

Humanistic psychology: Maslow

The humanistic approach to psychology was developed by Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow in the United States during the 1950s. Humanistic psychology is concerned with topics that are meaningful to human beings, focusing especially upon subjective experience and the unique, unpredictable events in individual human lives.

Humanistic psychology has forced many psychologists to question some of their basic beliefs. Humanistic psychologists differ from most other psychologists in focusing on conscious experience rather than on behaviour, on personal responsibility and free will rather than on determinism, and on discussion of experience rather than on use of the experimental method. Humanistic psychology also emphasises the importance of the individual's striving towards personal growth and fulfilment. Whether or not these views are valid, they have certainly succeeded in offering an alternative point of view.

Humanistic psychology and empirical research related to it.

Søren Kierkegaard (Denmark) and Martin Heidegger (Germany) represent existentialism. Existentialism focuses on

- Personal responsibility
- Free will
- Striving towards personal growth and fulfilment
- Major choices in life are generally accompanied by anxiety
- Our conscious experience is of particular value (inspiration from Gestalt psychology)

Gestalt psychology emphasised the role of perception when people described their experiences (phenomenology, i.e. the descriptive science of pure experience without theoretical and practical implications). This approach was a contrast to analytical introspection (represented for example by Wundt and Henry James).

Key aspects of existentialism is expressed in this way by Ford and Urban (1963):

“Man has the capacity for being aware of himself, of what he is doing. And what is happening to him. As a consequence, he is capable of making decisions about these things, and of taking responsibility for himself...He does not exist; he is not a being; rather, he is coming into being, emerging, becoming, evolving towards something...His significance lies not in what he has been in the past, but in what he is now and the direction of his development, which is towards the fulfilment of his innate personality”.

Humanistic psychology was developed primarily by Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow and came into prominence in the 1950s and 60s. In many ways, it applied the philosophical ideas of existentialism to psychology. According to Cartwright (1979), humanistic psychology *“is concerned with topics that are meaningful to human beings, focusing especially upon subjective experience and the unique, unpredictable events in individual human lives”*. More specifically, humanistic psychologists argue that psychology should be based on *phenomenology*.

Maslow and the basic nature of human beings: Humans are innately good and our innate tendencies are predominantly healthy and benign. People have an innate capacity for constructive growth, honesty, generosity and love. However, these instincts are weak and could easily be overwhelmed by the more powerful forces of

learning and culture (and here he agrees with Erikson). The result is that a pathogenic environment can inhibit our positive potentials and evoke hatred, destructiveness, and self-defeating behaviour.

Maslow prefers an eclectic approach to personality, and he advises psychologists to guard against excessive optimism by acquiring knowledge of Freudian psychoanalysis: My goal] is to integrate into a single theoretical structure the partial truthsin Freud, Adler, Jung ... Freud is still required reading for the humanistic psychologist... [yet] it is as if [he] supplied to us the sick half of psychology, and we must now fill out with the healthy half... (Maslow, 1968).

Humanistic theories of motivation.

According to Maslow, most theories of motivation are limited because they mainly deal with basic physiological needs such as hunger and thirst, or with the need to avoid anxiety. Such theories omit many important needs relating to personal growth in Maslow's view. He addressed these issues in his theory based on a hierarchy of needs, where physiological needs (food, drink etc.) are at the lowest level of the hierarchy followed upwards by need for safety, need for love, need for esteem and finally need for self-actualisation. The needs at the bottom are deficiency needs and the needs at the top are called growth needs.

Maslow's key concepts: self-actualisation and peak experiences

According to Maslow (1954), self-actualisation can be described in the following way: "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualisation". Self-actualised people are characterised by an acceptance of themselves, spontaneity, the need for privacy, resistance to cultural influences, empathy, profound interpersonal relations, a democratic character structure, creativeness, and a philosophical sense of humour. According to Maslow, Abraham Lincoln, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Albert Einstein were identified as self-actualisers. In his book based on the lives of famous people, who were self-actualisers according to Maslow, he used the biographical method (archival research) to study the lives of several individuals and found similarities in their lives that he called 'self-actualising tendency' and on the basis of this work, he identified 15 characteristics of self-actualised people: accurate perception of reality, enjoyment of new experiences, tendency to have peak experiences, clear moral standards, sense of humour, feeling of kinship with all people, close friendships, democratic character accepting others, need for privacy, independence from culture and environment, creativity, spontaneity, problem-centred rather than self-centred, acceptance of human nature, resistance to conformity.

It is not necessary to display all these characteristics in order to be self-actualised, and not only self-actualised people display them. However, Maslow considered that those individuals that he had identified as self-actualised people displayed these characteristics more. Self-actualisers are people who fulfil their own potential, not perfect human beings.

Psychological theory of motivation: Maslow (1954) the hierarchy of needs: combination of **deficiency needs** (need for survival, need for safety) and **growth needs** (need for love and belonging, need for esteem, need for self-actualisation).

Maslow (1970) defines self-actualised people as those who are fulfilled and doing all they are capable of. His study of famous people that he regarded as self-actualised include his theoretical and conceptual framework. However, this work is not regarded as scientific by many psychologists because Maslow himself has chosen the people that seem to fit with his theory.

Basic assumptions on which Maslow's theory is founded:

Human motivation is more than just fulfilling basic physiological needs such as reduction of eating, reduction of anxiety etc. There is also a motivation to grow.

Maslow made the major assumption that in order for the higher needs to emerge, the lower needs must be satisfied, which means that people only focus on their growth needs after their deficiency needs have been met, so consequently, fewer people manage to satisfy their growth needs than to satisfy their deficiency needs. Maslow (1970) estimated that Americans satisfy about 85% of their physiological needs, 70% of their safety needs, 50% of their belongingness and love needs, 40% of their self-esteem needs, and only 10% of their self-actualisation needs.

Maslow's own methodology: case study method and archival research, ideographic approach. Other psychological studies have tested his theory and assumptions empirically.

Empirical study testing the basic assumption that lower needs must be fulfilled before the higher needs of self-actualisations will emerge.

Aronoff (1967) tested the assumption by comparing fishermen and cane cutters in the British West Indies. Fishermen worked on their own and generally earned more than cane cutters, who worked in groups and were paid on the basis of the amount of cane cut by the entire group. Cane cutting was a more secure job, because the rewards fluctuated less than for fishermen, and because cane cutters were still paid even if they were unwell. It seems to follow from Maslow's theory that it would be mainly those whose security and esteem needs were met who would choose the more challenging and responsible job of fishermen. As predicted from Maslow's theory, only 25% of the fishermen had a high need for security or safety, against 80% of the cane cutters. In addition, 80% of the fishermen had high self-esteem, but only 20% of the cane cutters.

Empirical studies of Self-Actualisation

One way of measuring self-actualisation is to study people's *peak experiences*, moments of ecstatic happiness when people feel most 'real' and alive. Maslow (1962) interviewed several people, many of whom were successful in their chosen field. His view was confirmed that at such moments, the person is concerned with 'being' and is totally unaware of any deficiency needs or the possible reactions of others.

Czikszenmihalyi (1975) interviewed a wide variety of prominent sportsmen and reported experiences, similar to those reported by Maslow, of ecstatically losing themselves in the highly skilled performance of their sport.

Such peak experiences cannot, normally, be consciously planned and yet, for many, the growth of humanistic psychology is almost synonymous with *deliberate* attempts to enhance personal growth through encounter groups and other short, intensive, group experiences. (This is associated more with Rogers's theory than with Maslow's.)

Whatever the empirical support or otherwise for Maslow's theory, there is no doubt that it represents an important counterbalance to the nomothetic approach of Cattell and Eysenck by attempting to capture the richness of the personal experience of being human.

Application to issues: Work, education and therapy.

Maslow takes an active interest in the area of **work**. "If you're unhappy with your work, you have lost one of the most important means of self-fulfilment" (Maslow 1971). Organisations should be designed so that employees can satisfy their need for belongingness, dignity, respect and self-actualisation (Eupsychian management). According to Maslow, the ability of any organisation to satisfy its workers' needs must be assured by studying the specific nature of employee complaints, rather than merely tabulating their frequency.

In **education**, Maslow just like Rogers advocates a nondirective and person-centred approach to education. He takes strong exception to the rigid formalities common to higher education: courses must all span precisely the same number of weeks, even though some subjects are more difficult than others. Academic departments are totally independent, as though human knowledge could be neatly divided into separate and distinct categories. The emphasis is on learning specific facts, rather than on personal growth. And motivation is provided by such external rewards as grades, which often leads students to do only the work that is specifically required by the teacher. "The present school system is an extremely effective instrument for crushing peak experiences and forbidding their possibility" (Maslow 1971).

According to Maslow, the ideal university would have no formal credits, required courses, or degrees. It would serve as an educational retreat where people could explore various subjects, discover their own true interests and identities, and appreciate the joys of learning and the preciousness of life. The teacher would show students how to hear the beauty of a great symphony, rather than merely having them repeat back the date of the composer's birth on an examination. He or she would be a self-actualiser, thereby serving as a model for the students' inevitable identifications, and would demonstrate unconditional positive regard for their particular interest. Thus education would achieve its proper goal: to help people become fully human and actualise their highest potentials.

Humanistic therapies evolved in the USA in the 1950s but the most know humanistic therapy is Rogers' client-centred therapy. Unlike Rogers, Maslow adopts an eclectic approach to psychotherapy. He does agree that the therapist should often be accepting, genuine, kind, and concerned, since these behaviours help satisfy the patient's need for safety and belongingness. However, he cautions that there are too many patients who do not thrive in a warm and friendly atmosphere for this to become a universal procedure. For example, people with authoritarian personalities

would most likely interpret kindness as weakness, and distrustful individuals may well regard friendliness as a dangerous trap. With such patients, Maslow recommends that the therapists assume the role of authority. Maslow also differs from Rogers by favouring the use of Freudian psychoanalysis with seriously disturbed patients, notably those who are too enmeshed in infantile perceptions of themselves and others to accept those need satisfactions that may be offered. In less severe cases, however, briefer forms of therapy may well suffice.

Evaluation of Maslow's theory

The greatest strength of Maslow's approach to motivation is that it is very comprehensive and intuitively appealing. More specifically, the needs for self-actualisation and for esteem seem important and they were not included in earlier theories. However, the notion of self-actualisation is vague, and it has proved hard to develop good ways to measure it.

Maslow has been criticised for an overly optimistic view of human nature, e.g. that everybody has the potential to become a self-actualiser. The fact that the average British person spends 25 hours a week watching television suggests that there are many people whose motivation for personal growth is not enormous. The notion that self-actualised people are creative, self-accepting, and have excellent interpersonal relations ignores the fact that many people possess only some of those characteristics. For example, the artist Van Gogh was outstandingly creative, but he was so lacking in self-acceptance that he committed suicide. H.C. Andersen was outstandingly creative as well, but he was also very unhappy about himself in many ways and other people tended to see him as weird in spite of his creativity. There are numerous other examples of very creative people whose lives were disaster areas- should they be regarded as self-actualisers or not? The hierarchy of needs assumes that self-actualisation is at the top, but for some individuals this is not the case. It is also not the case in all cultures. Not all societies see self-centred goals as the ultimate human behaviour, for example collectivistic cultures strive for the greater good of the community rather than focusing on individual achievement.

Humanistic psychologists argue that self-actualisation occurs mainly because of needs within the individual rather than because of the beneficial impact of the environment. However, the environment often helps the process of self-actualisation. For example, most Western societies provide their citizens with many years of schooling, training opportunities for those with special skills, part-time courses, and so on. It is probable that self-actualisation depends on external (environmental) as well as internal (need) factors.

Even though Maslow has been criticised for being overly optimistic on behalf of humanity, his greater acceptance of Freudian principles renders him less vulnerable to this charge than Rogers. However, Maslow's eclecticism does not seem sufficiently well thought out. For example, he fails to reconcile his professed holism with his acceptance of such processes as repression and reaction formation, constructs that necessarily imply that personality includes sufficient subparts to become a house divided. Similarly, he casually endorses Horney's construct of an idealised image without considering the discrepancies between her inner conflict model and his holistic approach. Eclecticism requires more than merely accepting under one theoretical roof all those constructs of other theorists that one likes. The various ideas

must also be integrated into a meaningful and non-contradictory whole, and this Maslow has not done.

Although Maslow's ideas are intuitively appealing and although they have been successfully used in a number of situations, some serious criticism of his work has been raised apart from the contradictions in his theoretical work. One criticism raised is that Maslow's research into self-actualised people was not carried out scientifically and the only criterion for identifying a self-actualised person was Maslow's own opinion. Maslow has also, like Rogers, been accused of false optimism about human nature and largely ignoring the more negative aspects of human experience.

Cross-cultural evaluation: Perhaps most importantly, as Engler (1999) has pointed out, Maslow's view of people as striving for personal achievement is extremely culture-bound, being firmly located in the individualistic culture of the USA. Cross-cultural research by Kitayama and Markus (1992) has shown that, whilst positive feelings in American students were associated with personal achievements, Japanese students by contrast tended to associate positive feelings with good relations with others. This shows that Maslow's idea of self-actualisation as individual achievement has limited explanatory power in cultures different from the USA and Western cultures.