Humanistic-Existential Perspective Essay, Research Paper

The Humanistic-Existential Perspective

The humanistic-existential perspective is both a reaction to and an outgrowth of the psychodynamic perspective. These thinkers refer to psychodynamic theory as inadequate, many were repulsed with its tendency to break down the “whole” person into discrete components, and, the idea of adapting to one’s society, however questionable its values. Most importantly, they disagree that human action is beyond the individuals control, in fact they believe that if we could develop with out constraints, we would be rational and socialized. Humanists and existentialists also think psychology should be converted into a human science, different from psychological theories with more focus on natural science. Nonetheless, there would be four basic premises that both groups (humanists & existentialists) would follow.

First is the Phenomenological Approach. This entails the therapist entering into the patients world by tuning into their mental life and seeing the world as they do through their eyes. This is accomplished by listening with a lot of empathy and avoiding searching for evidence to fill their own theories by not looking into the real truth of their patients statements. This approach considers the minds knowledge for its own behavior. Second, the Uniqueness of the Individual is taken into consideration. This concept suggests every person percieves the world differently through their own “self-creation”, thus making us unique. According to this premise, to subject the patients to a set of formulas, in comparison to psychodynamic theory, is to limit the therapists knowledge. This perspective also understands that while society sets rules to follow, such rules cannot define a human life. The third premise is Human Potental. This emphasizes the ability for a human to become what they want and fulfill their capabilities, by growth through experience. Both humanists and existenialists see the individual as a process. Finally, the concept of Freedom and Responsibility is met. What this means, and what also makes the humanistic- existential perspective stand apart from any other psychological stand-point is the belief that we are as humans, given self-awareness. Meaning, we can control our impulses and are responsible for them. In other words we create our own destinies, the result is reached through our own judgement.

Humanist Carl Rogers developed a theory that saw behavior motivated by what he called the actualizing tendency, the desire to preserve and enhance oneself through self-actualization. While persuing self- actualization we engage in the valuing process, where we go through various experiences that either enhance oneself and are valued as good, or, bad experiences not enhancing oneself which are avoided. Hence, how we handle this process relies on two interacting factors: the organism, our total perception of our experiences, and, the self, our image of ourselves. A major decisive factor is childhood experience and the positive regard that is engrossed. Rogers also developed a technique called client-centered therapy. In an accepting atmosthere the patient confronts inconsistent feelings and experiences, where self and organism are brought back into congruence. Now free from their troubles they can proceed with self-actualization.

Another humanist, Abraham Maslow, is recognized for contributing to the humanistic perspective. His concept of The Hierarchy of Needs, is noted for the series of needs that must be met before self- actualization can be obtained. Maslow proposed five levels. The first being biological, where the needs for hunger, thirst and sex drives are met. Second are the safety needs, where we acknowledge our environment as stable, safe and predictable. The third is the need for belongingness and love that is warm and accepted by as well as given by family and friends. Fourth are our esteem needs, which the person seeks both to respect others and also be respected. We create our self-esteem through achievment, competence and recognition. Finally, after completing these four levels a person can then fulfill their own unique potiential and become self-actualized.

Rogers and Maslow agreed that abnormality was a failure to develop and progress beyond acceptable standards of normality. Their suggestion to cure abnormality was to first adjust the person to a normal life, then you could work your way up from there.

Existential psychology is an outgrowth of European existential philosophy, it emphasizes the difficulty of living authentically in the modern world. The condition known to them as alienation is a spiritual death, where the person is overcome with a sense of meaninglessness of life and the terror that comes with death. It is believed modern technologies effeciency has banned people from values and responsibility. The existential perspective was introduced to the United States by Pollo May, whose contribution was the antologial context, it states a person can be understood only in terms of their sense of self, also known as the center. He concluded abnormality is merely a protection from percieved threats and in administering it the therapist uses self-transcendence, the ability to see oneself as a responsible, growing person.

Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl brought about another theory, the will-to-meaning. It is the struggle of humans to find some reason for their complicated existence, which could only be found through values of love, work, other people, of the world and confrontation of personal sufferings. For those blocked in the process Frankl evolved a treatment stradgedy of logotherapy. The therapists role is to confront the patient with existential responsibility and lead them to choose values. Both therapist and patient then work togeather toward a better approach to life through the meaning of values.

The Humanistic-Existential perspective graciously affected therapy in modern day by providing patients with more empathy and focus on the present as well as striving toward future growth. However criticism relates it to be uncsientific and antiscientific. These theorists say that they are being repremanded for using the wrong tools and questions. They also argue whether or not therapy can actually be judged scientifically, without matters of will, values, goals, and meaning being weighed in.