

Abraham Maslow's Legacy: A Personal Exploration of Hierarchy of Needs

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ABSTRACT:

Whenever the history of psychology is written and the names of the most influential psychologists are discussed, Abraham Maslow will always be on the list. He is known as one of the pioneers of humanistic psychology, and his theory of motivation is renowned worldwide. The hierarchy of needs proposed by Maslow outlines human needs, suggesting that to fulfill higher needs such as self-esteem and self-actualization, the basic needs (called deficiency needs) must first be met. Maslow had a troubled childhood, and he may have used the emotional pain he experienced as a child to achieve great things in his life. It is possible that his own life experiences led to the formulation of his remarkable theory of motivation, which has not only helped me personally in achieving career success but has also benefited numerous people over the years and continues to do so. In this article, I will discuss Maslow's life and his theory of motivation, and I will also address how this theory has influenced my life and career.

Keywords:

Abraham Maslow, Hierarchy of Needs, Self-Actualization, Humanistic Psychology, Theory of Motivation, Psychology

1- The Birth, Early Childhood, and Education of Abraham Maslow

Abraham Maslow is my personal favorite psychologist. I will write about him in detail and also highlight how he influenced my life and continues to do so.

The great psychologist Abraham Harold Maslow was born on April 1st, 1908, in Brooklyn, New York.^{1,2} He was a Russian Jewish immigrant and belonged to a financially poor family.² He was the oldest among the seven siblings.¹ His early life was full of isolation and dissatisfaction mainly because of his parents. He suffered with low self-esteem because of the behavior he faced from others. He was made fun of for having a big nose and weak body, as a result he started to think he was ugly. This low self-esteem affected him greatly throughout his life.² He was mainly affected mentally by his mother's harsh personality who verbally abused him and made his life miserable.^{3,4} He was also affected by the fact that his parents did not get along well. All these factors affected Maslow as a child.^{3,4} He was also not happy with his father for remaining absent for him most

of the time. All this collectively impacted Maslow mentally. Yet he continued to strive towards a career success that only a few blessed one's witness. He completed his high school from Boys High School in Brooklyn, then went to City College of New York, then later joined the University of Wisconsin and graduated with a bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degree. His mentor was Harry Harlow initially, when his area of interest was behaviorism. Later he developed the interest in humanistic psychology for which we all know him today.

In the beginning of his career, Maslow started studying monkeys to understand the behavior and psychology of human beings. However, he later realized that to understand humans he needs to study humans instead of monkeys. For his study he also developed his own approach which is called extended interview technique 2. Today, Maslow is a recognized figure in the field of psychology and along with Carl Rogers is credited to be one of the founders of Humanistic psychology. He is well known for his theory of motivation which presented the idea of his famous "hierarchy of needs" and the concept of "self-actualization."

He studied the positivity of human nature, most likely because of personal negative experiences he witnessed during his formative years 2. The emotional connection he lacked during his early years possibly led him to study human potential and accomplishment which culminated in the development of his famous theory of motivation and hierarchy of needs. Which we will address later in this article in detail.

Maslow studied sexual dominance arrangements in female monkeys (rhesus) and discovered that these monkeys compete with other females to pair with the most potent male monkeys. Once they get the males monkey, they become submissive to the males. Maslow thought that humans are quite like monkeys in this regard. Thus, he got into a research position to confirm his hypothesis at Columbia. For his research he involved young females and conducted his extended interview sessions with questions related to sexual fantasies and preferences. This research confirmed his findings. Later he focused on unhappiness and psychological problems.

Later in 1943, his famous theory "Theory of Human Motivation" was published and there begun a new era

of psychology with one of the most well-known theories of the last century.

2. Details of Maslow's Major Theory and Its Impact on Mental Health

Anyone who has studied psychology or success or motivation as a subject most likely is familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs ². This motivational theory is comprised of a five-tier model of human needs, which is popularly depicted as a pyramid ². This model or the pyramid shows the human needs. From the bottom of the pyramid the needs are physiological, safety and security, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization ². However, Maslow later extended his theory and added Self-transcendence as the last of the needs after self-actualization. Self-transcendence means the need to be greater than our own selves or the desire and need to be larger than life as many people suggest. When human beings reach the highest level of self-actualization, it is not the highest level but there is one level above that which means that when we have reached our fullest potential, we feel the need to engage ourselves in a big purpose or mission which is way greater than any of our desires and needs. We now think of serving others or doing something for mankind or society or other human beings ². The first needs were referred by Maslow later as "deficiency needs" or D-Needs while the other two were called "being needs" or B-Needs. Deficiency needs were considered by Maslow as the necessary needs for life, once these needs are met human beings think of reaching their greatest potential.

Physiological needs signify basic human survival requirements like water, food, and shelter. While safety needs include the security such as financial security, and health. Love and belongingness need as the name suggests includes close relationships, social circle, connection with others, and friends ². Esteem needs involves self-esteem, respect, and recognition. While self-actualization means our maximum potential, personal growth, peak performance, or in layman's terms it is the need to be the best version of ourselves ². Then as discussed above, comes the self-transcendence which is the ultimate stage of needs mentioned by Maslow in his paper that was published later and this idea did not quite become popular until the 21st century ².

Maslow's theory has given a new direction to the field of psychology by emphasising the role of mental and psychological growth and accomplishment ². It has also given new insight to psychologists to incorporate this model into the current therapies by focusing on the physiological needs and personal accomplishment and personal development. This model also led to the development of the new branch of positive psychology or the concept of success psychology (which is also being considered interrelated to humanistic theory) ⁵ adopted by many success trainers and coaches around the globe. The popularity of hierarchy of needs can be seen as how other fields like medicine ⁶⁻⁷ nursing ^{8,9,10},

and management ¹¹ also adopt this theory and find it relevant to them. I have also used the hierarchy of needs model for my substance use disorder clients and have noticed that not only it helps them, but they enjoy the process of therapy with this model as well.

3. Cultural Worldviews and Theoretical Systematic Biases Associated with Maslow's Theory

Cultural worldview of Maslow's theory has positive as well as negative views both. On one side his theory has been adopted by many psychologists and coaches all around the world. While on the other side his hierarchy of Needs has been critiqued for its cultural bias, because it mainly focuses on individualism and self-actualization, because these are mainly the Western values and cultural norms ¹². The Asian and many other cultures don't believe in individualism, but a collective community achievement and success. Maslow has been criticised for totally ignoring the collectivist culture and values where collective goals matter more than individual achievement ².

Montag et al., demonstrated that our feelings and personalities play a role in how we feel happy and safe in life. For example, an outgoing and playful person will tend to feel happier and meet his needs better than others. This study suggested that Maslow ignored this aspect and considered everyone to be the same, which is far from the truth ¹³.

Moreover, the fixed progression has been highlighted in Maslow's theory and pyramid does not support diverse experiences and people from different cultures can have different priorities, some may consider love more important than self-esteem and love for example. I personally know many people who put relationships and love more than self-actualization. I have also seen people who don't care about self-actualization at all in fact they more care about their basic needs and never pursued self-actualization but went on to self-transcendence without reaching self-actualization. Thus, they bypassed the self-actualization stage.

Similarly, in many cultures where the societies and cultures are religion predominant, many people if not most consider the life after death as the ultimate success. For example, the Islamic, Jewish, and Christian cultures sharing the common concept of the life after death. Adherents of these religion consider a life which is simple, humble, and the ultimate success for them is the permanent life which is the life after death. For them, if you don't have money, it doesn't matter, if you don't have shelter, it also does not matter, whether you have self-esteem it does not matter. But what matters is that you should be an obedient servant of God and follow his commandments and as a result you will be transferred to the next dimension called the hereafter and if you do good deeds, you go to heavens or paradise. But if you do bad deeds, you go to hell fire. For them getting the paradise is the ultimate success. For them Maslow's self-actualization does not matter.

You could be self-actualized but if you are not a good servant of God, you are unsuccessful and you don't attain the actual success which is the paradise or heaven. Or probably it is more appropriate to say that for them self-actualization is the life after death, and it is the only purpose of survival. Food shelter and esteem do matter, but if one does not have those, the purpose can still attain the ultimate success.

Considering both the criticism and support, Maslow's hierarchy of needs is still considered a remarkable idea and is adopted all over the world. Different psychologists and therapist try to incorporate other theories with Maslow's theory to better serve their patients and clients. With the passage of time this theory is becoming more relevant and possibly more theories will be built upon this model to give us a new perspective in the future.

4. Ethical Issues Relevant to Maslow's Theory Both Historically and in Current Professional Practice

Maslow's theory historically, has been criticized for poor methodology. For example, the sample size was small and labelling his sample as self-actualized was not a proper scientific approach. How he considered these people as self-actualized was not clear¹⁴, because if we interview anyone who is doing reasonably good financially, we will assume that this person is self-actualized as well. There is no way to actually find out if this person is self-actualized or not. Moreover, the theory is more inclined towards European and Western populations which believe in individualism rather than collectivism. Furthermore, Maslow's theory is more relatable to the sample of self-actualized people (majority of them were Western White men). This pointed towards ethical concerns about generalizability of his theory. Similarly, as discussed above, the theory does not consider the religious perspective in mind, for religious adherents, achieving the success of the after life is the real success and they do not consider self-actualization as the ultimate success.

Today, ethical considerations must be applied to Maslow's theory in a way that it does not reinforce stereotypes or ignore the diverse needs of others. Therapists must keep cultural context in mind while using Maslow's model for their patients. It should be all inclusive and consider the difference in cultures and customs. For example, those cultures who value relationships over self-actualization, for them relationship success should be on the top of the pyramid. Similarly, if the client is a strict follower of any of the Abrahamic faiths or any belief system that believes in the concept of life after death, the counselor or therapist should incorporate the concept of after life and religious perspective into consideration. In substance use disorder counseling for example there is a concept of Alcoholics anonymous and Big Book and 12 steps. These steps incorporate the religious perspective into consideration and many clients feel they have quit using drugs because of these 12 steps.

Moreover, I have also personally seen and known many people in my life who were satisfied, happy, and considered themselves accomplished because their main priority was health, and family. They lived in a rental property for their shelter and barely had any money for any leisure activities but because they had loving relationships, they didn't care about reputation, esteem needs, or self-actualization. Similarly, people from different religious backgrounds can have different values and for them the self-actualization defined by Abraham Maslow 2 may not mean anything at all. It is also possible that for some food, water, and shelter come together under the big umbrella of money. I am a prime example of this, for me food, water, shelter, and even getting married come under the umbrella of "money," then comes self-actualization. However, the concept of self-transcendence is something I personally believe should not be the ultimate or last need or the top of the pyramid, the reason is, I have seen people who were living a life for a greater purpose and were living a life of self-transcendence without any noticeable financial or influential success. Therefore, for me the biggest problem with Maslow's hierarchy of needs is the lack of flexibility for people from different cultures and religions. People like Abdul Sattar Eidhi of Pakistan and Mother Teresa are great examples of people who served the mankind to the best of their abilities and lived the lives with a purpose and mission greater than themselves, or we can say they were the people who were larger than life. Both personalities barely had money for themselves to enjoy yet they did for the mankind that not everyone can.

Maslow was an atheist and did not believe in any religion 4 this clearly explains why a genius person like Maslow totally ignored the religious perspective. Had he been a follower of any religion, I believe he would have incorporated the religious perspective in his model and there would have been a slot of life after death or appeasement of God as the ultimate human need on the pyramid. Yet, I believe he did a marvelous job despite being an atheist and did not ignore some of the basic needs that all human beings unanimously agreed upon 2. For example, none of us can deny that food, water, and security are the essential needs for every human being, in fact, not just human beings, these are physiological needs and are essential for any living being including animals.

5. Personal Summation and Application of Maslow's Theory in Personal Practice or Career Goals

I have personally been fond of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. I have adopted it personally in my life and in my profession as a therapist as well. This theory is not the theory of needs, but as Montag et al., suggested it is also a theory of personality development¹³. Therefore, this theory helped me in my own personality development as well. It encouraged me to grow and learn more. In my personal life I have myself gone through all the phases of the hierarchy of needs described by Abraham Maslow. I started my career with

a time when I had no money in my pocket. This was the time I didn't have any other worry but to find a job and start my career. Once I found a job, the next task was to find a place to live which Maslow described as the need for shelter and security. Then I felt the need to start a family, and got married. Then I do not yet know if my self-esteem need was already there or it developed later, however, what I do know is that after all of these needs, I started my journey to be self-actualized. I became goal oriented and became a lifelong goal setting and a student of success.

However, after careful thought I now feel that the model should be modified, and it should be individualistic. For example, when there is an Asian patient or client for whom family values and collectivism is more important than anything else, we should incorporate Maslow's model in a different way with slight modifications. This client's hierarchy of need should be something like this, food, shelter, esteem, family. Family as the ultimate accomplishment and success. I have noticed that to bring self-actualization concept to people from certain cultures where collectivism is prevalent, can do more harm than good. It can offend people and they become defensive. I have observed this during a friend's gathering as well where I addressed the concept of self-actualization and I noticed that my friends got offended and thought I was being judgmental and consider reaching one's fullest potential as the ultimate need. For them the ultimate need was the success in the eyes of God or as mentioned above, the idea of the success of the life after death. Thus, we should be mindful of who we are dealing with and speaking with, especially in the therapeutic setting. Proper understanding of the values of the client or patient is essential for the better well-being of the patients. If we know what their values are, it becomes easier to understand how we can incorporate Maslow's hierarchy of needs to our clients from different backgrounds. I believe there is no harm in incorporating a customized approach to Maslow's hierarchy of needs for the wellbeing of the patients.

Now I also use Maslow's model for my clients' therapy. I try to understand the basic needs of my clients and help them create a treatment plan focused on their basic needs focusing on the patient-centered approach which was also an idea proposed by another Humanistic philosophy expert Carl Rogers^{15,16}. My clients have responded very well to this approach. However, there is an extra point I add in this model, therefore, it can be said, that I have tailored Maslow's hierarchy of needs according to my understanding and values. I consider the need to be healthy as an essential need that I believe Maslow ignored and which in my opinion is the weakness of his theory. My approach by adding health as a need has helped my clients, and I believe we should think and analyse and see what is good for our clients' wellbeing and what works for them.

The idea of self-actualization has played an important role in my own client's therapy, and I have observed that many of them went on to be accomplished and

successful in their lives and careers and quit drugs or alcohol.

Conclusion:

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a remarkable piece of work and has a profound impact on my life and the lives of many other people. However, it has some limitations. For example, it is not culturally and religiously flexible. The model, just like any other model, theory, or invention has a room for improvement, and we believe future psychologists will expand this model and enlighten us more about the human needs and life in general.

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