Human potential movement

A movement that focused on helping normal persons achieve their full potential through an eclectic combination of therapeutic methods and disciplines. The movement’s values include tolerance, a basic optimism about human nature, the necessity of honest interpersonal communication, the importance of living life to the fullest in the “here and now,” and a spirit of experimentation and openness to new experiences.

William James, an early proponent of human potential and altered states of consciousness, is considered a forerunner of the human potential movement. However, modern interest in human potential can be traced most directly to the humanistic psychological approach of such figures as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow in the 1950s. Humanistic psychology was sometimes referred to as the Third Force because it presented an alternative to the prevailing psychoanalytic and behaviorist methods. Rejecting the view of behavior as determined by childhood events or conditioned responses to external stimuli, humanistic practitioners emphasized the individual’s power to grow and change in the present and embraced the goal of self-fulfillment through the removal of obstacles.

Maslow, together with Rogers, Rollo May, and Charlotte Buhler, founded the American Association of Humanistic Psychology. Subscribing to a positive, optimistic view of human nature, he popularized the concept of self-actualization, based on his study of exceptionally successful, rather than exceptionally troubled, people. Selecting a group of “self-actualized” figures from history, including Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), Albert Einstein (1879-1955), and Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962), Maslow constructed a list of their characteristics, some of which later became trademark values of the human potential movement (acceptance of themselves and others, spontaneity, identification with humanity, democratic values, creativity). In Maslow’s widely popularized hierarchy of motivation, the basic human needs were arranged at the bottom of a pyramid, with self-actualization at the highest level. Another of Maslow’s ideas was the concept of the “peak experience,” a transcendent moment of self-actualization characterized by feelings of joy, wholeness, and fulfillment.

The philosophy of Carl Rogers’s client-centered therapy (which had been developed by 1940 but peaked in popularity in the 1950s) resembled Maslow’s ideas in its view of human impulses as basically positive and in its respect for the inner resources and innate potential of each client. Another strong influence on the development of the human potential movement was the sensitivity training inaugurated by Gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) in his T-groups at the National Training Laboratories in the late 1940s and 1950s. Under the influence of such figures as Maslow and Rogers, sensitivity training—which had initially been used to train
professionals in business, industry, and other fields—evolved into the encounter groups of the 1960s and 1970s. Encounter groups used the basic T-group techniques but shifted their emphasis toward personal growth, stressing such factors as self-expression and intense emotional experience.

At the center of the human potential movement was the growth center, for which the model was the Esalen Institute at Big Sur in California. Independent of any university or other institution, Esalen offered workshops by psychologists and authors on many topics of interest to humanists. Its founder, Michael Murphy, envisioned it as a place where humanistic psychology could be integrated with Eastern philosophies. In the mid-1960s its roster of presenters included philosopher Alan Watts (1915-1973), historian Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975), theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965), and chemist Linus Pauling (1901-1994). Maslow became affiliated with Esalen in 1966. By the early 1970s there were an estimated 150 to 200 growth centers modeled after Esalen throughout the United States.

California’s status as the hub of the human potential movement was further enhanced when Carl Rogers moved to La Jolla in 1964, writing and lecturing at the Western Behavioral Science Institute and later at the Center for Studies of the Person. Central tenets of his therapeutic approach were expanded into areas such as philosophy and educational reform that transcended the boundaries of psychology, and the phrases “person-centered approach” and “a way of being” began to replace “client-centered approach.” Rogers also became a leader in the encounter group movement, adapting the principles of client-centered therapy to a group model. These included the belief that individuals can solve their own problems and reach their full potential in a supportive, permissive environment. Rogers’s model called for the group leader to act as a non-authoritarian facilitator, creating a non-threatening atmosphere conducive to open and honest sharing among group members.

Besides encounter groups and a variety of non-traditional therapies (including Gestalt therapy, psychodrama, transactional analysis, primal scream therapy, and Morita therapy), the human potential movement also embraced a number of disciplines and practices (both Eastern and Western) involving healing, self-improvement, and self-awareness, including Zen Buddhism, astrology, art, dance, and various systems of body movement and manipulation. While the flashier and most eccentric aspects of the human potential movement have largely been relegated to fads of the 1960s and 1970s, such as primal scream therapy and EST (Erhard Seminars Training), it endures in other forms. The American Society of Humanistic Psychologists is still an active, well-organized group. Journals in the field include the Journal of Humanistic Psychology, Journal of Creative Behavior, Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, and others. Beyond this, the legacy of the human potential movement can be seen in the continuing popularity of self-improvement workshops and books and even in the recent proliferation of 12-step groups, as well as in the many ways its values and principles continue to influence the professional work of therapists with a variety of orientations.

Further Reading

David Hume

1711-1776
Scottish philosopher who developed a philosophy of “mitigated skepticism,” which remains a viable alternative to the systems of rationalism, empiricism, and idealism.

If one was to judge a philosopher by a gauge of relevance—the quantity of issues and arguments raised by him that remain central to contemporary thought—David Hume would be rated among the most important figures in philosophy. Ironically, his philosophical writings went unnoticed during his lifetime, and the considerable fame he achieved derived from his work as an essayist and historian. Immanuel Kant’s acknowledgment that Hume roused him from his “dogmatic slumbers” stimulated interest in Hume’s thought.

With respect to Hume’s life there is no better source than the succinct autobiography, My Own Life, written four months before his death. He was born on April 26, 1711, on the family estate, Ninewells, near Edinburgh. According to Hume, the “ruling passion” of his life was literature, and thus his story contains “little more than the History of my writings.” As a second son, he was not entitled to a large inheritance, and he failed in two family-sponsored careers in law and business because of his “unsurmountable aversion to everything but the pursuits of Philosophy and general learning.” Until he was past 40, Hume was employed only twice. He spent a year in England as a tutor to a mentally ill nobleman, and from 1745 to 1747 Hume was an officer and aide-de-camp to Gen. James Sinclair and attended him on an expedition to the coast of France and military embassies in Vienna and Turin.