

## **Culturally Relative Self-Actualization for the Person of Today: A Precis for *Empowering Children: A Multicultural Humanistic Approach***

Christopher J. Kazanjian, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Educational Psychology, El Paso Community College

[ckazanji@epcc.edu](mailto:ckazanji@epcc.edu)

*Abstract:* Growth-promoting relationships are more relevant than ever in a post-pandemic world. This precis of *Empowering Children: A Multicultural Humanistic Approach* (2021), explores the phenomenon of growth-promoting relationships through a multicultural humanistic psychological after-school program called Kidz n' Coaches. This program seeks to facilitate the culturally relative self-actualization processes of volunteer college student Coaches and emerging children through group activities. The author also synthesizes humanistic psychology and multiculturalism into a multicultural humanistic psychology paradigm, where the consilience approach allows for a more relevant approach to the diverse human needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Keywords: Humanistic psychology, multiculturalism, after-school, self-actualization, phenomenology

### **Introduction: Encountering a Multicultural Humanistic Psychologist**

Self-actualization, social and emotional intelligence, and cultural competencies are trending topics in today's interconnecting world of psychology, education, and human development. I wondered, are these topics instances of a discourse actualizing its potentials through scaffolding research or are they trendy pop-psychologies used for instant gratification. Regardless of my curiosities, in 2011, I began my dissertation research on an after-school program in Utica, New York called Kidz n' Coaches.

I took interest in Kidz n' Coaches because it was created and facilitated by Mohawk Valley Community College (MVCC) professor of psychology, James D. Smrtic—whom I admired as my first undergraduate psychology professor. His approach to the psychology curriculum seemed to be more *human* than my previous encounters. Prof. Smrtic created Kidz n' Coaches to be an after-school program where concerned college student volunteers design and facilitate group activities for emerging children to support their culturally relative self-actualization processes. Ten to fifteen volunteer Coaches engage fifteen to twenty emerging children for two hours a month, eight times a year. Events are held on the MVCC campus or within the community; they range from noncompetitive sports to crafts, from field trips to museums and even plays. Through interviews with Prof. Smrtic about his methodological design, I was introduced to the field of

humanistic psychology. Exploring the library at New Mexico State University, I found the worlds of Carl Rogers, Clark Moustakas, Charlotte Bühler, and Abraham Maslow. Inspired by their revolutionary mindsets for unshackling the person from determinisms, fatalisms, and pessimisms of other psychological models, I was inspired by the potentials of the person. I realized that an intense reading of these works revealed that self-actualization, social and emotional intelligence, and cultural competencies, were not new topics, but had a deep history and an even richer praxis through these humanists.

In the most clichéd way possible, everything old became new again as I studied and participated in Kidz n' Coaches, because I realized that this program not only adhered to the original intent of humanistic psychology, but developed self-actualization, social and emotional intelligence, and cultural competencies out of its humanist roots. Kidz n' Coaches is a 21<sup>st</sup> century humanistic psychology—where self-actualization became culturally relative, social and emotional intelligences were expanded, and cultural competencies became multicultural humility.

*Empowering Children: A Multicultural Humanistic Approach* (2021) is a book that not only chronicles my experiences with Kidz n' Coaches, but also uncovers the intellectualism and life of the artist of a multicultural humanistic psychological program, James D. Smrtic. Since 1983, Prof. Smrtic built a program for community college students to learn how to become facilitators of human growth via the power of growth-promoting relationships. The children, roughly between six and twelve years of age were recruited from the Utica Municipal Housing Authority at the Culver Avenue Apartment Complex near the MVCC campus. What is unique about Kidz n' Coaches and Utica, is that the Resource Center for Refugees, better known as The Center, has a 200-year history of resettling refugees and immigrants from around the world. Many of these families (and especially children) came to live at the Culver Avenue Apartments. When someone studies the history of Kidz n' Coaches, it must be done from a global perspective, as emerging children from around the world came to be part of the group.

### **Children Emerging: A Humanistic Foundation**

Emerging is a humanistic psychological term that frees the child from stigmas and determinisms, labels, or categories. Prof. Smrtic chose the term so that the Coaches could see potential in each child and the greater group. The profile of the emerging child has diversified from 1983—as waves of refugees from Uganda, Bosnia, and Somalia have come to settle in Utica. Kidz n' Coaches was not intended to be a resettlement program, nor did it create educational agendas or place limitations on what the program should be. Rather, Prof. Smrtic decided to allow the tenets of humanistic psychology to guide the methodology and utilize human diversity to support self-actualization processes.

My study of Kidz n' Coaches continued after my doctorate as I set up a sister program in El Paso, aptly named: Kidz n' Coaches-El Paso. In this program, we enabled the Prof. Smrtic's original humanistic intent. However, our population of emerging children were Latinx youth, many of whom immigrated from Mexico and Latin America. As I facilitated the program in El Paso, and observed the one in Utica, I began to realize something about Kidz n' Coaches' methodology. A new humanism was before me, one that was beyond research parameters, conceptual framework, or lecture—it was a living humanism that was actualizing potentials in the lived moment.

### **An Infinity of Traces: Phenomenology**

I decided to implement a phenomenological case study of Kidz n' Coaches-El Paso and reveal the invariant qualities of the phenomenon of growth-promoting relationships. *Empowering Children: A Multicultural Humanistic Approach* (2021) became this phenomenological exploration of what it means to experience culturally relative self-actualization within growth-promoting relationships. In Chapter 1, titled “After-school Multicultural Humanistic Psychology,” I explore the biography of Prof. Smrtic as a means to reveal the inner workings of a multicultural humanistic psychologist. In Chapter 2, “Multicultural Humanistic Psychology,” I investigate how communities around the United States are diversifying in cultural, economic, and political ways due to the forces of hyper-globalization, and readers begin to appreciate interdependent nature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To effectively engage and actualize the potentials of diverse societies, I argue that we need to fuse the tenets of humanistic psychology and multiculturalism to create a *multicultural humanistic psychology*. This chapter takes readers through current topics in both fields, such as privilege, cultural blindness, and the recent sects of humanistic psychology that have branched off from its roots. One important aspect of Chapter 2 is that children and college students need to develop a sense of cultural humility to succeed in the hyper-connecting world. Cultural humility is where the person “walks humbly with their cultural values and acknowledges their limitations and privileges within their cultural paradigm, while seeking to build empowering relationships with those of different cultural paradigms” (p. 36). Chapter 2 also redefines self-actualization within a multicultural paradigm. Culturally relative self-actualization is “the fulfillment or transcendence of a person's needs within the function and definition of a cultural paradigm, that helps the person to actualize potentialities of either the conception of a self and/or group/community to bring about growth-promoting meanings and capabilities defined by the cultural paradigm” (p. 42). This update to Abraham Maslow's conception is necessary in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as humanism acknowledges its Western biases and transforms itself by incorporating other world paradigms.

*Empowering Children: A Multicultural Humanistic Approach* (2021) addresses the needs of both humanistic psychology and multicultural communities. Both fields share similar challenges and will be lesser without the other field in overcoming them. However, this book is more than just a

new synthesized conceptual framework. Rather, through Kidz n' Coaches in both Utica and El Paso, the reader begins to understand the praxis of multicultural humanistic psychology. Prof. Smrtic knew that ideas were ineffective if they stayed in books or classrooms—they must be enacted and touch the lives of people. Of course, Kidz n' Coaches has experienced many challenges that they were unable to overcome, but it is a learning methodology that seeks to learn from the diverse people it serves. Readers will follow Prof. Smrtic through his thirty years of developing the program and learn about community college Coaches, emerging children, and the growing city of Utica.

Part II of *Empowering Children: A Multicultural Humanistic Approach* (2021) is titled “Multicultural Humanistic Psychology on the Border: Kidz n' Coaches-El Paso.” In this final chapter, I delve into the current research regarding displaced and immigrant Latinx youth, and the neurobiological consequences of stress, anxiety, and cultural estrangement. I also review the current discourse for social and emotional learning, empathy, and inequities in schooling for Latinx populations. This information frames the phenomenological inquiry of growth-promoting relationships in Kidz n' Coaches-El Paso. At the end of the study, readers encounter the pure descriptions of invariant qualities, such as *seeing*, *communication*, *relationship/encounter*, *sincere play*, and *freedom to be*.

## **Conclusion**

*Empowering Children: A Multicultural Humanistic Approach* (2021) reveals a multicultural humanistic after-school program designed to help youth and college students in their processes toward culturally relative self-actualization. However, the pandemic due to Covid-19 (SARS-CoV-2) has made schools cancel after-school gatherings until further notice, Kidz n' Coaches-El Paso included. Many children will be left alone and miss opportunities to form growth-promoting relationships, self-actualize, and learn about their potentials amongst caring others. Conversely, Kidz n' Coaches is a multicultural humanistic psychology praxis that adapts to uncertainty and the changing nature of our world. *Empowering Children: A Multicultural Humanistic* (2021) is a book that reveals a history of people determining the meaning of uncertainty by reaching out and helping others actualize human potentials. As for now, Kidz n' Coaches-El Paso will seek to engage children and college students in multicultural humanistic group activities through virtual or online environments, never giving up on the need or the beauty of growth-promoting encounters.

For more information, please visit [Routledge.com](https://www.routledge.com) and search:

*Empowering Children: A Multicultural Humanistic Approach*. ISBN: 978-0-367-49452-0

