

# HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY & POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY



As we already know, positive psychology, as a field of study, arose as a concerted and coordinated effort to promote theoretical and research attention toward flourishing (psychological functioning at its best) thus creating a better balance with the work being done on mental illness. In their address to the American Psychological Association (APA), Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) proposed their vision for a new and promising science of “positive psychology”, expanding the horizon for psychological research. However, humanistic psychologists dispute this claim of originality, arguing that positive psychology has its roots in humanistic psychology, echoing themes which have been developing for decades. In this section we will review the humanistic psychology movement, identifying key themes and looking at whether or not positive psychology is simply remarketing them.

## Three Key Papers

Resnick, S., Warmoth, A., & Serlin, I.A. (2001). The Humanistic Psychology and Positive Psychology Connection: Implications for Psychotherapy. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, **41**, 73-101.

**> a brief review of the humanistic psychology movement and how its developments constitute a positive psychology, and the implications this has on therapy**

Taylor, E. (2001). Positive Psychology and Humanistic Psychology: A Reply to Seligman. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, **41**, 13-29.

**.> this paper provides a harsh critique of positive psychology, arguing that it is directly echoing themes congruent with humanistic psychology**

Waterman, A.S. (2013) The Humanistic Psychology-Positive Psychology Divide: Contrasts in Philosophical Foundations. *American Psychologist*, **68**, 124-133.

**> a more up-to-date comparison of Humanistic and Positive psychology, and the contrasts in their foundations**

**“Seligman is claiming for himself credit that is actually due to more distinguished predecessors... Their efforts established the liberal climate that permits Seligman and his colleagues to function today.”**

**E. Taylor, 2001**

As pointed out by Resnick et al (2001), the term “positive psychology” was in fact first used by Maslow (one of the leading founders of humanistic psychology) in his book *Motivation and Personality*(1954). Interestingly, the last chapter of Maslow’s book was titled “Toward a Positive Psychology” and in this chapter Maslow lays out a research proposal which is not dissimilar to Seligman’s proposal. The early stages of humanistic psychology (around 1960 to 1980) were largely influenced by Maslow’s agenda for a positive psychology, as it articulated that human beings were irreducible to parts, instead needing communication, creativity and meaning. Humanistic psychology has continued as an organized movement that focuses research and educational efforts on the study of human experience (Greening, 1985). Is positive psychology based upon the same basic principles introduced by Maslow in 1954? Could it be that humanistic and positive psychologists are conveying the same message, just in differing theoretical languages?

Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) would most likely deny this, as they claim that humanistic psychologists have failed to develop a research tradition and have created a cult of narcissism which lacks an empirical base and spawned therapeutic self-help movements. Interestingly, positive psychology has been heavily criticized for some of the same reasons. Arguably, the harshest critique is by Lazarus (2003), who discusses the methodological and conceptual issues surrounding the positive psychology movement, his four main problems being;

1. The use of cross-sectional research (which tends to dominate in positive psychology) does not have the ability to demonstrate a causal relationship between emotions, health and well-being as it cannot distinguish what variables are stable or changing.
2. The tendency to use an over-simplified approach in dealing with emotion in which any emotion of interest is assigned automatically to one of two valences, positive or negative.
3. Failure to give adequate attention to individual differences when overstating the importance of differences within the sample/cohort.
4. The use of overly causal procedures when measuring emotion (checklists, questionnaires etc.) as these are inadequate for the purpose of providing accurate descriptions of the flow of emotions experienced by human beings.

It would appear that a critical issue in developing a positive psychology is whether the dominant objectifying approach of 20th-century quantitative psychology is sufficient to measure the uniqueness of

human experience. Should positive psychologists really criticize humanistic psychology for its lack of empirical research whilst their theory is based on the construct of “happiness”, which is by nature immeasurable in an empirically research-based manner?

It seems a bit reductionist for positive psychologists to state that humanistic psychological research primarily focuses on the bad, creating a culture of narcissism. The history of psychology contains a variety of efforts to better understand healthy psychological functioning and well-being including work carried out by humanistic psychologists Jahoda (1958) on positive mental health; Rogers (1963) on the fully functioning person and Maslow (1968) on the nature of motivation and self-actualization.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Humanistic psychologists see their perspective as an important forerunner to positive psychology, addressing many of the same concerns which positive psychology still focuses on today, whilst positive psychologists see humanistic psychology as one among several foundations leading to the creation of positive psychology and not the most important of its predecessors. But who is right? Waterman (2013) provides a more recent review of the humanistic and positive psychology divide and he concludes that there are extensive differences in the philosophical groundings of the two perspectives, both holding different understandings about the nature of being human and differing widely in the aspects of psychological functioning they find most interesting.

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### **Additional References**

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