Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a theory of motivation and personality developed by the psychologist Abraham H. Maslow (1908-1970). Maslow's hierarchy explains human behavior in terms of basic requirements for survival and growth. These requirements, or needs, are arranged according to their importance for survival and their power to motivate the individual. The most basic physical requirements, such as food, water, or oxygen, constitute the lowest level of the need hierarchy. These needs must be satisfied before other, higher needs become important to individuals. Needs at the higher levels of the hierarchy are less oriented towards physical survival and more toward psychological well-being and growth. These needs have less power to motivate persons, and they are more influenced by formal education and life experiences. The resulting hierarchy of needs is often depicted as a pyramid, with physical survival needs located at the base of the pyramid and needs for self-actualization located at the top.

Description
Maslow's hierarchy specifies the following levels:

- **Physiological needs**: These are the basic requirements for human physical survival. They include such essentials as food, water, shelter, oxygen, and sleep. When these needs are unmet, human beings will focus on satisfying them and will ignore higher needs.

- **Safety needs**: Once the individual's basic physical needs are met, his or her needs for safety emerge. These include needs for a sense of security and predictability in the world. The person tries to maintain the conditions that allow him or her to feel safe and avoid danger. Maslow thought that inadequate fulfillment of these needs might explain neurotic behavior and other emotional problems in some people.
• *Love and belonging needs:* When the individual's physiological and safety needs are met, needs for love and belongingness emerge. These needs include longings for an intimate relationship with another person as well as the need to belong to a group and to feel accepted. Maslow emphasized that these needs involve both giving and receiving love.

• *Esteem needs:* Esteem needs include both self-esteem and the esteem of others. Self-esteem is the feeling that one is worthwhile, competent, and independent. The esteem of others involves the feeling that other people respect and appreciate the person. Once the person has satisfied his or her basic needs, concerns about worthiness emerge. The focus becomes not just surviving, but doing well according to meaningful communal standards.

• *Self-actualization needs:* These are the needs associated with realizing one's full potential. As these needs emerge, the person focuses on doing what he or she is meant to do in life—developing his or her talents and abilities to their fullest extent.

**Other human needs**

Maslow described other needs that did not fit into his hierarchy. These included cognitive needs, such as curiosity and scientific interest, as well as aesthetic needs, which include the need for beauty and order. As Maslow studied self-actualizing individuals, he also discovered a range of needs that extend beyond self-actualization. He called these needs transcendence needs or B-values. They refer to needs to contribute to human welfare and to find higher meanings in life. Although transcendence needs are usually described as lying somewhere beyond the need for self-actualization, these needs are not included in most formulations of Maslow's needs hierarchy.

While Maslow described human needs as a hierarchy, he allowed for some departures from the strict order of his needs hierarchy. He stated that lower needs must be reasonably well satisfied in order for the person to focus on higher needs, but he noted that complete satisfaction of a given need may not be possible or necessary. He indicated that most people would show a range of need satisfaction levels at any given time. For example, a person might be 85% satisfied in the area of physiological needs, 60% satisfied in the area of safety needs, 45% satisfied in the area of love and belonging-ness needs, and so on. Maslow also noted situations in which lower needs might be ignored in favor of higher needs, as when an artist sacrifices comfort and security in order to pursue aesthetic goals, or when a student postpones looking for a romantic partner in order to earn high grades and get into a prestigious graduate program. Maslow thought, however, that these departures from a strict hierarchy did not invalidate his general theory.

**The historical context of Maslow's theories**

At the time Maslow developed his theory in the early 1960s, psychology was dominated by two views of human behavior, the psychoanalytic and the behaviorist. The psychoanalytic view emphasized unconscious conflicts and drives, drawing many of its concepts from case studies of neurotic people. The behaviorist view emphasized the role of learning and derived many of its principles from observations of animal behavior. Maslow pointed out that the psychoanalysts had failed to consider the behavior of healthy human beings, while the behaviorists were too mechanistic and largely ignored subjective experience. He thought that no theory of human personality could be complete without a thorough study of healthy functioning, so he set out to examine the conscious motivations and experiences of healthy individuals. One important finding was that psychologically healthy people were more likely to report what Maslow called “peak experiences.” A peak experience, according to Maslow, is one in which the individual loses a sense of time.
and place and experiences a momentary feeling of unity with the universe. It is a particularly intense form of growth experience.

Maslow's perspective, together with similar approaches proposed by Carl Rogers, Gordon Allport, and others, came to be known as the “third force” in psychology. Because of their focus on the positive, growth-oriented aspects of human behavior, these views are also described as humanistic theories of behavior. They stimulated the emergence and rapid growth of the human potential movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

**Viewpoints**

Maslow's theory and the other humanistic theories have had an important impact on psychology as well as in other fields. By emphasizing positive aspects of human behavior, these theories provide a framework for understanding human behavior outside the context of mental illness and dysfunction. Humanistic approaches to behavior allow for the possibility of growth and achievement, in addition to providing useful explanations for some forms of maladjustment that do not fit the traditional understanding of neurosis and mental illness. The humanistic viewpoint has been very influential on psychotherapy and counseling, and many therapists identify themselves as humanistic in orientation.

Maslow's need hierarchy provides a helpful way to understand human motivation in many settings. Maslow proposed many changes in business management in order to make workplaces more responsive to the needs of workers. He called his ideas “eupsychian management,” emphasizing the potential for human growth in the workplace. A small body of research has shown modest support for some of Maslow's concepts. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is also used in medical and social welfare settings, providing a set of theoretical guidelines for understanding the concerns of people suffering from physical illness, disabilities, or other life problems. In addition to these settings, the theory is frequently applied in educational and career counseling, in which it is used to help clients select appropriate goals for their lives.

Maslow's theory has been criticized because it is difficult to evaluate objectively. Many of the phenomena that Maslow describes are subjective and difficult to quantify. Most studies rely on self-reported data, which are notoriously subject to distortion and inaccuracies. Because studies based on Maslow's concepts often focus on value-laden topics, it is also difficult for researchers to remain objective. Maslow acknowledged these difficulties himself, but thought that human potential was so important that it should be explored without regard to current limitations of scientific accuracy.

The field of personality theory has changed considerably over the 30 years since Maslow's death in 1970. The cognitive behaviorist approach has become increasingly influential, answering some of Maslow's criticisms of earlier psychoanalytic and behaviorist theories. Humanistic theories have become less popular in academic and research settings, with newer approaches generating more research topics. Nonetheless, Maslow's theory, with its positive emphasis, remains influential, particularly in such applied settings as counseling, industrial management, and health care.

**Professional implications**

Maslow's understanding of human motivation has had an important influence in the fields of nursing and allied health. The needs hierarchy provides a useful framework for understanding patients, and this framework has been incorporated into several important theories of medical and nursing care. One major approach to nursing theory has been described as a “needs” approach, and it relies on Maslow's need hierarchy as well as the developmental theories of Erik Erikson. Needs-oriented theories emphasize the
nurse's role in helping the patient to meet his or her physiological and psychosocial needs. Although more recent theories have moved away from this position, the needs hierarchy has been useful in helping care providers look for the "big picture" of a given patient's situation. A description of Maslow's needs hierarchy is still included in many textbooks for students of nursing and allied health.

As the realities of health care in a managed care environment have affected medical professionals, Maslow's theory has also found a role in human resource management for health care. The needs hierarchy offers one approach to such human resource issues as quality assurance, employee burnout, and job satisfaction. By understanding the larger set of needs that health care providers bring to their professions, human resource managers can do a better job of coping with and planning for problems that arise in the medical workplace. Maslow's ideas remain influential because they make sense of a certain range of human behavior.

KEY TERMS

Behaviorism—
The theory that human or animal psychology can be accurately studied only through analysis of objectively observable and quantifiable behaviors, in contrast to subjective mental states.

Humanistic psychology—
An approach to psychology that emphasizes the special qualities and potential of human beings. It emphasizes the positive qualities in people, rather than the characteristics of maladaptive or unhealthy individuals.

Peak experience—
An awe-inspiring emotional experience, characterized by a sense of timelessness, unity, and wonder. Maslow found that self-actualizing people were more likely to have peak experiences, but that ordinary individuals could have these experiences as well.

Self-actualization—
The development of one's full potential as a person through creativity, independence, spontaneity, and a grasp of the real world.

Self-esteem—
A sense of competence, achievement, and self-respect. Maslow felt that the most stable source of self-esteem is genuine accomplishment rather than public acclaim or praise.

Transcendence needs—
Needs or values that go beyond the need for self-actualization. These values involve a higher purpose and concern for the good of the community rather than personal welfare.

On the other hand, Maslow's emphasis on a strict hierarchical ordering of human needs has not held up well in other respects because it has never been empirically substantiated. The connections between motivation and external behavior in human beings are more complex than Maslow's theory allows. People strive to satisfy simultaneous needs for love, safety, self-esteem, etc. Moreover, people who have their "lower" needs met in a satisfactory fashion do not invariably seek the fulfillment of "higher" needs, as the behavior of many wealthy or famous individuals indicates. In addition, the drive to satisfy "higher" needs
takes precedence over “lower” needs more frequently than Maslow thought. In sum, human beings are influenced by a wide range of needs and motives. For some people, love, safety, and security are paramount values, while others are motivated by desires for power and dominance. Lastly, human beings are shaped to a considerable extent by their cultures, and cultures differ widely in the sets of values that they emphasize and transmit to their members. For example, the very notion of a “self” is more consistently individualistic in Western societies, whereas it incorporates family relationships in Eastern cultures. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs reflects the values of twentieth-century Western middle-class males; it is not culture-neutral and is therefore not universally applicable to all periods of human history or to all contemporary societies.

Resources

BOOKS

- burger, Jerry, M. Personality, Mh ed. Wads-worth/Thomson Learning belmont LA, 2000. Check for full text

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ORGANIZATION

- American Psychological Association. 750 First Street, NE, Washington, DC 20002. (800) 374-2721.

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