

PART I

INTRODUCTION TO HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

In the view of humanistic psychologists there is in each and every one of us a humanity that is struggling to make itself known. However, to a lesser or greater extent this humanity does not achieve a full and wholesome expression. There are two major reasons for this. First, people are selective about those aspects of their lives they will allow themselves to look at and, second, they fail to see the true meaning of their experience and misinterpret it. The society or culture in which people live plays an active role in encouraging both selection and misinterpretation. It does this, particularly in the early years of childhood, by providing the terms and conditions under which experience is to be interpreted. In other words society, especially in the form of family members, provides the socially sanctioned ideas with which to make sense of experience. This sense, at least to some extent, will not be in line with a person's humanity.

Understanding the nature of a person's present experience has been a major aim of humanistic psychologists. They take the view that if people were allowed to flourish and mature in an ideal environment, the meaning given to experience would be free from error and would represent accurately the realities

of who they are and the realities of the world in which they live. Since ideal environments obviously do not exist, this does not happen. As each person grows up there are a number of influences that create psychological biases of various kinds that affect which aspects of experience will be acknowledged and how they will be interpreted.

In spite of this humanistic psychologists firmly believe that there is a motivating force at work in everyone that constantly encourages positive change. Once the circumstances are right to see clearly, the individual will choose to move in the direction of psychological maturity and become more mentally healthy. The humanity and humanitarian values inherent in each person will then come to the fore and will naturally and spontaneously guide all thought and feeling.

The two most influential proponents of the humanistic perspective have been Carl Rogers (1902–1987) and Abraham Maslow (1908–1970). Rogers pioneered a form of therapy which makes an extensive examination of experience possible. This therapy, which was originally called client-centred (Rogers, 1951) but is now referred to as person-centred therapy (Thorne, 1991), is explained in Chapter 1. It is a means by which a client can discover within his or her private world the biases which falsify experience, which rob it of authenticity and which contribute in a significant manner to the development of psychological problems.

A person's self-image significantly influences the meaning given to experience. Rogers saw the kinds of change that took place in therapy as inextricably linked with changes in how a person regarded his or her 'self'. Progress was accompanied by the dawning recognition that certain beliefs about the self were false or inaccurate. Problems associated with the self-image and how it can change are presented in Chapter 2.

There are two primary aspects to Maslow's work. Initially he carried out extensive studies of mentally healthy people, an area of work that surprisingly few psychologists have been interested in. Some of the results of Maslow's studies are

described in Chapter 4, along with some of Rogers' ideas on what has come to be known as *positive* mental health.

From the results of his studies Maslow drew certain conclusions about the nature of motivation. His theory of motivation subsequently became and continues to be highly influential. It is explained in Chapter 3, with particular reference to its implications for child and adult development. Also presented in this chapter is a more recent theory (Csikszentmihayli, 1992) examining a form of motivation that is compatible with Maslow's ideas about psychological growth.