

Key thinkers

Compared to many other disciplines, psychology has a fairly recent history. In this column, Noel Sheehy looks at the contribution of the most influential figures. Here, he discusses Abraham Maslow.

Abraham Harold Maslow

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1908, Abraham Maslow was the eldest of seven children. His parents, uneducated Jewish Russian immigrants, wanted to ensure that their children took advantage of every opportunity available to them. Being the eldest, Abraham was placed under a lot of pressure to be academically successful, which he found stressful and lonely. His parents encouraged him to take a law degree at the City College of New York (CCNY).

After three semesters, Abraham transferred to Cornell, and then returned to CCNY. Against his parents' wishes, he married Bertha Goodman, his first cousin, and they moved to Wisconsin, where Maslow completed his training in psychology. The Maslows had two daughters.

Humanistic psychology

Maslow, the founder of humanistic psychology, was interested initially in psychobiology. This was to inspire his study of human motivation which, he argued,

should be the study of the ultimate goals or desires of people. Rather than attempting to list every goal and desire, he focused on the linkages between them in order to identify general structures or patterns of links. He had been taught how animals seek to satisfy their needs in order of precedence, or hierarchically, and this was his guide to identifying the general structures of goals and desires. For example, breathing takes precedence over drinking and drinking over eating.

Maslow identified five levels of need:

- physiological needs
- needs relating to safety and security
- the need for friendship and love
- the need for self-esteem
- the need to actualise the self

More basic needs (physiological) take precedence over high order needs (self-actualisation). He used the idea of a personality syndrome — an organised, interdependent, structured group of symptoms — as his primary unit of analysis and focused on studying two particular syndromes: self-esteem and security.

The hierarchy of needs

A crucial part of Maslow's theory concerns the distinction between lower ('deficiency') and higher ('being' or 'growth') needs. Higher-order needs are thought to appear later, both in evolutionary terms and in an organism's

development (in adulthood rather than childhood). He also regarded them as less vital to survival — satisfying these high-order needs can be delayed — but once satisfied, they are associated with a profound sense of self-fulfilment. Maslow's criticism of the psychology he studied as a student was that it was too pessimistic. People were thought of as having to cope with destructive, unconscious instincts from within and a hostile social environment from without.

Self-actualisation

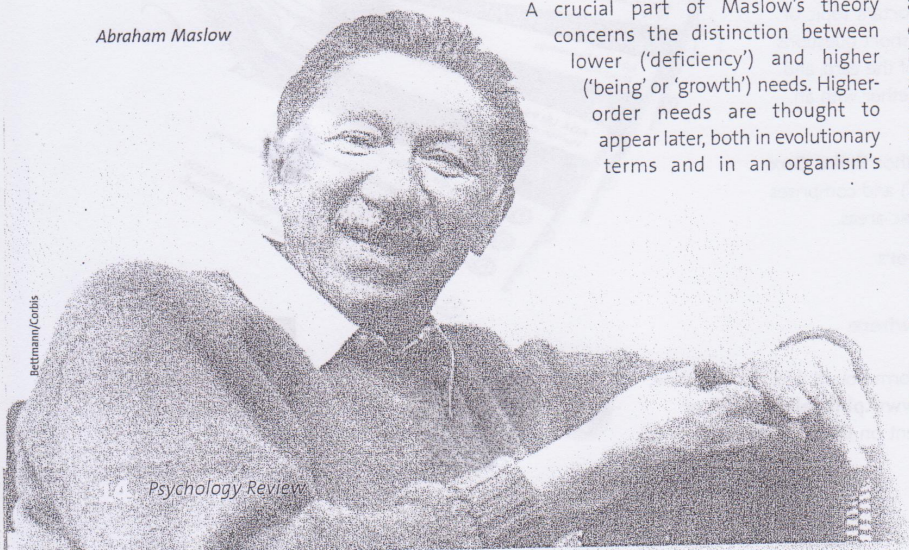
Self-actualisation is a concept offering an optimistic alternative. It refers to the instinctual need of humans to make the most of their abilities: to become what they are capable of becoming. Maslow's hope was that, by identifying the core features of the self-actualising person, it would be possible to produce something like a periodic table of qualities, pathologies (he never regarded the self-actualised person as 'perfect'), and solutions typical of the highest levels of human potential.

Much of the criticism of his optimistic theoretical framework concerns the approach he took to identifying the core elements of self-actualisation. He began by identifying people he regarded as high self-actualisers and then used various combinations of interviews, biographical and autobiographical accounts to distil the core characteristics of self-actualisation. These include:

- being spontaneous in one's ideas and actions
- being creative
- feeling close to other people
- generally appreciating life

The difficulty with this approach is that, by deciding beforehand who were and who were not self-actualisers, Maslow based the development of his theory on

Abraham Maslow



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his personal impressions of self-actualised people such as Albert Einstein and Eleanor Roosevelt. He was aware of the problems this posed but always maintained that his approach to research was mainly concerned with making people aware of the issues involved in studying self-actualisation.

A second criticism concerns the arbitrary limit Maslow imposed on the achievement of self-actualisation. He estimated that only 2% of humans achieve self-actualisation and a list he produced in 1970 contained just nine living and nine historical figures.

This contrasts with Carl Rogers' view that self-actualisation is what every person strives to do: to grow and fulfil their biological fate. Whereas Rogers regarded babies as the best examples of human self-actualisation, Maslow considered it a rarity among the young. This difference in approach is linked to an interesting omission from Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow knew that curiosity — the desire to explore and learn — is an important human need particularly obvious in

young children, but he was unsure of where to place it in the hierarchy, so chose to omit it.

A third criticism focuses on Maslow's claim that people always satisfy lower-order biological needs before attending to self-actualisation. However, some eminent artists and scientists — high self-actualisers — chose to live poor lifestyles, and suffered physical and mental ill-health as a consequence.

Although Maslow's theory has little empirical support with respect to the order of priority of needs, it has proved a useful descriptive model of personality and a good framework from which to investigate individual differences. An enduring feature of his psychology is its concern with well-being and the realisation of human potential. His interest in understanding psychological wellbeing contrasted with the traditional interest in the 'abnormal' and with psychological illness.

Maslow's legacy

Maslow's humanistic psychology stimulated the development of new kinds

of therapies that focused on realising personal resources for growth and healing. His approach is often described as representing a 'psychology of fulfilment' and he is usually classified with other theorists called 'third force' psychologists. 'Depth' psychologies such as psychoanalysis constituted the first force, behaviourism was the second force, and humanistic psychology constituted the third force.

Towards the end of his life, Maslow started to develop the 'fourth force' in psychology. This refers to transpersonal psychologies which, taking ideas from Eastern philosophies, study meditation and altered states of consciousness. Maslow died of a heart attack on 8 June 1970.

Noel Sheehy is Professor of Psychology at Liverpool John Moores University and an applied social psychologist. He is the author of 50 Key Thinkers in Psychology, published by Routledge, and co-author of Understanding Suicidal Behaviour and Applying Social Psychology.

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