Abraham Maslow, Humanistic Psychologist (1908-1970)

Abraham Maslow has been described as the founder of "humanistic psychology." Unlike many psychologists who conceive of psychology as the study of the mentally ill, he aimed to develop a *positive psychology* that investigates the causes, not of mental illness, but of mental health. Maslow concluded that psychological health in human beings is achieved by a *prioritized* fulfillment of human needs, which he specifies in his famous "*hierarchy of needs*," that, when successfully completed, *can* result in *self-actualization* (a complete actualization of one's potentialities). Over the course of his career, he taught at the *Alliant International University*, *Brandeis University*, *Brooklyn College*, the *New School for Social Research* and *Columbia University*. He authored many important books and articles, but his book, *Towards a Psychology of Being*, has become a standard text in psychology curriculums around the world. In 1961, with Anthony Sutich, he founded the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, which is still in operation today. His 1967 lecture, later adopted as the title of a book, "The Farther Reaches of Human Nature," is recognized as a seminal work in the creation of "transpersonal psychology." In 1969, with Stanislav Grof and Anthony Sutich, he initiated the publication of the first issue of *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, a journal still in operation today. In 1967, he was named *Humanist of the Year* by the *World Humanist Association*.[1] A survey conducted by the *Review of General Psychology* in 2002 ranked Maslow as the tenth most cited psychologist of the 20th century.[2]

Biography

Maslow, the oldest of seven children, was born in 1908 in Brooklyn, New York. His parents, first generation Jewish immigrants from *Kiev* (now Ukraine but part of Russia at the time) had fled Czarist persecution in the early 20th century. His parents were poor, but they valued education. Maslow grew up with few friends on the tough streets of Brooklyn where he faced persecution from anti-Semitic gangs who assaulted and abused him.[3] Things were no better at home. He had a very tense relationship with his mother who he saw as stingy, selfish, sloppy, loveless, narcissistic, dogmatic, exploitative and racially prejudiced, especially against black people. He describes one occasion when he laid his prized collection of 78 rpm records, one of his few treasures at the time, on the floor, and when, in response to his mother's command, he did not pick them up fast enough, she smashed them with her heel. On another occasion, when his mother found two stray kittens that he had brought home and hid in the basement so that he could feed them, she dashed their heads against the wall, killing them in front of him.[4] Possessed of a natural kind disposition, he escaped to the world of libraries and books. He went to *Boys*

High School, one of the top high schools in Brooklyn, where he served as the officer for many academic clubs, became editor of the *Latin Magazine*, and edited *Principia*, the school's physics, for a year. Believing that physical strength was an essential part of manliness, he attempted to develop his physique with weightlifting, but with little success. His unhappy childhood was a major part of his determination to strive for an idealistic world of widespread education and economic justice.[5]

Education

After high school, Maslow attended the *City College of New York* in 1926, working on an undergraduate degree during the day and taking legal studies classes at night. He became dissatisfied and transferred to *Cornell University* but dropped out after one semester due to poor grades and high costs. He returned to the *City College* and later went on to graduate school at the *University of Wisconsin-Madison* to study psychology. It was during this time, in 1928, that, against the wishes of his parents, he married his first cousin Bertha, who was still in high school at the time. They had two daughters. Maslow has stated that his life only began with his marriage to Bertha and his intensive graduate studies. At the *University of Wisconsin*, he studied primate dominance and sexuality. His early orientation was experimentalist-behaviorist with a strong positivist mindset. He was awarded a Master's Degree in the summer of 1931 for his thesis on "learning, retention, and reproduction of verbal material" but was so ashamed of his thesis that he removed it from the psychology library and tore out its category listing so that no one could see it. However, Professor Cason admired the thesis so much that he encouraged Maslow to submit it for publication and it was published as two articles in 1934. Maslow continued his research at *Columbia University* where he was influenced by the famous psychologist Alfred Adler. From 1937 to 1951 he was on the faculty at *Brooklyn College*. During these years, influenced by the horrors of the 2nd World War, he began to develop his ideas about self-actualization. His studied under the supervision of the distinguished anthropologist Ruth Benedict and the distinguished *Gestalt*-psychologist Max Wertheimer, both of whom he admired both personally and professionally. Seeing them as "such wonderful human beings" inspired him to take notes on the way they lived and use them as models for his ideals of a self-actualized person.[6] It was also during this period that he developed his concepts of a hierarchy of needs, meta-needs, meta-motivation, self-actualizing persons, and peak experiences. He was a professor at *Brandeis University* from 1951 to 1969 before moving to the *Laughlin Institute* in California. Believing that the organization should develop a movement organically without a leader, he turned down an invitation in 1963 to become the president of the *Association for Humanistic Psychology*. After a life devoted to the furtherance of human happiness, while jogging in Menlo Park, California in 1970, he died at the age of 62 of a massive heart attack.

Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow saw human needs as ordered in a hierarchy of 5 basic levels. The lowest level is Physiological (food, breathing, water, sleep, sex). The next higher level is Safety (security of

body, employment, resources, family, health, property). The next higher level is Love/Belonging (friendship, family, sexual *intimacy*). The next higher level is Esteem (self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect by others). The highest level is Self-actualization (morality, creativity, spontaneity, lack of prejudice, problem solving). The first four (lower) levels concern "Deficit needs" (D-needs) because they involve the satisfaction of lacks in one's life. Satisfying D-needs results in contentment but does not motivate beyond itself, e.g., achieving sufficient food does not motivate one to write poetry. However, one must satisfy the lower D-needs before one can move on to the next higher levels, e.g., the physiological needs before safety, safety before love, and so on. If one ascends all the way to the top level one can achieve self-actualization, characterized by autonomy, creativity and self-motivation. There are certain social conditions, freedom of speech, freedom to express oneself, and the freedom to seek new information that must be present if one is to fulfill the basic needs. It is worth noting that the famous pyramid of needs associated with Maslow was not produced by himself but, perhaps, by a psychology textbook to give pictorial representation of his views, and, though a useful heuristic tool, may represent the ascent up the hierarchy as more rigid and mechanical than Maslow intended.[7] From the beginning, Maslow understood that there is a certain fluidity in satisfying the needs at the various levels. Further, he revised his views about the hierarchy in his later writings.[8] Maslow's views about the hierarchy of needs have also had considerable influence on theories of education, consumer behavior and business management.

Self-Actualization

Self-actualization is the fullest possible use of one's talents and interests. The self-actualizing person is highly individualistic, "sovereign and inviolable," and possesses their own tastes, opinions, and values.[9] Such a person is "reality centered" and able to distinguish the fraudulent from the genuine.[10] Faced with a problem, they try to find solutions, not complain. They are happy alone but can also have healthy personal relationships. They are spontaneous and creative. Maslow coined the term "*meta-motivation*" to describe the motivation to strive beyond the scope of one's basic needs in order to reach one's full potential. Maslow based his conclusions both on his own personal experience but also on case studies of people he believed to be self-actualized, including scientist Albert Einstein and poet/essayist/philosopher Henry David Thoreau. To the extent that someone achieves self-actualization, they acquire a positive productive relation to reality. To the extent that they fail to do so, they have limited external relationships, only develop internal awareness, and cultivate hostile feelings toward the world.

Peak Experiences

In his 1964 book *Religion, Values, and Peak Experiences*, Maslow described *peak experiences*, which have been associated with religious and mystical experiences, as "moments of highest happiness and fulfillment." Peak experiences represent the very highest level of self-actualization, achieved, perhaps, by very few, the "private lonely, personal illumination, revelation, or ecstasy of some acutely sensitive prophet or seer."[11] Maslow concluded, as a result

of his research (consisting in interviews and questionnaires), that common triggers for peak experiences are music, creative work, scientific knowledge, introspection, nature, sex, and art.

Transpersonal Psychology

Maslow's 1967 lecture, "The Farther Reaches of Human Nature," is credited with having outlined a "*fourth-force*" psychology, to complement the existing three forces, behaviorism, humanistic psychology, and psychoanalysis. In the following year he was among a group who announced transpersonal psychology" as a "fourth-force" in psychology. Transpersonal psychology is concerned with those states of consciousness, or ultimate potentials, that go beyond the ego or personal self, including *self-transcendence*, *unitive experiences*, and the *spiritual*. Thus, Maslow helped to bring phenomena, formerly assigned to religion or mysticism, and phenomena often associated with Asian philosophies and religions, under psychological investigation.

Criticisms

Maslow's hierarchy of needs has been criticized for his assumption that human needs are *universal*. For example, it has been argued that Maslow incorrectly assumes that Asian populations possess the same prioritized hierarchy of needs as Western populations. More generally, Maslow does not sufficiently allow for cultural differences. Further, whereas Maslow places the social needs on the third level from the bottom, it appears that the satisfaction of *all* needs may require *some* kind of social interaction (a baby and her mother). Maslow also gives the impression that once needs are satisfied one can go on to the next level when, in fact, one must continuously satisfy basic needs throughout one's life. Further, Maslow's psychology has been criticized as unscientific (although, at the same time, many people report that Maslow's hierarchy captures something they see in themselves and others).[12] Since it is difficult to define what constitutes the satisfaction of a need, it is difficult to specify precisely when one can move from the satisfaction of one level of needs to the satisfaction of needs at the next higher level. Empirical studies on Maslow's hierarchy, for example, in the area of consumer behavior, have been mixed, sometimes supportive and sometimes not.

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Note: There is an extensive list of Maslow's publications and various secondary materials, including audio recordings, at http://www.maslow.com

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[1] *The American Humanist*. Humanist of the Year Awards. URL: https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/humanist-of-the-year-awards/

[2] *American Psychological Association*. Eminent Psychologists of the 20th Century. URL: https://www.apa.org/monitor/julaug02/eminent

[3] Hoffman, *The Right to be Human*, p. 9

[4] These two stories are reported in Hoffman, *The Right to be Human*, pp 7-8

[5] Hoffman, "Abraham Maslow: A biographer's reflections," pp. 439-443

[6] Hoffman, "Abraham Maslow: a biographer's reflection," pp. 439-443

[7] A standard representation of Maslow's "pyramid of needs can be found in Neel Burton's article in *Psychology Today*.

[8] Koltko-Rivera, "Rediscovering the Later Version," p. 302ff

[9] Aron, "Maslow's Other Child," p. 13

[10] MacDonald, *Deceptions, Distractions, Illusions*, p. 40

[11] McDaniel, *Lost Ecstasy*, p. 273

[12] Abulof, "Introduction: Why We Need Maslow," pp. 508-9