 1961), in which he delineated his theory of the “self” as an organizing principle in the process of forming and reforming one’s own capacities and actualizing tendencies. He made evident that there are core conditions of successful therapeutic intervening: congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard. Later on, Rogers joined the Center for Studies of the Person in La Jolla, California and began to work with Encounter Groups (Rogers 1970) and partnership training. As he was also engaged in school reform and peace movement, he was one of the most prominent proponents of Humanistic Psychology in the United States in the late twentieth century.

I don’t know if Fromm and Rogers ever had a meeting, but we know that Fromm took note of Rogers’ therapeutic method because he commented on it. Vice versa, there are no indications that Rogers’ practical and theoretical work was directly influenced by Erich Fromm. But he was influenced by Maslow who was a follower of Fromm. Certainly, Rogers and Fromm had some congruent opinions on personal growth as an actualization of human potential. They had correspondent ideas about therapy as a core-to core-re-

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relationship of two adult persons without regression to early childhood. But Fromm did not know Rogers’ method very well and his comments on client-centered therapy were superficial. Finally, he disapproved of group therapy.

There are some German Jewish psychoanalysts who got into contact with Erich Fromm in America before they joined the humanistic movement in psychology. During his formative period in Berlin, Frederick S. Perls (1893–1970) was a follower of Wilhelm Reich. At the beginning of the Nazi regime, he went to Amsterdam and some years later he lived in Johannesberg as a training analyst of the *South African Institute of Psychoanalysis*. Laura Perls (1905–1990) who in Frankfurt had studied Gestalt psychology helped Frederick Perls write *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* (1969 [1942]), a book in which Freud’s libido theory was criticized. Fromm knew this book and partly agreed with its unconventional interpretation of psychoanalytic theory. When Fritz and Laura Perls came to New York he gave support to them by referring some patients to them. Fritz Perls later on was asked if he would work as a training analyst at the *William Alanson White Institute*, but Perls did not accept this offer. Together with his wife and Paul Goodman, he established the *New York Gestalt Institute* based on the premise that an effective therapeutic method should not work merely as a “talking cure”, but in a more “holistic” or “organismic” way, including bodily expressions. In the late sixties, Fritz Perls was very famous as a group-therapist and a “guru” at the *Esalen Institute* in Big Sur/California. Erich Fromm would have heard indirectly about Perls’ later career, but he never met him again.

Ruth C. Cohn (1912–2010) was another German psychoanalyst who met Erich Fromm in New York. Born in Berlin in a Jewish family, she left Germany in 1933 and went to Zurich. While studying psychology, she was married, got a child and undertook training in psychoanalysis. In 1941, she immigrated to the United States with her young family. The *American Psychoanalytical Association* gave her no permission to analyze adults because she had no medical certificate, so she could work only with children. Her husband tried to complete his medical studies by a psychoanalytical training at the *Washington School of Psychiatry* which later was called *William Alanson White Institute*, and his training analyst was Erich Fromm. As the family situation was complicated and tensions were increasing, Ruth Cohn wanted to have a therapeutic meeting with her husband and Fromm, but
Fromm refused to do so. Her husband’s analytical training was broken off, and she was divorced. Ruth Cohn later said that Fromm should have been more helpful in this situation. Although discussions with the couple were unusual at that time, the William Alanson White Institute was progressive in testing new methods. In spite of Fromm’s refusal – as she saw it – Ruth Cohn was very impressed by the writings of Harry Stack Sullivan and the therapeutic engagement of Clara Thompson, and she admired Frieda Fromm-Reichmann who was practicing “intensive therapy” with psychotic patients at Chestnut Lodge. The neo-Freudian orientation of the William Alanson White Institute was very influential on Ruth Cohn’s own therapeutic work.

In the 1960s, Ruth Cohn took part in the humanistic psychological movement in the United States and in the German speaking countries in Europe. She worked with Fritz and Laura Perls, Carl Rogers, Carl Whitaker and Virginia Satir in the American Academy of Psychotherapists and described their meetings in a book entitled Lived History of Psychotherapy (Farau & Cohn 1984). Her special method is called Theme-centered Interaction (TCI) which means that a group engaged in a discussion should not work in a merely theoretical or academic manner but in a more personal or even “therapeutic” way. She said that Erich Fromm never participated in the meetings of the “humanistic” psychotherapists but his writings were very influential by spreading humanistic thinking.

**Fromm’s Comments on Humanistic Psychology**

As I said in the beginning, Fromm in his own writings between 1955 and 1965 used to speak about “humanistic psychoanalysis”. He avoided the term “humanistic psychology”. This is significant because Fromm always was a psychoanalytical thinker. Other therapists who primarily were trained in psychoanalysis later on changed their theoretical foundations, as Fritz and Laura Perls did as they helped found “Gestalt” psychology. It is not surprising that Fromm, in one of his late manuscripts which were published under the title The Art of Being, said that he had given up the attribute “humanistic” because this word “had been used by a group of psychologists whose assumptions I could not share” (Fromm 1989a, p. 64).
In a paper written as addendum to “Freud’s Model of Man and its Social Determinants” (Fromm 1970d) and finally published in 2013 (Fromm 1977g), Fromm pointed out that Freud’s theory of human motivation merely was based on “physiological” needs and drives, whereas Marx and Goldstein thought that the “realization of human potential” was the driving force in human life. He added that Maslow had “popularized” this idea in Motivation and Personality (Maslow 1954). Some years later, Fromm’s comments on Maslow were more critical. In The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness he said that Maslow, when he was enumerating human needs unsystematically, “failed to derive them from their origin in human nature” (Fromm 1973a, p. 222). According to his theory in The Sane Society, there are five existential needs rooted in human nature: relatedness, transcendence, rootedness, identity and frame of orientation (Fromm 1955a, pp. 30–66). All needs can be satisfied in an alternative mode: relatedness by love or narcissism, transcendence by creativity or destructiveness etc. Fromm believed that Maslow was right when he points out human life as an actualization of human potential, but he falsely neglected alternative possibilities in human nature. Fromm came to the conclusion that Maslow’s concept of self-actualization was “degenerated” and the “humanistic” movement gave “simple answers” to existential questions by a mixture of “psychoanalysis, group therapy, yoga and other ingredients” (Fromm 1991h, p. 143).

Obviously Fromm did not know what to do with practical “humanistic” psychology, as it was done in group therapy and encounter groups. He said that he was “very skeptical” about group therapy because he would not like to speak about inner problems “when ten other people were present.” Perhaps group therapy might be a chance for young people who have similar problems and are not suffering very much, but it “can never be equivalent to psychoanalysis” (Fromm 1991d, pp. 106–7). Fromm added, with a self-ironic wink, that he was “an individualist” and “somewhat old-fashioned” (ibid.).

Erich Fromm’s notes on Carl Rogers indicate a critical distance, too, although there was some kind of companionship. In The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness, Rogers is quoted as an opponent to B. F. Skinner (Fromm 1973a, p. 34fn.). We may conclude that Fromm regards him as an ally to his own criticism of behavioristic thinking. Surely we can say that Fromm
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and Rogers had a great deal in common, for instance their thinking about the client’s self-actualization and a living therapeutic relation, but they did not know very much about each other. In his late lessons called *Therapeutic Aspects of Psychoanalysis*, Fromm says that “client-centered therapy” is a strange terminology because every therapy has to be “client-centered” (Fromm 1991d, pp. 97–8). If the therapist is too narcissistic to be concentrated on the client’s person, he or she should better give up their job. But this comment fails to hit the heart of the matter. The question is in what way the therapist is centered on the client’s person. I think that Fromm is mistaken when he says that according to Rogers the therapist should be “like a mirror” (ibid.). In fact, the therapist shall answer by his own resonance expressing the client’s original feelings, so that he can better understand his situation. Fromm, in contrast to Rogers, says that he “hears” something “different” from the client’s saying that is unconscious and maybe opposite to his accessible feelings (Fromm 1991d, p. 98). He makes use of dreams and associations to get into contact with the client’s unconscious feelings, while Rogers is concentrated on feelings which are present “here and now”. Fromm’s method seems to be more analytical and leading to interpretations, and Roger’s method is more empathic. Ruth Cohn said that she never worked with a therapist who was more “gifted to emotional understanding by his mere concentration on the client” than was Rogers (Farau & Cohn 1984, p. 289).

**Concluding Remarks**

There is a note on Fromm in an article on the Internet concerning Humanistic-Existential Psychology, which seems to describe him very adequately. The author writes that Fromm “saw himself as neo-Freudian in orientation”, but he also “occupied a key position on the periphery of the humanistic movement” (Pioneers 2015). Surely, Fromm never was in the center of the humanistic movement, but he was in a key position on its periphery.

There are three facts characterizing Fromm’s role as a precursor of Humanistic Psychology. First, is his transition from Freudian drive theory to Sullivan’s *interpersonal theory* of human development and therapy. In the appendix of *Escape of Freedom*, Fromm made it very clear that human

beings are primarily social beings, and not secondarily dependent on others when they want their needs and drives to be satisfied, as Freud was thinking (Fromm 1941, p. 290). Secondly, he had a concept of human growth and self-actualization which should be supported by interpersonal relations (Fromm 1947a, pp. 219–226). Thirdly, he labelled his fundamental assumptions as “humanistic” views in ethics and psychology (Fromm 1964a, p. 15). These positions are common to all humanistic psychologists. Fromm was the first one who pointed that out.

It is not surprising that some founders of Humanistic Psychology developed some resentment towards Fromm in the 1940s because he was self-confident, direct and at times impulsive. Nevertheless, they made use of his writings and held them in high regard. On the other hand, Fromm did not maintain close ties with Humanistic Psychology. He underestimated the potential of Humanistic Psychology, because he was and remained a psychoanalyst. Some Humanistic Psychologists, like Fritz Perls, were trained as psychoanalytical therapists and gradually changed their theoretical framework. Fromm thought that psychoanalysis, with some “revisionist” modifications, was a better basis of therapy and superior to Humanistic Psychology.

There is an anecdote of a discussion between Carl Rogers and Martin Buber at the University of Michigan in April, 1957 that illuminates the core issues. Rogers said: “Man is basically good.” Buber added: “And evil.” I think if Fromm would have been present at the discussion, he would have taken sides more with Buber, and less with Rogers, and Humanistic Psychology today would benefit from this corrective.

References


