

Humanistic Theory versus Social Cognition and  
Their Applicability in a Supervisory Role

Allen Ben-Harush

May 2009

PSYC 3130: Educational Psychology for Teachers of Adults

Valdosta State University

### Abstract

Several learning theories proposed by psychological visionaries have been compared to and contrasted with each other since their inception. Two such theories, humanistic theory and the social cognitive theory, are theories associable to office and corporate environments.

Conducting a comparison of these two theories and noting their applicability to a workplace environment in a supervisory role is the basis for the following report. To understand the comparison to the fullest extent, however, a definition of the diversity of office personnel must be performed in conjunction with the notation of specific contextual principles and activities.

Lastly, a discussion regarding the implementation of these principles in the relative environment finishes the topic.

### Humanistic Theory versus Social Cognition and Their Applicability in a Supervisory Role

Humanistic and the social cognitive theory are two theories that I find to be extremely applicable to a person in an educational field. To understand fully what the two theories have to offer is something that I think an instructor or professor must undergo prior to entering any field specific to education. However, one issue not really noted is that these theories (and all of the other learning theories as well), in my opinion, can be applied contextually to an office or corporate environment. A thorough examination of the compared and contrasted traits of humanistic theory and social cognition in their applicability to a corporate environment and usage in a supervisory role is what encompasses this presentation.

For the environment relevant to this paper, I will be working as a Human Resource representative in any hypothetical office building for a corporation not named. The employees are my “students,” and the material to be taught is Human Resource Development, soft skills, and upgrading workplace performance. To understand the type of adult learners an office environment has in it, a person must fully understand the basic principles of adult education, as portrayed best by Malcolm Knowles.

Knowles’s philosophies are described by Smith’s (2002) biography of Knowles. He (as written in Knowles, 1984) discusses five traits descriptive of adult learners: their self concept, their experience, their readiness to learn, their orientation to learning, and finally, their motivation to learn. People working in an office may or may not be actively pursuing any sort of educative experience, but I believe that education is a constant revolution of the mind and occurs internally. The diversity of the different variations of office environments is similar to that of the contents of a jar of jelly beans. Even more diverse, the people working in the environments characterize this description of adult learners because of their ages.

The people in these offices are no different than you and me. I think that Lieb's (1991) characteristics of these adults in these hypothetical offices are quite spot on. He discusses how these adult learners are autonomous and self directed; how their motivation to learn is inclined by a contextual practicality and relevance to goals. They will most likely have a latent penchant for learning, whether it be training for the job or having a mental change about something brought about because of a recent experience. I agree whole-heartedly with these descriptions, because through my own experiences, I have found that the tendency of people to personify these traits happen quite often. These adults will most likely learn new skills about human interaction because of working in an atmosphere like this, and I think that the perception for "student learning" is thrown out for terminology appropriate to an office environment: training and briefing.

### **Humanistic Theory**

Seeded into Knowles's philosophies of adult learning, humanistic theory's primary focuses are peoples' needs, self-concept/esteem, and values (Huitt, 2006, May). Edwords (as cited in Huitt, 2001) describes humanism as "a school of thought that believes human beings are different from other species and possess capacities not found in animals." What this tells me is that people have feelings and their feelings dictate their learning beliefs. If a person has a low self-esteem, then he or she will not follow well in an educative capacity. The instructor or professor must make sure to assess the classroom environment's atmosphere prior to continuing the material. Concisely speaking, asking a student, "are you ok?" or, "what's wrong?" may fix a wholesome esteem defect and assist with better material absorption and implementation.

I think that people are capable of listening and learning better by how their perception is maintained of other individuals (discussed later regarding social cognition). This is most likely

relevant to the workplace. I think that an educator should exemplify humanistic ideals to be fully effective. Bieler (2006), who is a proponent for career skills and bettering people in the workplace, states, “Don’t try to make others conform to all of your ideas and you will earn new friends and respect” (p.49). Practically speaking, static ways of education versus facilitation of learning is probably the best route for maximum educative quality. Gage and Berliner (as cited in Huitt, 2001) discuss five humanistic objectives to education as described by which are to promote autonomy, develop responsibility for learned material, develop creativity and curiosity, and finally, expressing an interest in artistic endeavors. Keep note of that last objective, as I will brief it later in the similarities of the two theories.

Professors, instructors, and teachers of adult learners should follow the humanistic education activities reviewed by Huitt (2001). Consistent with humanistic ideals, the following teacher methods seem tangible enough to make a difference to a student’s perception of the learning environment, but not concrete enough so they become static. These methods also show the complex nature of humanistic theory versus the social cognition aspect which will be discussed next. The suggestions are:

1. Allow the student to have a choice in the selection of tasks and activities whenever possible.
2. Help students learn to set realistic goals.
3. Have students participate in group work, especially cooperative learning, in order to develop social and affective skills.
4. Act as a facilitator for group discussions when appropriate.
5. Be a role model for the attitudes, beliefs and habits you wish to foster. Constantly work on becoming a better person and then share yourself with your students.

As described, allowing students to make choices shows a great deal of consideration for the students' feelings and attitudes. Goals are not assigned to the students, but rather developed from their own interests. One last thing, Dunn (2000) discusses Carl Rogers's facilitative learning theory (a model of teaching tied to humanistic theory), where an instructor is primarily a facilitator to student learning—and creates an environment for learning that emphasizes the students' interests and their experiences (cited in Laird, 1985). Once again, I think this clearly makes the connection with the environment, adult learning, and focus of self-direction.

### **Social Cognition**

Whereas humanistic theory focuses on the feelings of the individual, social cognition also includes a person's previous experience, knowledge, and expectations—but in a social aspect (Huitt, 2006). Huitt states that social cognition is best exemplified by use of a study group (group being the key word), uses the participant's experiences to reflect on acquisition of education; also, contrary to humanistic theory, social cognition does not take into consideration whether the learning activity was obtained through comfortable means. Because of its roots seated deeply in the social atmosphere, social cognition seems to characterize the culture surrounding itself and is based through the application of experiences through said culture.

Huitt (2006) wrote that social cognition was how people recognized their independent thought under the assumption that other people influenced it. I think the primary difference between humanistic theory and social cognition is that humanistic theory affirms a person's self-needs, whereas social cognition is related to a person's thoughts with the influence of others, either in a group or society, that surrounds that person.

Huitt (2004) described one of Albert Bandura's most well-known experiments regarding children and observational behavior (which is connected to a social context) in an article he

wrote to show that societal factors do come into play with methodologies of education. Four principle steps to observational learning regarding Bandura's findings in the "Bobo Doll" experiments (as cited in Huitt) are listed as:

1. Attention -- the individual notices something in the environment.
2. Retention -- the individual remembers what was noticed.
3. Reproduction -- the individual produces an action that is a copy of what was noticed.
4. Motivation -- the environment delivers a consequence that changes the probability the behavior will be emitted again (reinforcement and punishment).

What the study ultimately explained to observers of its theories was that children are impacted to a degree by observing an external stimulus. Although the children awarded versus those that were not are not terribly different from each other statistically, the experiment did show that children were impacted by observational behavior if punishment was observed. This social learning experiment attempts to delve into the complicated hypotheses that theorists had at the time regarding social psychology. If a humanistic experiment like this were to have taken place instead, then the big question most likely would have been whether the children felt that their needs were contingent on abusing the doll or not.

Lastly, I think it is necessary to briefly discuss some of Vygotsky's inputs regarding the social world and its relation to cognitive development. Alpay (2003) wrote that, "The social world as defined by Vygotsky considers not only the interpersonal interactions between, say, a student and teacher, or student and peer, but also the broader socio-cultural and historical influences on learning and the learning environment" (p. 1). The focus here is that Alpay wrote about Vygotsky's theory based on student psychological characteristics defined from a given

social situation. Another important factor of Vygotsky's theory in relation to social cognition is the impact language (culture/society) has on cognitive development. A good example is the prolific nature of Ebonics in the black community. The development of cognition in the practitioners of the language is heavily guided by the usage of high value figures in society, culture itself, and other factors relevant to its spread. These are all things that might be parallel to that of humanistic theory only in specific situations, but we now know that the defining line between the two theories is the importance of feelings and self (humanistic theory) versus the importance of development on the basis of external factors and influence (social cognition). The two theories reside in different psychological domains as well, the affective and the cognitive for humanism and social cognition respectively.

### **Similarities**

Social cognition and humanistic theory are different in terms of some basic assumptions and focus, but similar in a few ways. Before, I discussed how humanistic educators want students to develop an interest in artistic endeavors, and I can see this objective going hand-in-hand with the influential properties of language and personal interaction in a society. The needs of the individual can be directly related to an outside influential factor of that individual, and these two principles cause the juxtaposition of the humanistic and social cognitive theories. Another thing noted is self-efficacy and its relation to personal goals (Huitt, 2006). Personal goals are one of the main properties of humanistic theory (Huitt, 2001). When Huitt (2006) discussed Bandura's theory of reciprocal determinism, I personally think that humanistic theory can also be described with the social aspect as well. For example, a person's goals and needs may be directly impacted by and have an impact on an outside source: like winning the Nobel Peace Prize for curing cancer.

### **Principles and Activities**

The principles previously discussed regarding the two theories can be contextually used in the office environment in a supervisory role. I believe that supervisors in the workforce need to educate their subordinates to better express themselves and show individualism. This may be tied to their personal needs or self-image and its enhancement. Being involved in humanistic theory by expanding the emphasis on the roles of the needs of the employees should be a primary concern in the job market primarily because, in my opinion, as times progress, people want a focus on themselves as “people” versus “tools.” I can understand this.

I also believe that another tool used by employers with today’s workforce is an open appreciation for the various cultures in that specific environment. A good example of how employers can do this is to have a “culture day” or show appreciation for Black, Hispanic, or Women’s Heritage Months to get a feeling of culture equality out in the work place. Chevalier (2007) notes a couple of other activities for human resource development:

- Reinforce the employee’s feelings of self-worth and self-esteem while recognizing the employee’s positive performance and willingness to improve.
- Maintain a positive work environment where your employees believe they have an opportunity every day. (p. 50)

Obviously, as this previous example has shown, *books* can be written on specific activities that employers can utilize to enhance a usage of these principles in the workplace.

### **Conclusions**

The previous examples regarding humanistic and cognitive theory have been made into a contextual scenario properly showing the importance and relevance of the theories in today’s

world. If employers could actively instruct employees on these techniques and train Human Resource Development teams on the proper institution of them as well, then I believe that massive change could be seen in the morale and welfare of employees. Speaking from personal experience, I think that employees' personal goals and self-assessed needs have been tossed aside from improper employers to often these days. A good example is the basic display of emotions in the movie *Office Space*.

I understand that programs have been developed and implemented in corporate or office America, books have been written on bettering employed life in atmospheres like these, and lastly, training and education improved on the benefits of actively employing principles related to these two theories (which have probably gone unnamed in the training sessions themselves). The main goal of employers should be to continue the expansion of employee satisfaction by enhancing a program to develop them in a contextual manner to whatever the specific job that they are doing is. If this is relevant to the employment of principles of these two theories, then so be it.

## References

- Alpay, E. (2003). *The contribution of Vygotsky's theory to our understanding of the relation between the social world and cognitive development*. London, UK: Imperial College of Science, Technology, and Medicine. Retrieved March 2009, from [http://www.imperial.ac.uk/chemicalengineering/common\\_room/files/PsychEd\\_5.pdf](http://www.imperial.ac.uk/chemicalengineering/common_room/files/PsychEd_5.pdf).
- Bieler, B. J. (2006). *Powerful steps: 10 essential career skills and business strategies for the workplace warrior*. Phoenix, AZ: Little Falls Press.
- Chevalier, R. (2007). *A manager's guide to improving workplace performance*. New York: Amacom.
- Dunn, L. (2000). *Theories of learning*. Oxford, UK: Oxford Brookes University. Retrieved March 2009, from [http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2\\_learnth/theories.html](http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2_learnth/theories.html)
- Huitt, W. (2001). Humanism and open education. *Educational Psychology Interactive*. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University. Retrieved March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009, from <http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/topics/affsys/humed.html>
- Huitt, W. (2004). Observational (social) learning: An overview. *Educational Psychology Interactive*. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University. Retrieved March 2009, from <http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/topics/socog/soclrn.html>
- Huitt, W. (2006). Social cognition. *Educational Psychology Interactive*. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University. Retrieved March 2009, from <http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/topics/socog/socog.html>
- Huitt, W. (2006, May). Summary of theories relating to learning and development. *Educational Psychology Interactive*. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University. Retrieved March 2009, from <http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/topics/summary/lrndev.html>

Lieb, S. (1991). *Principles of adult learning*. Article from Vision, retrieved online March 2009,

from

<http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/adults->

[2.htm](http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/adults-2.htm)

Smith, M. K. (2002). Malcolm Knowles, informal adult education, self-direction and andragogy.

*The encyclopedia of informal education*, retrieved March 2009, from

<http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-knowl.htm>