

A Brief Analysis of Abraham Maslow's Original Writing of *Self-Actualizing People: A Study of Psychological Health*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Abraham Maslow's original writing of *Self-Actualizing People: A Study of Psychological Health*. The review of literature in this article reveals that Maslow's hierarchy of needs have had profound effects in the area of psychology. In addition, the authors present information regarding self-actualized people, theorists of psychology, humanistic principles, culture, and other related issues.

The purpose of this article is to briefly discuss Abraham Maslow's original writing of *Self-Actualizing People: A Study of Psychological Health*. Maslow's work is discussed relative to his work on psychology, implications of work, research, culture, ethnicities, children, issues, gender, theoretical assumptions, and impact on psychology in the United States.

Self-Actualizing People: A Study of Psychological Health

Abraham Maslow was one of the greatest psychologists of our times. He was best known for the development of his theory on Self-Actualization (SA) and/or Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow had humble beginnings as a Russian Jewish immigrant born in Manhattan April 1, 1908. His initial education pursuits of law inspired by his father were abandoned. He attended the University of Wisconsin achieving his B.A. in 1930, M. A. in 1931 and Ph. D. in 1934. Maslow married and fathered two daughters. He died from a heart attack on June 8, 1970. (Huber, Edwards Fleming-Boyton, 2000).

The Impact on Work on Psychology

Alfred Adler – John Watson -- Eric Fromm – Karen Horney, Harry Harlow – Edward Thorndike – Wolfgang Kohler – Kurt Koffka – Max Wertheimer – Ruth Benedict – Kurt Goldstein

Abraham Maslow had the privilege of working with several great predecessors in the area of psychology including Alfred Adler, Eric Fromm, Karen Horney, Harry Harlow, Edward Thorndike, Wolfgang Kohler and Kurt Koffka. However, he noted that significant influence was gathered from the likes of Max Wertheimer and Ruth Benedict. Additionally, he noted a love for behaviorism, identifying with John Watson's work, initially but then abandoning it after the birth of his first child. Maslow adopted the notion of SA from Kurt Goldstein. Dr. Goldstein was actually the first to coin the term "self-actualization". He identified this term as the reorganizational capability of the organism after injury into a new unity that incorporates the damages. (Decarvalho, 1991). Most review Maslow's work in reference to the hierarchy of needs as presented in a pyramid with the lower needs listed at the bottom requiring personal growth to reach the top and become self-actualized. Kritsonis (2002) emphasizes that according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, an individual's needs are arranged in a hierarchy from the lower-level physiological needs to the higher-level needs for self-actualization. The physiological needs are the highest priority because until they are reasonably satisfied, other higher-level needs will not emerge to motivate behavior. Clark (2004) reported that Maslow's hierarchy is best noted as a ladder structure, with all humans having the potential to move or climb towards the realization of the 19 characteristics of the self-actualized person.

“Gemeinschaftsgefühl” Feelings for Mankind

Dr. Maslow believed in a holistic analysis of the person to determine self-actualization. He saw the self-actualized person as “different” from the norm. He referred to them as “healthy individuals”, but not perfect. The “peak experience” is explained as a mystical identification that can be drawn from strong emotions associated with “newness appreciation”. Nevertheless, he negates any theological or supernatural equation, referring only to the natural experience. Maslow referred to a word invented by Alfred Adler, “Gemeinschaftsgefühl” as feelings for mankind expressed by SA individuals. This term was presented as a deep feeling of identification and affection that Adler referred to as “older-brotherly attitude”. (Huber, et.al. 2000). This tends to conflict with the idea of individualism that seems to resonate in Maslow’s work. He speaks of limited and highly selected interpersonal relationships pursued by the SA individual that appears to maintain an aloof atmosphere that usually surrounds his description. His theory focused on the “best of humanity”, but suffered from methodological flaws. (Hoffman, 1992). There is an ongoing tension that focuses on the collective action versus individuality.

Research

Abraham Maslow was initially interested in animal research, studying monkeys for his doctoral dissertation and becoming the first graduate of Harry Harlow. He then focused on sex and ways to improve sexual life thus, improving the whole species. (Hoffman, 1992). He eventually gave up this research to focus on his Theory of Meta-motivation that included peak experiences, hierarchy of needs, self-actualization, B-values (being motivation) and Eupsychia (utopian society). One flaw noted was that there was incomplete data for this study. He was consequently limited in his presentation yielding only “composite impressions” of the SA individuals. Maslow also had an interest in the concept of ‘evil’ and sought ways to study and understand it. “Evil people are rare, but you find evil behavior in the majority of people”. (Hoffman, 1992)

Therapy

Humanistic principles focus on the development of the person to self-actualization. Aspy (2004), notes that counselors must increase cultural awareness in order to promote positive aspirations in their patients. In counseling, different practices or schools of thought are utilized, but if cultural differences are not addressed traditional modes of thought will overcome best practices. The new “science paradigm” is “relate, empower and free”. Aspy (2004) believes that this model must be adopted for humans to actualize their possibilities.

Culture

The concept of individual self is seen as an integral assumption of American psychology that is ordinarily unquestioned. It appears that Americans naturally assume that each person has his own separate identity that should be recognized. Dr. Maslow believed that knowledge of oneself is not only a path to better individual value choices, but self-actualization also leads to knowledge of universal human nature. It is noted that in this mainstream culture, there is a paradoxical nature that tends to reflect tension between knowing oneself and others. Postmodern critics assumed that Maslow based his theory on individualism, whereas Maslow's perspective was focused on individuality. Individuality defines individuals in terms of uniqueness and their particular embedment within the social matrix that Maslow saw as distinct from individualism. He has focused on individual efforts to resist cultural pressures. Critics continue to believe that one cannot evolve the individual without noting the culture that surrounds them. (Pearson, 1991).

People of Other Cultures

Cross-cultural research indicates that self-actualization is primarily a function of American society. When Japanese were assessed in areas of independence, self-enhancement and self-improvement, they would tend to view themselves less positively than Americans. However, Heines, (2003) noted that North Americans tend to view themselves in unrealistically positive terms.

Ethnicities

As president of American Psychology Association, Dr. Maslow stated that his first objective was to work for "greater recognition of the Negro psychologists". However, he realized that at the time the number was limited and equated this variable with lack of recognition and justice and feelings of hopelessness, degradation and defeat (Hoffman, 1992).

Children

Maslow indicated in his study that he was able to conduct testing with children that was not applicable to older subjects. He appeared to favor the naïve way children looked at the world and compared it with persons who had become self-actualized. He stated that the SA person has

an ability to appreciate newness “again and again”. This feature allows them to maintain a positive and optimistic attitude despite negative environmental occurrences. (Huber et.al, 2000).

Gender Issues

Dr. Maslow saw no need for separate developmental models for men and women because all self-actualization and optimum mental health evolves from affiliation. Nevertheless, traditional society has developed separate paths of affiliation for males and females. Primarily men’s rite of passage is expressed as individuation through separation, mobility and competence. On the other hand, women’s rite of passage is expressed as individuation through connection, commitment and intimate care. (Coy & Long, 2005)

Other Significant Trends

Maslow has had significant influence in the area of adult education since mid century. Humanistic adult education is seen as an extension of the learner-centered strand of the earlier “progressive” adult education. Kritsonis (2002) emphasizes the aim of progressivism was to educate the individual according to personal interests or needs. This focus grows from the humanist premise of personal autonomy and social progress. Although criticized for focusing on the individual, with little relevance to the environmental influences, Maslow’s theory is seen as creating an important impact on theoretical assumptions during this period of academic growth. He is hailed as being one of the most cited authors in an analysis of adult education research from 1968 to 1977. (Pearson, 1999).

Impact on Western Psychology

Dr. Maslow became president of the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1966 and one of the founders of the Esalen Institute. (Huber et.al. 2000). He expressed a vision of “building a psychology for the peace table”. (Hoffman, 1992). He believed that in learning to understand people, we would one day understand their differences and help others unify to create world peace. Although American Humanistic psychology appears rooted in individualistic terms, its cofounder had the ultimate goal of one day uniting the entire world in acts of continuous peace through individual understanding.

Just Versus Unjust Practices

Maslow was seen by some critics as expressing Marxist views. They believed that he advocated for an elitist civilization based on social and economic analysis. This type of society would tend to alienate the “lesser” non-self actualized individuals, divulging them of privileges and power, and justifying building a society based on a “new Social Darwinism” (Pearson, 1999).

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, problems noted with Dr. Maslow’s work are primarily empirical. Although he saw the need for future, objective studies, he initially viewed his pursuits as a way to “convince and to teach” himself, “rather than to prove or to demonstrate to others”. Reading this study would lead one to believe that the self-actualized person is untouchable and beyond reproach. However, Maslow has a way of detaching the SA individuals and then slowing allowing them back down to earth. He identified several positive factors but also explained the Self-actualized are not perfect, invariably bringing back the “human part” of this humanistic view of psychology. (Huber, et.al, 2000). He seemed to have a sense of humor, indicating in one interview regarding his childhood, “it’s a wonder I’m not psychotic” when referring to growing up Jewish in a non-Jewish neighborhood. (Hoffman, 1992). He also described his childhood as a reflection of being the only Negro going to the white school after segregation. Maslow appeared to be in touch with himself and, although criticized by others, in touch with his surroundings and the people in them. Review of the literature revealed that although his hierarchy of needs has had profound effects in the area of psychology and abroad, there is room for improvement. Yang (2003) indicated a need for implementation of a “Y-shaped hierarchical system that was originally developed by Y. Yu- 1992. Although Yu’s model had a biological basis, he incorporated Maslow’s needs in his model. Finally, we recommend that research should be reviewed regarding this radical revision to address cross cultural validity and unidimensionality. In doing so, the concept of self-actualization could be used as it was meant initially.

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