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## “MISINTERPRETATIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS OF MASLOW’S THEORY”

Abraham Maslow's theory of self-actualization has had significant impact upon both social science scholars and upon those involved in the human services. Although no one person founded humanistic and transpersonal psychology, Maslow was the central figure in the birth of what he labelled third force (humanistic) and fourth force (transpersonal) psychology. Even critics have often found Maslow's theory "the most sophisticated, challenging and important of the self-actualization theories", a theory which is "subtle, challenging, and rich in insight" 1). Scholars have widely applied Maslow's theory to the understanding of industrial management, religious behavior, teacher effectiveness, student behavior, family life, counselor effectiveness, alcoholism and numerous other topics 2). This author has even applied Maslow's theory to understanding and measuring the health and decadence of entire civilizations 3). Although Maslow did not coin the term self-actualization 4), he is the individual most identified with this now globally used term. The word has become commonplace in the mass media and to the general public. As the popularity of Maslow's theory spread, a variety of misconceptions about the theory have developed. These misconceptions and misinterpretations have sometimes led scholars to make undeserved attacks upon the theory. Unless these misconceptions are corrected, a most useful and promising theory will be rendered impotent and misleading.

### MASLOW'S THEORY

Self-actualization theory is a theory of innate human needs and of human motivation. It is a theory well supported by research and the degree of self-actualization can be measured scientifically 5). According to Maslow, each individual has particular innate needs which must be basically satisfied before a person can become self-actualizing, i.e., to be a fully developed and most complete person. The self-actualized person is the most mentally healthy individual. These innate needs form a hierarchy (See Figure 1). The bottom four needs are the basic needs. At the very bottom of the hierarchy are the physiological needs. The physiological needs must be mostly satisfied before the individual can properly satisfy the next highest

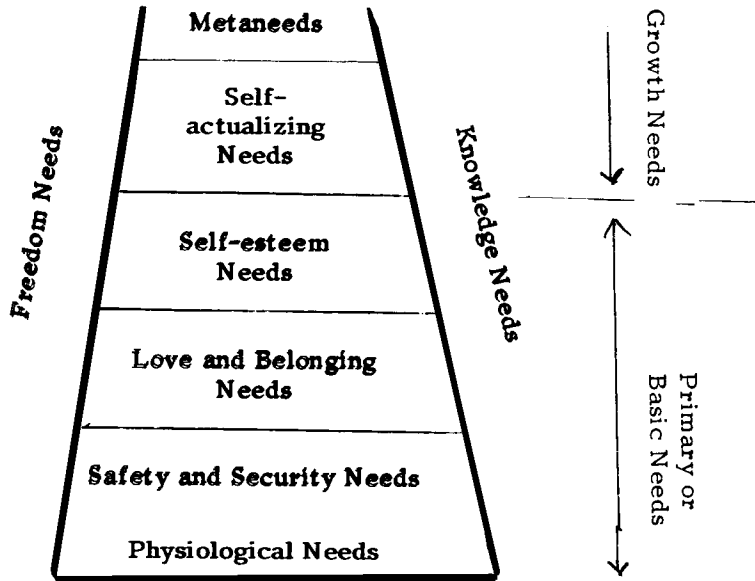


Figure 1

needs, the safety and security needs. Once safety and security needs are satisfied, belongingness and love needs become most urgent. Then come the esteem needs. Maslow labelled a human need a basic need if (1) its absence breeds illness; (2) its presence prevents illness; (3) its restoration cures illness; (4) under certain (very complex) free choice situations, it is preferred by the deprived person over other satisfactions; (5) it is found to be inactive, at a low ebb, or functionally absent in the healthy person. The basic needs are defined as follows: (1) **Physiological needs.** Examples of physiological needs would be food, water, sleep, and exercise. (2) **Safety and security needs.** Safety and security needs include freedom from fear, physical violence, and abuse. (3) **Belongingness and love needs.** These needs include the needs for friendship, love and a sense of rootedness. (4) **Esteem needs.** These include the needs for a positive self-concept and respect from others.

Following the basic needs are the two growth needs. The first growth need is for self-actualization. This is the need to develop one's innate talents and potentials. According to Maslow, "What a man can be, he must be. He must be true to his own nature. This need we may call self-actualization" (6). The need for self-actualization is universal among the human species, but each individual's collection of capacities is unique. Maslow had at first thought that the self-actualization

need was the last need to be fulfilled in fully developed people; thus the reason the theory is labelled self-actualization theory. In later years he discovered, through clinical studies, that another higher growth need level existed (7).

Although all self-actualized people had satisfied their basic and self-actualizing needs, some had transcended their own egos to become motivated by even higher needs, labelled metaneeds, needs for cross-cultural values. This he called metamotivation. Metamotivation is the individual's search for the Being Values, a need for a holistic sense of: understanding, human dignity, beauty, wholeness, universal justice, aliveness, uniqueness, meaningfulness and reverence for human life. Metamotivation can lead to transcending one's own ego to develop a oneness with nature, life and humanity. If the metaneeds are not met, psychological problems such as depression, alienation from life and nature, and purposelessness can result. Thus, Maslow found that some individuals go beyond the self-actualizing needs to become metamotivated self-actualizers. In this paper, both non-metamotivated self-actualizers and metamotivated self-actualizers will be referred to as self-actualizers. Even deficiency-motivated (non-self-actualizing) people can be attracted to the Being Values. However, it is the degree of attraction which is important. The self-actualizing person has more freedom to be attracted to the Being Values which satisfy the metaneeds. The illustration of the Maslow hierarchy (Figure 1) includes the metaneeds. Although most authors fail to place the metaneeds in are in the same hierarchial-integration" (8).

Maslow held that the drive to satisfy the various needs was instinctoid, i.e., biologically based. Though full animal instincts no longer exist in humans, there still exists the remnants of the old animal instincts. These instinct remnants can be thought of as species-wide urges or capacities which can be easily perverted by the cultural environment. The instinct remnants are part of our evolutionary heritage. Deprivation of the various needs can lead to death (physiological and safety needs) or mental pathologies (psychological and growth needs). If members of a species are destroyed or crippled when they fail to attain certain needs satisfactions, one can justifiably think in terms of the needs being innate and biological.

There are also, according to Maslow, two continual needs, the needs for freedom and knowledge (9). At each level of the basic and growth needs, one needs certain types of freedom and knowledge in order to successfully satisfy and maintain the various basic and growth needs. For example, in order to satisfy the self-actualizing need level, the need to develop one's innate talents and abilities, the indi-

vidual must be free to engage in self-exploration and to explore alternative life styles. In order to satisfy the love and belongingness needs, one must be free to meet and develop relationships with new and different people. Basic knowledge of nutrition is necessary if the physiological need for food is to be properly satisfied. Thus, the continual needs for the various types of knowledge and freedom needed to satisfy the basic and growth needs may also be visualized as a part of the famous Maslow hierarchy (See Figure 1).

Satisfaction of the basic, continual and growth needs leads to a personality with the following characteristics: (1) free from neurosis and psychosis; (2) free from crippling anxiety; (3) less dogmatic; (4) superior perception of reality; (5) less conformist and more inner-directed; (6) higher frequency of peak experiences (peak experiences are feelings of wonder, awe, wholeness, which are dissociated from theological and supernatural interpretation); (7) increased acceptance of others; (8) more democratic; (9) more creative; (10) more spontaneous; (11) more healthy interpersonal relations; (12) increased identification with the human species; (13) more humanistic values; (14) greater ability to turn inward in a meditative way to solve personal problems; (15) more altruistic and loving; (16) greater appreciation for solitude and privacy; (17) more liberal on political, social and religious questions; (18) greater sense of purpose and meaning in life; (19) more peace of mind and feeling of harmony with life and nature; (20) greater capacity for intimate contact; (21) more able to live in the present rather than dwelling on the past or the future. Thus we have the most healthy human being.

## **THE MISCONCEPTIONS AND MISINTERPRETATIONS**

The misconceptions and misinterpretations are of a varied nature and without an identifiable pattern. In the aggregate they gravely weaken the applicability of Maslow's theory. The various misconceptions and misinterpretations follow.

### **1. The metaneeds are the highest need level.**

The most common misunderstanding of Maslow's theory stems from the mistaken belief that the need for self-actualization is the final human need. As discussed earlier, Maslow did at first believe that the self-actualization need level was the last need to be satisfied. His discovery of a need level above the need for self-actualization, the need for metamotivation, led to the development of fourth force, or transpersonal, psychology. Critics unaware of the metamotivation need level have criticized Maslow for ignoring the spiritual aspect

of the human personality. However, the metamotivation need level is the spiritual need level - Maslow defined metamotivation as a search for one's highest values, for the spiritual and philosophic in life. This development of what Maslow labelled "unitive consciousness" contained mystical and sacral elements 10). Maslow, through his clinical studies, found transcending self-actualizers to be more spiritual, in either the theistic or nontheistic sense, than deficiency-motivated individuals 11). This spiritual or religious experience is not the private property of any one particular religious orientation or organization. Maslow held that too often intellectual primitives and theistic fundamentalists have been allowed to capture, contaminate, and monopolize the words religious and spiritual. Maslow stated:

*I want to demonstrate that spiritual values have naturalistic meaning, that they are not the exclusive possession of organized churches, that they do not need supernatural concepts to validate them, that they are well within the jurisdiction of a suitably enlarged science, and that, therefore, they are the general responsibility of all mankind 12).*

## **2. Self-actualization is not self-indulgence.**

Some critics fear that an emphasis on individual self-actualization will encourage the development of narcissism and egocentric self-centeredness. The term self-actualization has been misinterpreted in the popular media and has been misused to refer to immature selfish behaviors and goals. The word self-actualization has pervertedly been used as an excuse for gluttony and greed. These critics have mistakenly pictured the self-actualizing person as selfish 13). However, the personality characteristics of the self-actualizing person are not those of the selfish person. The self-actualizing person is more loving and altruistic, according to Maslow, than the deficiency-motivated person. And, the self-actualizing person is dedicated to something outside of him/herself while the transcending self-actualizer is metamotivated for the humane Being Values. There is nothing in the writings of Maslow or in the research findings on self-actualization which would support the false criticism that the self-actualizing person is selfish or egocentric. This misconception of the self-actualizing person as selfish and egocentric is one of the more misleading misconceptions.

## **3. The self-actualizing person is not a totally uninhibited being.**

It is too often assumed that being uninhibited is a sign of self-actualization. Exposing all of one's nerve endings and engaging in inter-

personal exercises where the most uninhibited individual is the "winner" are activities engaged in by many pseudo-self-actualizing people, even at some professional meetings of humanistic psychologists. During the 60's and 70's rebels rebelled against many unexamined cultural mores and traditions. The "Consciousness III" individual, of the "greening of America" paradigm 14), rebelled against the restrictiveness of the "grey flannel suit", jobs on Wall Street, etc. Too often it was assumed that the healthy person had no inhibitions at all, that he or she unreservedly gushed over everyone and everything. As Maslow's model of self-actualization became popularized, it too was tainted with this false assumption about the healthy person. However, Maslow's personality profile of the self-actualizing person is not the profile of a mindlessly uninhibited person. In fact, Maslow found that self-actualizing people needed more solitude and privacy than deficiency-motivated people.

#### **4. The self-actualizing person does not live a life of eternal bliss.**

The self-actualizing person does not live twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, in a state of meditative calm. The pseudo-self-actualizing person, the faker, sometimes imitates a state of super-calm to the point of being ludicrous. The self-actualized person is misunderstood to be an individual who has reached absolute perfection and is eternally happy, living in a type of static **nirvanah**. However, human self-actualization is a dynamic process. Even the metamotivated self-actualizer does not reach a static upper growth limit since the metaneeds can never be totally satisfied. Permanent complete contentment is not possible. The metamotivated self-actualizing person is not perfect, not a "**superman**", but merely the most healthy person. An ultimate human capacity for transpersonal development is unknown and may not exist. Thus, the traditional Maslow hierarchy has been further modified by leaving the top of the hierarchy open (Figure 1).

Maslow believed that self-actualizers, especially metamotivated self-actualizers, sometimes experience what he called cosmic-sadness, a sadness

*over the stupidity of people, their self-defeat, their blindness, their cruelty to each other, their shortsightedness. Perhaps this comes from the contrast between what actually is and the ideal world that the transcendents can see so easily and so vividly, and which is in principle so easily attainable 15).*

Self-actualizers are human; thus they too have failures and moments of unhappiness. However, self-actualizers recover more quickly from their failures and are relatively more happy more often.

#### **5. Maslow's theory does not explain all human behavior.**

Supporters of Maslow's theory sometimes mistakenly assume that Maslow believed his theory explained **all** human behavior. Maslow's theory does help explain most human behavior, most of the time, for most people, under most circumstances. Maslow was well aware that other factors besides needs satisfactions (e.g., Skinnerian reinforcements, Freudian subconscious fears, etc.) help explain human behavior. Maslow's theory provides a good core theory to which knowledge from other personality theories can be added. Realistic social science theories do not claim to offer absolute knowledge about human behavior; instead, good theories offer evidence-supported probabilities, tendencies, and generalizations with acknowledged exceptions. By acknowledging exceptions to generalizations, the social scientist can strengthen the personality theory to which the generalizations belong.

#### **6. The order of needs prepotency is not absolute.**

Some supporters of Maslow's theory falsely believe that the order of prepotency is absolute. Maslow was aware that the hierarchy was not absolute. Some needs may appear simultaneously with other needs. The order of needs are not absolutely fixed (16). With Maslow's theory one can expect to find some exceptions to the general sequential development explained by the theory. For example, for some individuals the satisfaction of the love and belongingness needs may not be prepotent to the satisfaction of the esteem needs. Instead, for some people satisfaction of these two needs levels may go hand in hand. Others may need to enhance their self-concepts before they feel worthy of accepting love from others.

Wahba and Bridwell reported evidence to support the general thrust of the Maslow hierarchy - that basic, or maintenance, needs are generally prepotent to growth needs (17). However, empirical research attempts have been unable to clearly identify the exact hierarchical prepotency between the four basic needs. Alderfer also reported evidence to support the general structure of the Maslow hierarchy (18). He found that the biological needs were prepotent to the psychological needs, which in turn were prepotent to the growth needs. Alderfer used the terms existence needs (biological needs: physiological and the security needs), relatedness needs (psychological needs: love

and belongingness needs and esteem needs), and spiritual needs (need for self-actualization). However, he was not able, through his research, to distinguish the physiological needs from the security needs within the existence category, or to distinguish the love and belongingness needs from the esteem needs within the relatedness category. Also, Alderfer did not attempt to distinguish the need for self-actualization from the metaneeds within the spiritual category.

It may be impossible ever to test the exact prepotency of the various needs. The need levels probably overlap and thus it is difficult to measure the exact workings of the prepotency aspect of the hierarchy. Also, in order to accurately measure the prepotency workings of Maslow's hierarchy, social scientists would have to consider the history of the individuals studied. Longitudinal studies covering the several stages of each subject's life are needed. In addition, social scientists may not be able to trust the self-report instruments used in researching the prepotency question. Possibly most people are unable to identify the exact factors stimulating their motivations.

#### **7. Achieving material and vocational success is not the same as becoming self-actualizing.**

The self-actualizing person is not the typical capitalist success story - the Horatio Alger success story is unrelated to self-actualization. Moreover, the values of the self-actualizing person are often in conflict with the values found in materialistic capitalist cultures. Nor is there any reason to believe that the self-actualizing person would necessarily be the model of material and vocational success in an authoritarian socialist nation such as the Soviet Union. Relatively large paychecks, expensive homes and political power are not signs of self-actualization.

#### **8. The self-actualizing person is not a mindless follower.**

Misinterpretation of Maslow's concept of self-actualization has led to unfair criticisms of the whole theory. A classic example of such a misinterpretation can be found in the Edgar Easley and David Wigglesworth claim that the nine hundred People's Temple members who committed suicide at Jonestown, Guyana "willingly gave up their lives in the search for self-actualization" 19). These critics held that "a Reverend Jim Jones can attract thousands of people who will try to reach toward self-actualization" 20). Easley and Wigglesworth claimed that the Jonestown mass suicide occurred because to Jones' followers "death was the avenue of self-actualization" 21). However, the People's Temple members were not self-actualizing



people, they were instead examples of deficiency-motivated people. Maslow's self-actualizing people are inner directed and not other directed true-believer types as were the People's Temple members. Luckily there does exist a wealth of research on personality correlates of self-actualization which make evident the absurdity of the Easley-Wigglesworth criticism 22).

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There is no Dale Carnegie-type program for achieving self-actualization. Self-actualization requires the intelligent application of hard work over an extended period of time. Maslow held that achieving self-actualization required that one go through "an arduous and demanding period of preparation" 23). This challenge meant "using one's intelligence" 24). Also, time is needed; thus the reason why research has identified "the trend of increasing actualization up to the early or middle adult years" 25).

### **CONCLUSION**

The tremendous value Maslow's theory holds for aiding and understanding individual and societal growth and behavior can become lost through misinterpreting and misconceiving the theory. Since humanistic and transpersonal psychologies derive from Maslow's theory, the contamination of Maslow's theory will significantly weaken both of these new schools of psychology.

Maslow saw a new philosophy of human nature emerging from his theory of self-actualization. 26) Maslow did not, however, offer the world another panacea-ridden ideology. Although human nature itself validates human self-actualization as a plausible ultimate social goal, no one economic or political ideology holds the key on how best to re-structure society so as to enable most people to self-actualize. Maslow's theory offers the world a goal for, and a direction for, human growth. It also offers a criterion for evaluating individual and cultural health and a source for truly cross-cultural human rights. By remaining true to its founding theory, humanistic psychology offers the world of scholarship a fruitful challenge and useful explanation of human behavior.

## Footnotes

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