Humanistic Psychology, Human Welfare and the Social Order

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At a time when the ability of North American society to promote human welfare for the population at large is questioned on numerous accounts, it is morally incumbent upon psychologists of various orientations to examine the social and political repercussions of their theories and practices. The present article contends that in marked contrast to its declared values of justice, community and self-actualization, humanistic psychology has in effect supported a state of social affairs inimical to the promotion of human welfare for all sectors of society. This is primarily the consequence of the glorified view of the self held by much of contemporary psychology. It is argued that if humanistic psychology's witting or unwitting endorsement of the societal status quo is to be avoided, its political sophistication will have to mature at an accelerated pace.

There is little doubt that psychology has left its imprint on 20th century society. Psychological expertise and advice are sought in countless human affairs. This phenomenon led Haverman (1957) to term the present era the "age of psychology," and Koch and Leary (1985) to define our times as the "psychological century" (p. 33). The pervasive incursion of psychological thought in the cultural ethos is succinctly described by Koch (1980): "throughout this century (and before), psychology has been under gracious dissemination—whether in school, bar, office, or bedroom; whether by book, magazine, electronic propaganda, or word of mouth—to a voracious consumership" (p. 33). More recently, Kipnis (1987) stated that psychological services are "sought and accepted in practically all fields of human activity . . . . To state it bluntly, psychologists have considerable power to influence the opinions and behavior of the public" (p. 30).

Cognizant of the potential impact of their professional endeavors on the social order, psychologists have begun to analyze the social, moral and ideological implications of psychology in general (Albee, 1986; Braginsky, 1985; Cushman, 1990; Jacoby, 1975; Larsen, 1986a; Nahem, 1981; Prilleltensky, 1989, 1990a, 1990b; Sampson, 1983; Sarason, 1981; Sullivan, 1984) and of cognitivism (Anderson and Travis, 1983; Prilleltensky, 1990c; Sampson, 1981), behaviorism (Holland, 1978; Kvale, 1985; Prilleltensky, 1992) and psychoanalysis (Ingleby, 1981; Jacoby, 1983; Kovel, 1981) in particular. Judging from the impetus Humanistic Psychology (HP) has gathered in the last three decades, an inquiry into its ideological and sociopolitical repercussions is also warranted.

What kind of an imprint is HP having on the present social order? How is the third force in psychology influencing society? Is it transforming societal regulations and institutions, or is it perhaps affirming the status quo? And what are the social and ethical implications of endorsing or challenging the status quo? This last question is of utmost importance, for if HP is inadvertently endorsing an undesirable state of social affairs, it may be in fact contradicting its own principles and undermining its mission of propagating humanistic values of respect for the individual and growth.

In order to evaluate the ultimate impact of HP on the present social order, we should ask to what extent is the present social system conducive to human welfare. For the purpose of the present inquiry, Maslow's hierarchy of needs may be utilized as the criterion for the attainment of different levels of human welfare. Self-actualization, or the highest stage of human welfare, may ordinarily be attained only after more basic (i.e., physiological, safety, belongingness and esteem) needs have been at least partially satisfied. Maslow's theory of self-actualization (1970), which has a well respected tradition in philosophy, from Aristotle (1978) to the contemporary Blanshard (1961), has proven superior than its precursors in that it provides a descriptive and hierarchical account of what are the specific needs to be gratified in order to reach the higher level of human welfare, i.e., self-fulfillment.

Maslow (1970) placed heavy emphasis on the minimal social requirements necessary for the satisfaction of basic needs. He enumerates justice, fairness, freedom and order as some of the preconditions for the fulfillment of the most fundamental needs. A sensible exposition of these and other indispensable social ideals conducive to the well-being of the population is provided by Olson (1978). His elucidation of the "good society" consists of six prerequisites: stability, harmony, social cohesion, justice, freedom, and material prosperity. Close scrutiny of each and every one of these attributes leads invariably to the conclusion that the regnant social system is quite far from approximating the status of good society.

Economic instability (Edwards, Reich, and Weisskopf, 1986), social tensions (Brittan and Maynard, 1984; Czerny and Swift, 1984; Kallen, 1989),

unequal distribution of material prosperity and life opportunities (Edwards et al. 1986; Weisband, 1989), and most importantly, a dominant conception of social justice that rewards those in position of privilege (Facione, Scherer, and Attig, 1978; Miller, 1978), are powerful evidence that fundamental changes in the social order must occur if human welfare for the public at large is to be fostered.

What are the implications of this negative appraisal of current social arrangements for humanistic psychology? At the very least, careful attention must be paid to witting or unwitting endorsements of the societal status quo. At best, efforts must be channeled toward social transformation.

Humanistic Psychology and the Status Quo

I contend that HP's fundamental values of compassion, justice, and morality (Goble, 1970; Graham, 1986; Rogers, 1972; Tageson, 1982) are totally incompatible with a societal status quo that glorifies competition, maintains inequality and perpetuates social injustice. Yet, despite the irreconcilable differences between the values espoused by HP and those of the dominant capitalist philosophy, the former has not only failed to challenge the latter but has also supported it (e.g., Beit–Hallahmi, 1977; Bell and Schniedewind, 1989; Buss, 1979; Nord, 1977; Shaw and Colimore, 1988). The following conservative elements of HP have played a significant role in upholding a basically unjust state of social affairs.

Belief in the Ability of Self to Transcend Society

As opposed to Freudian and Skinnerian interpretations of our lives as controlled by either impulses, the unconscious, or external stimulation, HP advanced the notion that human beings are capable of making choices and being in charge of their own lives (Graham, 1986; Tageson, 1982). Humanistic psychologists took upon themselves the task of creating a self-generated image of persons. An organism that would rise above environmental conditioning and be able to conduct her/himself through life as a self-guided, self-governed individual. "The suggestion implicit in the humanist concept of 'psychological freedom' is the *individual ability to transcend society*" [italics added] (Larsen, 1986b, p. 227). Moreover, humanistic psychologists mandated themselves to rescue the "self" from the lack of reflection and contemplation endorsed by behaviorism and from the imposition of unconscious drives advanced by Freudian psychology.

Buss (1979) contends that many liberal psychologists could not reconcile the pursuit for self-determination with either behaviorism or psychoanalysis; for both paradigms are highly deterministic. In this regard humanistic psy-

chologists may have confused the messenger with the message. To the extent that psychoanalytic and behavioral principles can be found to be correct, they represent a certain situation, they do not necessarily create conditions for control or determinism. The claim would be tantamount to accusing Newton for the existence of the law of gravity.

The emphasis placed on personal and global liberation through self-actualization is one of the principal tenets of the humanist movement. This notion entails a number of political implications which have been succinctly presented by Buss (1979):

> The excessive individualism contained in the doctrine of self-actualization serves to mask the larger social questions surrounding society's structures and institutions. A theory that predisposes one to focus more upon individual freedom and development rather than the larger social reality, works in favor of maintaining that social reality. (p. 47)

The importance placed on therapy and on the almost unlimited possibilities of change in the individual, along with a rather constricted social critique, might well lead to the conclusion that *nothing is wrong with society, it is the "I" who has to change* (cf. Caplan and Nelson, 1973; Hall, 1983).

A parallel between the idolization of the "self" by humanistic psychologists and the cherishment of individualism in modern America can be easily drawn. As Lasch (1984) noted, "Rogers' own approach to therapy . . . was 'as American as apple pie'" (p. 211). The American dream is ratified by humanistic psychologists who lead individuals to believe that it is within their power to satisfy all their aspirations, regardless of adverse material and social circumstances, thus leaving the social order unaffected. "Those who believe that self-actualization will occur in a socio-economic vacuum support the status quo" (Larsen, 1986b, p. 226).

Retreatism

Another latent conservative facet of humanistic psychology is the phenomenon known as *retreatism*. This is a form of

> system maintenance by encouraging or aiding those who experience frustrations with the system to retreat into the self or into groups embracing emotional but not political expression. The clearest case is the encounter group movement, which . . . has strong elements of sociopolitical withdrawal. (Bermant and Warwick, 1978, p. 393)

Marien (1983) draws an analogy between the activities of humanistic psychologists and children playing in a sandbox. The *sandbox syndrome*, as Marien refers to it, symbolizes the area where children play without disturbing the adults, or where humanists entertain ideas of change without considering the

political complexities surrounding the sandbox. In the sandbox, humanists nurture each other and foster the belief that a better world is *inevitably* coming. This is a dangerous perception, for the "belief in a transformation that *is* happening in fact keeps it from happening" (Marien, 1983, p. 7), simply by deflecting attention from structural, material, and economic concerns.

Humanistic psychologists (e.g., Ferguson, 1983; Tageson, 1982) point with pride to the fact that industry is gradually adopting humanistic concepts and techniques. Both Ferguson (1983) and Tageson (1982) see this as evidence that a more "humane" corporate world is in the making. The introduction of T–groups and organizational development are given as examples of measures taken by management to humanize the work place. Completely absent from their analysis is the well documented argument that these stratagems serve primarily to increase productivity by conveying to workers the *illusion* of control and participation (Baritz, 1974; Prilleltensky, 1990d; Ralph, 1983; Wells, 1987). "Talking" about team work, worker participation, collaboration, etc., does not substitute for more actual control and a real redistribution of power in industry. This consequential omission led Lerner (1991) to claim, correctly, that "because Humanistic Psychology rarely discusses issues concerning class and the organization of the world of work, its prescriptions seem class-biased" (p. 183).

A rather illuminating apologetic statement of industrial capitalism is furnished by Tageson (1982) in his chapter on Eco-psychology. He poses the question "is a humanistic capitalism possible?" (p. 231). Judging from his congratulatory coverage of HP in industry Tageson would lead us to believe that a humanistic capitalism is indeed possible and that it can greatly benefit from heavy doses of HP.

The concepts of first and second order change advanced by Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974) may help clarify the uncritical attitude of HP towards the social order. According to these authors a first order change is a mere change of form that does not threat the structural configuration of the issue or situation at hand. A second order change attempts to restructure the foundations of a problem or situation, thus leading to radical transformations, not only of form but also of essence. Humanistic psychologists appear to confuse first and second order change. While their activities amount basically to first order operations, their pronouncements usually reach the level and rhetoric of second order transformations.

Belief in Global Salvation Through Self-Actualization

A reading of works by leaders of the humanist movement (e.g., Maslow, 1965, 1971, 1979; Rogers, 1967, 1972) reveals a concern for social and global issues such as alienation, war, the environment and human rights. Humanistic psychology's hope is to expand the rewarding experiences of self-actual-

ization to as many people as possible. The transition from self to communal actualization, however, may not be as simple as envisioned by humanists such as Ferguson (1983), Maslow (1971) or Rogers (1972).

The primary mode of addressing these issues is a highly individualistic one. The underlying assumption is that if we all become better individuals through self-actualization, constructive changes in the structure of society will necessarily follow. Societal conflicts are treated as if they were merely interpersonal or intrapsychic problems (cf. Van Hoorn, 1984). As Doyle (1986) observed, "humanists and psychologists . . . are addressing change at the interpersonal level of politics rather than structural change" (p. 203). Consequently, caution is recommended when predicting the humanization of society through methods whose feasibility has been chiefly proven in artificial collectives created for the purposes of self-development (Back, 1978). Such caution is doubly necessary when facing an embellished picture of the future and exaggerated claims about the ability of humanist technology to bring about an ideal state of affairs. Here is one such claim made by Rogers (1972):

> I believe that our American way of life will be radically altered by the growth of a new value system, a new culture in which feelings and subjectivity and openness (rather than hypocrisy) have a prominent place, alongside intelligence. We are going to have a new America, in my judgment, an America of change and flow, of people rather than objects. *We have the know-how, the skills, to bring about this new America* [italics added]. And now, in an increasing number of significant persons, mostly young but also older, we have the determination and the will to bring it into being. I think it is not unrealistic to believe that there will come into being a portion of the global community, residing on this North American continent, of which we will no longer be ashamed, but in which we will feel a quiet, peaceful pride. (p. 60)

Rogers' unfounded extravagant optimism is completely astonishing.

Personal accounts tend to confirm that encounter groups and humanistic therapy in general do facilitate the process of self-actualization (Lafferty, 1981). Clients report considerable improvement in the way they feel about themselves and the way they get along with others. Lafferty (1981) notes that his humanistic therapy "produced profound and highly rewarding personal results" (p. 47). These satisfying personal outcomes, however, should not be confused with, or taken as, social amelioration. The individual spiritual elation and happier general outlook on life that may be occasioned by humanistic therapy do not automatically translate into steps for a better society. This is the realm of social and political action. "Without action toward social change, humanistic psychology will remain a class psychology for upper middle class families" (Larsen, 1986b, p. 226). Hitherto, the beneficial effects of humanistic therapy appear to have been reserved for a small privileged community whose socioeconomic status affords them the luxury of seeking personal development (Campbell, 1984).

Global "salvation" through self-actualization presupposes that social relations can be changed through individualistic means *par excellence* (Nord, 1977). In other words, there is an unwarranted tendency to extrapolate from personal to global salvation.

Psychological vs. Political Power

Political power is a largely neglected issue in HP. Attitudinal changes are given much more consideration than power redistribution. As with many other issues, political power is conceptualized in psychological terms such as authoritarianism (Maslow, 1965, 1979), and therefore it can be given psychological remedies.

There is little doubt that if a consequential redistribution of resources in society is to occur, a political rather than a psychological approach to power is called for (e.g., Schwartz, 1987). When preoccupation with psychological transformations, however important they might be, divert attention from unprosperous socioeconomic realities based on inequality of political power, the result is the inadvertent strengthening of the status quo. If one is to seriously challenge Nord's assertion that "much of humanistic psychology may be too psychological to be effectively humanistic" (1977, p. 83), the consolidation of a more politically mature stance in human affairs is imperative.

Humanistic Psychology and Social Change

Humanistic psychology's attitude toward the social order is evocative of the Latin maxim *qui tacet consentit*. Yet, there are some indications that this state of affairs is slowly changing. Witness for instance recent social critiques appearing in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (e.g., Bell and Schniedewind, 1989; Shaw and Colimore, 1988). Nevertheless, if humanistic psychologists are not only to lose their political innocence but also become active agents in the advancement of human welfare, the emerging signs of political maturity must be fortified. Three progressive elements are to be pursued in order to solidify the tenuous political inroads made in HP.

Improved Appreciation of Pervasive Effects of Socioeconomic Circumstances on Self

There is a need to moderate the belief in the ability of self to transcend society. This notion may have occasioned a severe case of myopia or, to use Jacoby's expression, social amnesia (1975). There is now overwhelming evidence that adverse socioeconomic and political circumstances cause deep physical and emotional wounds (e.g., Catalano, 1991; Cereseto and Waitzkin, 1986; Elder and Caspi, 1988; Jahoda, 1988; McDowell, 1989; Mirowsky and

Ross, 1989; Rutter, 1988; Taylor, 1989). For as long as HP continues to focus on the self as its main facilitator of progress in the face of unpropitious realities, politicians may continue to use this as an excuse to pursue psychological—as opposed to material and political—cures (cf. Chomsky, 1988; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). After all, only very few exceptional individuals such as Victor Frankl can endure the most traumatic experiences and emerge with a sense of personal dignity and integrity. Most human beings are likely to be severely affected by much less taxing vicissitudes. An improved understanding of the long term effects of noxious psychosocial environments on the individual will help humanistic psychologists realize the need to invest considerable efforts at changing society.

Political Education

The publication of *Politics and Innocence* (Greening, 1986), a collection of essays on the politics of HP, has given the field the necessary impetus to explore the social repercussions of its endeavors. It is a consequential step in educating humanistic psychologists on the numerous social and ethical ramifications of their actions. There is a need now to capitalize on that accomplishment and further the understanding that meaningful improvements in the lot of a great many people will necessitate political changes. Reform in the structure of economic and political power may have to precede psychological growth if the welfare of vast sectors of the population is to improve. When helping individuals living in materially depriving and emotionally injurious environments, much more than psychological help is needed (Halpern, 1988; Prilleltensky, 1990b).

An interdisciplinary dialogue may prove fruitful for HP in its efforts to amalgamate person-oriented with system-centered paradigms. For example, preventive and therapeutic approaches that take into account the psychological as well as the social, political, and economic needs of individuals and groups have been central in community psychology for over two decades now (Heller, Price, Reinharz, Riger, and Wandersman, 1984; Levine and Perkins, 1987; Rappaport, 1977). Currently, an effective model for integrating therapeutic and social concerns is being developed by Lerner (1991) in the Institute for Labor and Mental Health in Oakland, California.

Social Betterment Through Social Action

Improved social conditions will derive neither from retreatism nor from a magic extension of the effects of self-actualization on a number of fortunate individuals. Social betterment is more likely to occur as a result of social action. This is not an easy lesson for psychologists to learn. Having been trained in

intrapsychic models, highly reflective of the prevalent individualistic cultural ethos, psychologists deal with individuals as if they were asocial entities (Sarason, 1981). Psychologists suffer from an occupational disease that inter-feres with their seeing human beings in social context, both from a diagnostic and therapeutic point of view (Albee, 1981, 1990; Caplan and Nelson, 1973; Cushman, 1990; Hall, 1983; Prilleltensky, 1989, 1990a, 1990b; Sarason, 1981, 1982, 1988). Therefore, our remedies are prescribed almost entirely in intrapsy-chic terms. As Gergen recently put it, "furnish the population with hammers of mental deficit, and the whole world needs pounding" (1990, p. 363).

Badcock (1983) discusses this proclivity in some detail. He contends that

> the psycho-therapist, social worker or social reformer, concerned only with his own clients and their grievance against society, perhaps takes a view comparable to the pri-vate citizen of Venice who concerns himself only with the safety of his own dwelling and his ability to get about the city. But if the entire republic is slowly being sub-merged, individual citizens cannot afford to ignore their collective fate because, in the end, they all drown together if nothing is done; and again, as with Venice, what needs to be done is far beyond the powers of any one individual. In such circumstances . . . the therapist can no longer afford the luxury of ignoring everything that is going on outside the consulting room. (pp. 74–75)

Conclusions

Following Maslow's conceptualization of human welfare, the fulfillment of certain basic needs precedes the attainment of higher stages of development such as self-actualization. The gratification of these primary needs depends, in turn, on social preconditions largely dictated by the structure of the social order. It is then morally imperative upon those concerned with the promo-tion of human welfare to examine the societal status quo. The appraisal of the regnant social system conducted in this article would seem to indicate that it is far from creating the minimal conditions required for the advance-ment of human welfare for society at large.

It has been argued that HP may have inadvertently contributed to the per-petuation of the status quo. To the extent that that has been the case, humanistic psychologists may have endorsed an unfavorable state of affairs. If this is to be avoided in the future, the political vision of HP will have to continue to mature at an accelerated pace.

To be sure, HP is not the only culprit of "silent consent" when it comes to supporting the social order. Several other sub-disciplines in psychology and social work, for example, adopt an uncritical stance with respect to the social order (Carniol, 1990; Prilleltensky, 1989). Most applied behavioral scientists conceptualize social problems that originate in the socioeconomic system in terms of psychological maladjustment (Hall, 1983). This thesis, captured in the title of Ryan's seminal book *Blaming the Victim* (1971), has been empiri-

cally confirmed by Caplan and Nelson (1973). Their research indicated that eighty percent of psychological studies dealing with Black Americans attributed their predicaments to some intrapersonal variable as opposed to sociohistorical circumstances such as racism or discriminatory hiring policies. Needless to say, this mentality results in changing efforts being almost exclusively directed at the individual and not at the socioeconomic conditions. For as long as psychologists and social scientists continue to neglect the simple truth that a multitude of handicapping human conditions derive from social, and not necessarily from intrapsychic or interpersonal factors (cf. Mirowsky and Ross, 1989), their contribution to human welfare will be remembered by historians as a great, unique, and missed opportunity.

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