Maslow’s Theory of Motivation and Hierarchy of Human Needs: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

**Background:** Although the research support for Maslow’s theory is still developing, the concepts have provided a framework for positive psychology and have been utilized to conceptualize policy, practice, and theory in the social sciences for 65 years. Human behavior is motivated by the satisfaction or frustration of needs, which are arranged in a hierarchy of prepotency from physiological, to safety, to social, to esteem, to self-actualization.

**Aims:** Using a psychobiography orientation, Maslow’s life history is explored in terms of motivation theory in order to 1) present a case study that is particularly well-matched with the model, and 2) understand the development of motivation theory in the context of its inventor’s ecological environment.

**Findings:** Empirical and theoretical criticism of Maslow’s hierarchy feature discussions of cultural relativity and universalism, the directionality implied by the model of gratification and deprivation, the validity of the original categories of needs, and the lack of operationalization throughout the model. Existing research refutes the existence of the original need categories and questions the directional hierarchy that Maslow proposed, but it supports the concept of self-actualization, the existence of lower and higher needs, and gratification-deprivation as motivators of human behavior.

**Implications:** Future studies must develop instruments that clearly operationalize the concepts. An ecological model of human needs can complement Maslow’s theory by offering a dynamic, systems-based framework. Motivation theory and self-actualization have profound implications for society because of the positive consequences of meeting basic human needs to allow individuals to become self-actualized.
Conceptual Framework and Methodology

Psychobiography can be defined as systematic investigation of a life history that employs an explicit theory (Runyan, 1982). This analysis seeks to present the life history of Abraham Maslow in the context of his theory of human motivation. Psychobiography is a method of interpretation and analysis that has been the subject of significant controversy among social science researchers, theorists, and scholars. Some espouse psychobiography’s unique contribution to the understanding of phenomenological experiences while others dismiss the study of individuals as not generalizable and thus not worthwhile. This work does not intend to settle this debate; rather it aims to apply Maslow’s (1943b, 1954) theory of human motivation to its creator to analyze the individual factors and particular life course trajectory that contributed to the underlying assumptions and explicit components of the theory. The use of Maslow’s own life history provides dual opportunities for productive scholarship: 1) present a case study that is particularly well-matched with the model, and 2) understand the development of motivation theory in the phenomenological context of its author.

This work utilizes the case study method to reconstruct and interpret a synthesis of evidence about an individual’s life (Runyan, 1982). Maslow’s life history draws from various sources in an attempt to triangulate and synthesize information. The material is drawn primarily from Maslow’s personal journals (1959-1970), a comprehensive biography by Hoffman (1999), and selected published works (Maslow, 1943a, 1943b, 1954, 1970). Maslow’s case study is presented using a life course orientation, drawing from selected elements throughout his life span.

The stages of Maslow’s life are framed by the need categories he proposed. His
childhood and adulthood are explored with regard to physiological, safety, love and self-actualization needs. This analysis focuses on Maslow’s frustration in the four basic needs during his childhood, in contrast to his adult life when his needs seem to have been well satisfied. Maslow was able to engage in self-actualization goals and behaviors in adulthood because his basic needs had been satiated and were no longer the primary motivators for his behavior. This particular life course trajectory fits well with the model that Maslow proposed, which is clearly not coincidental: Maslow’s phenomenological experiences contributed to his theoretical creations, and his own theories have profound salience in the contextualization of Maslow’s personal development.

Motivation Theory

Maslow (1943a, 1943b, 1954, 1970) proposed a positive theory of human motivation that was based on his studies of successful people including his own mentors. Maslow criticized traditional psychological methods of developing theories based on studies of deviant or dysfunctional people, and he developed a theory of behavior motivation based on the concept of self-actualization. Prior to Maslow’s groundbreaking work in the area of motivation, social scientists generally focused on distinct factors as biology, achievement, or power to explain and attempt to predict human behavior and its underlying motivations (Huitt, 2001). Maslow stated that the most important component of his theory is that it supplements the “Freudian pessimism” and “neo-behaviorist relativism” with positive and empirically grounded theories of human behavior, motivation, and development (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 191). The other

1 Motivation and Personality (1954) was based on Maslow’s previous theories and a revision was published in 1970. The chapters on motivation and self-actualization draw from his 1943 papers, but this analysis cites the earlier papers because of the value placed on the original conception and the detail with which the topics are covered in the articles.
approaches had ignored the highest achievements of humankind by focusing on problems and illnesses, studying “mainly crippled people and desperate rats” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 191). Maslow’s positive theories of human behavior and motivation were pragmatic as well as hopeful: realistic optimism about human beings’ capacity to develop is necessary to address social problems and improve the human condition.

There have been three waves of 20th century psychological thought: psychodynamic, behavioral, and humanistic philosophies of human nature have dominated the dialogue. As a theorist, Maslow is traditionally associated with humanist psychology, but the major theorists in all three areas influenced him, and he made significant contributions to each phase of the development of the field of psychology between 1930-1970. His contributions continue to inform, motivate, and challenge scholarship in the areas of human development, personality, and motivation. Maslow’s model of human needs and behavioral motivation is rooted in the social sciences and it rests upon the findings of several key thinkers. Grounded in the functionalist traditions of James (1936) and Dewey, Maslow (1943a, 1970) listed several other theorists as providing the background and foundation for the development of his theory of motivation, including Goldstein (1939), Freud (1920, 1923), Fromm (1941), and Horney (1937, 1939).

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and theory of motivation was widely used within the field of clinical psychology from the theory’s development in the early 1940s until it became utilized within the business sector in the 1960s (Steers and Porter, 1987). The theory of motivation that Maslow developed in the 1940s has become one of the most frequently cited theories of motivation in the management and organizational behavior
literature (Wahba and Bridwell, 1987). Since its publication over 60 years ago, Maslow’s theory of motivation has been “one of the most popular and often cited theories” (Huitt, 2001). A Google Scholar search indicates that Maslow authored over 200 scholarly works in his lifetime; *Motivation and Personality* is cited over 9,000 times in other scholarly sources.

Maslow’s theory of motivation conformed to known clinical, observational, and experimental evidence at the time of its various publications, and is directly derived from clinical experience. Maslow described the theory as being based on observational, experimental, and clinical facts and viewed it as a “theoretical offering” which others would criticize, utilize, and improve upon over time (Hoffman, 1988, p. 188). Over the next 10 years, he integrated the 1943 papers with other content to present a holistic and synthesized theory in his seminal text, *Motivation and Personality*, which he revised once more before his death in 1970. The text provides more detail about the mechanisms of need satisfaction and the potential consequences of deprivation. It offered a reconsideration of instinct theory in light of the developments in psychology, sociology, and anthropology. The concept of self-actualization was explored further through chapters concerning psychological health, love, normality, and cognition. This continuing process of development reflected Maslow’s commitment to building a flexible, responsive, and valid model of human behavior, motivation, and personality. It also demonstrates the development of the social sciences, since his revisions were motivated by advancements in knowledge including new theories and paradigms, empirical studies, rigorous analysis, and further reflection.

Modern researchers and clinicians have incorporated, tested, and utilized his
framework for human needs and behavioral motivation theory, as Maslow hoped they would: “My fellow scientists can proceed with less passion, personal involvement, and heat—in the cool manner of science—to check whether I was right or not” (Maslow, 1996, p. 30). This analysis aims to present a synthesized critique of Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs utilizing the empirical and theoretical studies that have tested his model. This aim is partially confounded by the continued lack of sound research upon which to build conclusions, but the limitations in the literature have been noted and an extensive scholarly review has been conducted to identify studies that contribute evidence to support or refute Maslow’s theory of motivation.

Maslow (1943a) determined that there was a serious lack of sound data upon which to build a theory of motivation, so he developed this theory to respond to the need for research and clinical work on the motivation of human behavior. The topics that held scientific relevance at the time focused on a strict and early behaviorism based on stimulus-response theories and physiological interpretations of behavior. Although the lack of empirical evidence confounded the development of a grounded theory, Maslow viewed the lack of sound research to be due primarily to the absence of a useful and valid theory of motivation to inform the studies (Maslow, 1943a). Rather than waiting for research to catch up to theory in this chicken-and-egg scenario, Maslow developed his hierarchy of human needs with the hope that future research and clinical practice would bear out the validity of the model he constructed.

Maslow argued that studying the motivation of behavior is important, in addition to observational measures of the overt consequences of behavior. Maslow (1943) argued that some behavior is highly motivated, other behavior is weakly motivated, and some
behavior is not motivated at all. Because most behavior is motivated to a certain extent, motivation is a relevant area for scientific inquiry and clinical work. He asserted that most behavior is multi-motivated. In his Preface to Motivation Theory, Maslow argued that it is almost impossible to separate the drives because multiple overlapping motivations exist simultaneously (Maslow, 1943a). A person may eat because she is physically hungry, because she feels afraid, because she feels lonely or unloved, because she is seeking pleasure or self-esteem, or for all of those reasons at once. It is necessary to consider human needs and motivations for behavior in terms of the complete picture, replete with nuance and interrelationships between different needs, desires, and behaviors. An important activity is considered to interact in dynamic relationships with other elements of relevance in the person’s ecological environment (Maslow, 1943a).

There are characteristics of human beings and the human experience that cannot be discovered through studying other animals, particularly rats. Maslow (1943a) was highly critical of scientific studies that developed theories about human behavior from the study of lesser animals. He lamented that too many research findings developed through animal models are valid for animals but have not been proven in human beings (Maslow, 1943a). Maslow argued that rats have few motivations beyond the physiological needs, so research attempting to generalize from rats to humans is bound to overestimate the importance of physiology and underestimate the higher needs such as esteem and self-actualization. Even if some higher need other than basic physiological survival motivates rat behavior, there is no way for human scientists to determine that accurately. This is particularly relevant in terms of investigating the inner motivations of behavior, because “one could not ask a white rat about his purposes” (Maslow, 1943a, p. 89).
In his research with primates, Maslow found that the higher a species was on the phylogenetic tree, the less important species-wide drives and instincts are to the determination of behavior (Maslow, 1943a, 1970). In other words, higher functioning animals have more variance in their behavior and the motivations for their behavior; lower animals are driven primarily by physiological needs while higher animals often engage in multi-motivated behavior. The receptivity of stimuli and responses to a particular drive become progressively more modifiable as we go up the evolutionary scale (Maslow, 1970). Instinct becomes less critical in the determination of behavior and other influences such as culture increase in salience when comparing rats to dogs to chimpanzees to humans. For this reason, lower animals should be considered unsuitable subjects for developing a theory of human motivation because these methods will likely minimize or exclude unique human features such as self-esteem, love, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943a).

Maslow argued that as higher primates or man himself are better subjects upon whom to build a sound theory of motivation. Strict behaviorism assumed that it was more scientific or objective to judge humans based on the findings of animal research, but Maslow argued this was naïve and impractical (Maslow, 1943a). Maslow noted that what we consider good for human beings “would be bad for mosquitoes, bears, or tigers” (Maslow, 1996, p. 31). Thus there are phenomenological differences between people and other animals, which complicate any attempt to decipher the meaning of the human experience through studies of other species. Despite his skepticism about the broad applicability of animal findings to human behavior, he always maintained a sense of connection to the biological aspects of the human experience. When asked by a colleague
whether his early research with primates had made “any difference” in his current work, Maslow responded, “Absolutely! Of course! They are the ground against which all my present work is figure. It is the foundation upon which everything rests. I am biologically rooted” (Maslow, 1979, p. 851).

Although Maslow was considered a seminal researcher in animal behavior, he was concerned about scientists carrying “the rat-picture over to the human being” (Maslow, 1943a, p. 89). The possibility of overlooking important nuances of human thought, emotion, culture, and social relationships is inherent in applying animal research findings to human behavior. Maslow lamented that it is necessary to repeat the truism that “a white rat is not a human being” (Maslow, 1943a, p. 89). In order to counter these previous methods of developing theories about human behavior based on rats and monkeys, Maslow’s theory is grounded in the human experience. This fundamental belief in the value of anthropocentric research methods for developing a theory of human motivation was echoed in Maslow’s writings about the hierarchy of needs.

Before publishing his new theory of motivation, Maslow released a *Preface to Motivation Theory* in which he outlined 12 foundational statements that form the framework for his hierarchy of needs. Maslow (1943a) asserted that the human being is a whole, integrated organism but social science research and theory has attempted to simplify the study of human beings by reducing them to a collection of separable and identifiable drives. Maslow cautioned against strategies modeling higher human needs (such as for self-esteem or love) on physiological drives. He specifically stated that hunger was not the ideal paradigm upon which to model a theory of human motivation from a practical or theoretical perspective (Maslow, 1943a). Hunger is more isolated, less
common, and it is different from other motivations because it there is a known biological base: most other drives are not related to a specific somatic base comparable to physiological hunger (Maslow, 1943a). Because of the nuanced and multi-layered psychophysiological nature of the higher needs, it is not possible to fully understand love or self-esteem through the study of physical hunger.

Maslow (1943a) railed against psychology’s quest to completely explain the human experience by developing exhaustive lists of driving motivations. He believed that classification should be based on goals rather than desires: a new theory of human motivation should focus on the ultimate goals that human beings pursue, rather than focusing so much on the immediate drives (Maslow, 1943a). This reflects Maslow’s perspective on universalism and cultural relativism, as he stated that the ultimate goals that are common across cultures should form the basis of motivation theory, since there are various culturally contextualized paths a person can take to accomplish broad goals that are common across cultural divides (Maslow, 1943a). He argued that the situation or field must be taken into account, but it must be balanced with dynamic interpretations of the individual and the human condition.

Maslow stated in the Preface the key tenets of his theory: “Man is a perpetually wanting animal; the appearance of a need rests on prior situations, on other prepotent needs; needs or desires must be arranged in hierarchies of prepotency” (Maslow, 1943a, p. 91). Maslow was careful to note that behavior is not often singularly motivated, and he stated that acts are usually motivated by multiple factors. He continued that the integration of organisms and the possibility for isolated, partial, or segmented responses can be included in an overarching theory of human motivation (Maslow, 1943a).
Hierarchy of Human Needs

Maslow published the *Preface to Motivation Theory* and *A Theory of Human Motivation* in 1943, outlining his new theory of human needs and behavioral motivation. At the time, Maslow noted that he had “no doubt that one by-product of modern motivation theory and research will be the overthrow once and for all of all classical hedonistic theory” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 151). He further commented that he believed the field of psychology would develop a new vocabulary based on his work. Privately in his journal, Maslow (1979) gloated in reference to the existing psychoanalytic and behavioral theories of human behavior: “My motivation theory of course destroys all this crap” (p. 852).

Maslow (1943b) proposed a hierarchy of human needs as the first theory of behavior motivation. Within his model, there are at least five sets of needs or goals: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. These basic needs are organized in an order according to relative prepotency. As the basic needs are met, higher needs emerge as primary motivators of behavior. The most salient need dominates the organism and motivates behavior. These needs should not be considered singular or exclusive; when a prepotent need dominates behavior other needs may continue to influence the person, but certain needs emerge as primary motivating factors that underlie human behavior (Maslow, 1943b).

Gratification of needs is as important as deprivation in Maslow’s model, because gratification is the means through which higher needs develop prepotency. Maslow (1943b) proposed that the physiological, safety, love, and esteem needs cease to be primary motivators of behavior once they are satiated. Maslow described how “a hungry
man may willingly surrender his need for self-respect in order to stay alive; but once he can feed, shelter, and clothe himself, he becomes likely to seek higher needs” and will not trade his self-respect for food in the absence of extreme circumstances (Hoffman, 1988, p. 154). These four basic needs are considered to be deficiency needs: the individual feels nothing if they are met, but feels anxious if they are not met. When deficiency needs are met, Maslow proposed that they cease to motivate behavior. He offered the following example: “Suppose you like eating a good steak. You may relish the first one and even enjoy eating a second, but eventually you know that too much steak will make you nauseous” (Maslow, 1996, p. 93). Maslow believed that higher needs could be differentiated from deficiency needs because the higher needs continue to motivate behavior when they are satisfied.

Self-actualization, the pinnacle of Maslow’s hierarchy, is considered to be a growth need, which continues to motivate behavior after it is satisfied. Self-actualization has been described as reaching one’s full potential, and it is self-perpetuating because it has no predetermined end point. Maslow quipped that people never get bored with growth; the thrill never wears off, and satisfaction of the growth needs leads to further pursuit of growth (Maslow, 1996). Maslow described the growth needs in his personal journal, nothing that the “process of growing is itself tasty, feels good” (Maslow, 1979, p. 1225, italics in original). The growth or “being” needs feed themselves, and partial satisfaction leads to continued efforts to self-actualize to an even greater extent.

Maslow (1943a) described human beings as “a perpetually wanting animal” because as “one desire is satisfied, another one pops up to take its place” (p.88). When needs are not met, negative consequences can ensue. Threats to the satisfaction of needs
can also be damaging to human beings. Maslow (1943a) asserted that thwarting or threatening these basic human goals or the defenses that protect them are perceived as a psychological threat that can harm the individual’s ability to function. He differentiated between minor and serious threats to basic needs since frustration of unimportant desires does not usually produce psychopathology, while deprivation of basic needs may lead to psychological damage or the creation of compensatory defense mechanisms.

Physiological Needs

The most basic set of human needs are physiological: eating, drinking, breathing, and excretion (Maslow, 1943b). In Maslow’s hierarchy, the basic needs are the most prepotent and they completely dominate the organism when they are not met (Maslow, 1943b). Human beings strive to achieve a state of homeostasis, which consists of physiological stability and psychological consistency (Maslow, 1943b). Eating, drinking, sleeping, and other activities maintain physical homeostasis, and behaviors that seek satisfaction of physiological needs contribute to a sense of balance and predictability for human beings. In his unpublished papers, Maslow noted, “To urinate or defecate at the right time can be a great satisfaction, in the sense of culmination, total discharge, and finishing” (Maslow, 1996, p. 41). This is an example of a physiological urge that must be satisfied.

Physiological survival is considered to be the most basic motivator of human behavior. These needs are not separated from the person: “the whole individual is motivated rather than just part of him… It is John Smith\(^2\) who wants food, not John

\(^2\) The modern audience must forgive Maslow’s use of terms like “mankind,” “John Smith,” and the “chronically hungry man”: references to “men” are present because significant gender bias in academic literature was normal in the mid-20th century. This contemporary analysis utilizes more inclusive terms, referring to “humankind,” “people”
Human Needs

Smith’s stomach… Food satisfies John Smith’s hunger, not John Smith’s stomach’s hunger” (Maslow, 1943b). When physiological needs dominate the organism, behavior is fundamentally different than when other needs motivate behavior. When John Smith is hungry or exhausted, he will forsake activities that would otherwise be prioritized in order to seek food or sleep. If John Smith is struck with a sudden need to urinate, his behavior will be fully focused on that need, regardless of the relevance of other goals that become temporarily relegated to a secondary status. When physiological needs are unsatisfied, they preoccupy the organism: all of John Smith’s available capacities will be directed towards the most satisfying his physiological needs when they advance to prepotency (Maslow, 1970).

Safety Needs

When physiological needs are met, a new set of needs relating to safety emerges as the primary motivators of behavior (Maslow, 1943b). Physical safety, financial security, protection from harm, and obtaining adequate materials to sustain survival are considered to be safety needs within this framework. Safety needs involve the human yearning for a predictable, orderly world, in which unexpected and unfamiliar things are rare. Human beings tend to seek out consistency and prefer familiarity to novelty; there is a common preference for the known and a fear of the unknown, which relates to the basic human need for safety and predictability.

When safety is threatened, a person becomes singularly focused on averting danger and quickly restoring security. When one is engaged in safety-motivated behavior, the singular focus of the organism is intense because everything else appears less important when confronted with a threat to physical or psychological safety. Even the and “persons” rather than gender-biased terminology, except when quoting.
physiological needs can be relegated to a secondary status in the face of pressing safety
needs. For example when the urge to urinate strikes at a time or place where the only
restroom appears unsafe, many people endure physical discomfort rather than risk their
safety using a dangerous restroom.

Safety needs are especially prepotent during the early years. Maslow (1943b)
argues that the average child tends to prefer a safe, orderly world where dangerous or
unexpected events are rare. As with the physiological needs, safety needs cease to be a
primary motivator of behavior when the needs are met. Safety seeking ceases to be the
dominant behavioral motivator as safety needs are chronically satisfied. For the average
American, safety needs are prepotent only in the context of emergencies or extreme
situational stress, such as the experience of being mugged (Maslow, 1943b).

Love Needs

If the physiological and safety needs are fairly well satiated, the love, affection,
and belongingness needs emerge to motivate behavior (Maslow, 1943b). The love needs
have been described in different ways: in terms of social relationships, connection with
other people, and belonging to groups or partnerships. Maslow (1943b) was careful to
differentiate between the love needs and sexuality: love needs are greater than a
physiological desire to procreate because they represent a human yearning for emotional
connection that is imbued with a different quality than sexual desire. It is not enough for
human beings simply to receive love. People must have the opportunity to love and be
loved: in his private journal, Maslow lamented that he had not “paid enough attention to
the need to admire as well as to be admired (parallel to love as well as to be loved)”
(Maslow, 1979, p. 1177). He wondered about the nature of the need to give to and
provide for others, since he was sure that the need to be loved was a deficiency need, but the need to give love seemed to be more of a growth need.

Social bonding, including the development of friendships, partnerships, and group affiliations are important components that synthesize to satiate social needs. Seeking meaning and connection with other human beings represents the core of social needs, and a variety of types of relationships are needed to fully satisfy the love needs. The sense of belongingness is crucial for human beings, who evolved as pack animals, dependent upon the group for survival. Modern people strive to belong to something larger than themselves: membership in a marriage, a family, a club, a school, a team, a country, a society, or other groups can provide this sense of belongingness and gratify some of the social needs. There can be significant damage to individual’s psychosocial functioning when love and belongingness needs are thwarted or seriously threatened. The deprivation of love needs can increase or reduce future love-seeking behaviors, depending on the individual, the circumstances, and the environment.

Esteem Needs

When the physiological, safety, and love needs are somewhat satisfied, a set of needs relating to esteem and self-respect emerge as primary determinants of human behavior. Generally speaking (with a few extremely pathological exceptions), people in our society wish to think highly of them, they want others to regard them with esteem, and they want this evaluation reflect their true value (Maslow, 1943b). The esteem needs include the desire for a high and accurate estimation of the self as well as the need for others to appraise the individual as worthy. Esteem of others is differentiated from love or social relationships in Maslow’s theory. In this model, the opinions of others about
oneself are considered to be a higher level of human need than simple human contact.

Self-esteem is the other important component of esteem needs. The need for self-esteem is not simply a desire to think well about oneself: it must be firmly based in order to fully satisfy the self-esteem needs. Firmly-based self-esteem is grounded in the real capacity, achievements, and respect from others that an individual maintains (Maslow, 1943b). These needs have been described as a desire for self-respect based on accurate assessment by oneself and other trusted people. The development of self-esteem and ego strength leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, and capability; these emotions propel behavior toward the higher goals (Maslow, 1943b). People who have satisfied their esteem needs tend to be hugely productive and well adjusted. However, thwarting of self-esteem needs can produce psychopathology, especially insecurity, helplessness, and inferiority complexes. People who are frustrated in their esteem needs may cope with these difficult experiences by withdrawing and becoming discouraged or they may create psychological defense mechanisms such as self-aggrandizement to cope with the deprivation they experience in this area.

*Self-Actualization*

When physiological, safety, love, and esteem needs are fairly well satisfied; self-actualization needs emerge as primary motivators of behavior. Maslow began to become interested in self-actualization through his relationships with two extraordinary human beings: Max Wertheimer and Ruth Benedict. He reports that his early investigations on “self-actualization were not planned to be research and did not start out as research, [but] as the effort of a young intellectual to try to understand two of his teachers whom he loved, adored, and admired and who were very, very wonderful people” (Maslow as
quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 150). The young Maslow wondered why these two mentors
were so different from “run-of-the-mill people in the world” (Maslow as quoted in
Hoffman, 1988, p. 150). Eventually, through his studies, Max Wertheimer & Ruth
Benedict came to represent to Maslow a “composite of the self-actualized person rather
than just individuals” and this was the beginning of his theorizing on the innate tendency
of human beings to self-actualize unless thwarted by unsatisfied lower needs (Hoffman,
1988, p. 156).

Maslow’s students also shaped his theory of self-actualization. He described one
case, in which a former student who had graduated and was working to support her entire
family during the Depression in a dull but stable job. Maslow reflected that “she was not
using her intelligence” and “this might be a major reason for her boredom with … the
normal pleasures of life” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 145). He counseled her
to enroll in graduate studies at night and she “became more alive, more happy and
zestful, and most of her physical symptoms had disappeared” (Maslow as quoted in
Hoffman, 1988, p. 145). This case and other similar stories left an impression on Maslow
as he was thinking through the mechanisms through which self-actualization is enhanced
or restricted.

In 1950, Maslow published “Self-Actualizing People: A Study of Psychological
Health” in Personality Symposia (Hoffman, 1988) In this important article, Maslow
offered a positive view of human development, motivation, and personality by focusing
on the lives of famous successful people such as Thomas Jefferson and Jane Addams, but
also contemporaries such as his own mentors Ruth Benedict and Max Wertheimer. The
psychological community met the article immediately with favorable reception. Carl
Rogers and other budding humanists considered Maslow’s work on self-actualization to be “a conceptual breakthrough” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 188). Maslow’s self-actualization research eventually formed “the basis for an entirely new vision of psychology, with the premise that each of us harbors an innate human nature of vast potential that usually becomes blocked or thwarted through the deprivation of lower needs” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 173). Threat to various needs can be considered an inhibiting factor for self-actualization, since it is the frustration of these needs that preoccupies the person and prevents the activities of self-actualization from occurring while the basic needs remain prepotent (Maslow, 1970).

The term “self-actualization” was originally coined by Kurt Goldstein (1939) and Maslow further operationalized it (Maslow, 1943b, 1954, 1970, 1996). While Goldstein originally intended to refer to the innate drive of each organism to reach its biological destiny, Maslow applied the term to describe the process through which human beings embody their full potential. Maslow was insistent about the value and importance of self-actualization: “What a man can be, he must be” (Maslow, 1943b, italics in original, p. 10). Self-actualization has been likened to a seed from which a plant develops: the plant is not present inside the seed, but the potential is there. Hoffman (1988) described self-actualization by invoking this popular and appropriate metaphor: “In the core of our being we each carry the seed of our becoming, of our latent potential” (p. 254).

Each individual will self-actualize in an endemic and idiosyncratic way that fits with his or her personality, circumstances, culture, and other factors. Maslow asserted that “a musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 155). Unlike
physiological, safety, love, and esteem needs, which cease to be primary motivators of behavior after the needs are met, self-actualization needs become more prepotent as they are satisfied. In this way, self-actualization is a unique and lifelong process.

Since satisfied people are rare in our society, it is difficult to obtain information about self-actualization and the processes by which it occurs. In proposing his theory, Maslow (1943b) lamented that not much is known about self-actualization empirically or clinically because basically satisfied people are rare and may be difficult to identify. Although “every baby” is born with the potential to self-actualize, according to Maslow, most have it “knocked out of them” by the time they reach adulthood (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 174). Although successfully self-actualizing people tend to be rare, it is not because they are special: self-actualizing people should not be considered as regular people with something added, but rather as normal people with nothing essential removed. The average person’s true potential, desires, and motivations tend to be inhibited and limited within the roles and necessary activities they enact in their day-to-day lives. Maslow (1996) described the possibility of pursuing higher-level goals within the context of partial satisfaction of the basic needs, invoking the example of the noble carpenter and the self-actualizing plumber. He determined that the basic and higher needs are not mutually exclusive and that behavior could be multi-motivated.

Critics argue that self-actualizing people are difficult to find because they do not really exist: self-actualization is considered by some critics to be nothing but a romantic notion based on hopeful wishes about human nature (Berkowitz, 1969; Wahba and Bridwell, 1987). Maslow’s theories and his perspective on human nature have been criticized as too hopeful. Since the base of psychological theory and research had
previously employed a disease framework replete with skepticism about human nature, some social scientists have found it difficult to accept Maslow’s revolutionary positive theories. While it is important to rigorously critique new theories, it is academically responsible to apply the same critical standards to existing theories, such as those with a more negative view of human nature. Most likely, there is some truth and value in both perspectives, and only through rigorous testing and open-minded criticism will the scientific community be able to fully describe the human experience.

Almost inevitably, the core tenets of Maslow’s theories became denigrated in the popularization process. Later in his career, Maslow devoted significant time to attempting to clarify what he originally meant to those who were applying his principles in ways that did not adhere to his model. He tried to rectify the misunderstandings that self-actualizing people were somehow superhuman and that self-actualization was a static state in which all human problems and needs are transcended. He insisted that self-actualization was not a perfect state of serenity or ecstasy: it is a “development of personality which frees the person from the deficiency problems of growth, and from the neurotic… problems of life, so that he is able to face, endure, and grapple with the ‘real’ [existential] problems [of] the human condition” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 257).

Application of Motivation Theory to Abraham Maslow’s Life

A systematic study of the life histories of important social science theorists can provide insight into the process of social science theory development to challenge the popular misconception that theory is somehow “objective.” Particular individuals who are shaped by their personal experiences, the historical context, their education and social standing, and other elements in the social ecology create theory. It is essential to analyze
not only the content but also the development process of social science theories, because the unique perspective of the theory’s author can introduce bias, nuance, and confounding factors to the theory’s broad utility. This is particularly true of theories dealing specifically with human behavior, personality, and development, because of the bias introduced by personal experiences and unconscious assumptions about other human beings. It is easy to assume that others share one’s experience or perspective without even knowing that one is making an assumption. To highlight an example, Maslow’s theories are criticized for operating based on an American/Western perspective; they are framed in these terms because that is his cultural background and the unconscious assumptions of a Western person form the backdrop for his thoughts. Careful scholarship of Maslow’s life reflects many parallels between his own process of personal development and the theory he developed to describe the same process in others.

Abraham Maslow was by all accounts an exceptional person, and his research was based on studying exceptional people. Some would describe Maslow as a profoundly self-actualizing person, but others would argue that he was insecure and did not exemplify his own definition of self-actualization. Since Maslow formulated the theory of motivation and creates this particular hierarchy of needs, his own life history will be presented following the framework of the five levels of human needs he proposed. This analysis will explore how Maslow’s development fits the theoretical model and whether he can be considered a self-actualizing person.

Abraham Maslow spearheaded humanistic psychology, “as a bold psychological thinker, he was a genius; his ideas have exerted tremendous and still-growing influence throughout the social sciences, the business community, and the wider culture” (Hoffman,
Maslow’s IQ was measured at 195: he initially found the news of his superior intelligence disturbing, and he “went off dazed…for days trying to assimilate this” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 74). Later he became more comfortable, even boastful about his high IQ (Hoffman, 1988, p. 74). He had a difficult time reconciling his intelligence and the value of his work, and others found his bragging unpleasant.

However, Harry Harlow remarked, “To say that [Maslow] was ahead of his time is an understatement of magnificent magnitude” (Harlow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 62). Abraham Maslow had a long and distinguished career, managing to reinvent the field of psychology, to publish prolifically, and to influence how professionals in a variety of fields view human nature and motivated behavior. He received his BA in 1930, his MA in 1931 and his PhD in 1934 at the University of Wisconsin, where he conducted groundbreaking research with Harry Harlow in the field of primate behavior. He conducted research at Columbia University after finishing his PhD, and then from 1937-1951 he was a faculty member at Brooklyn College. Maslow served as the chair of the Brandeis Psychology Department from 1951-1969. Maslow’s *Toward a Psychology of Being* was a collection of essays that became incredibly popular, selling over 200,000 copies before the trade edition was issued in 1968.

During the 1950s and 1960s, humanistic psychology began to take root, spearheaded by Maslow, Rogers, and others who urged the field of psychology to examine humankind’s potential as well as its weaknesses. Maslow was considered was the most prominent leader and proponent of the humanistic psychology movement. He was the cofounding editor of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* and the American Humanist Association chose him “Humanist of the Year” in 1966. Humanism has been
referred to as the “third force” in psychology—moving beyond Freud’s psychoanalysis and Skinner’s behaviorism to a new and more hopeful synthesis of human behavior. These professional accomplishments can be considered evidence of self-actualization and they reflect a deeper principle because of the content of Maslow’s contributions to the self-actualization of not only the field of psychology but also the larger society.

On July 8, 1966, Maslow was elected president of the American Psychological Association. He was stunned because he had been such a vocal and active critic of the profession’s previously pessimistic stance and behavioral methods, and because many of his mentors whom he considered more appropriate for the job had not been chosen. His presidency of the APA validated the criticism that he had doled out over the years as exactly what he had intended it to be: a wake up call to the psychological profession to self-actualize itself and embrace more positive and helpful activities on behalf of humankind. The APA demonstrated their faith in the concepts that Maslow espoused such as self-actualization and their respect for Maslow as a person when they elected him to the Presidency. This provides support for the assertion that others viewed Maslow as self-actualizing, a leader to whom they could look for positive direction.

After suffering his first heart attack in 1967, Maslow redoubled his efforts to publish and prepare his manuscripts. He mused, “by now, at the age of nearly 60, I know that if I begin to suffer from insomnia, digestive problems, glumness and grimness, it is actually a good sign. My wife will aptly comment: ‘Something good is cooking, isn’t it Abe?’” (Maslow, 1996, p. 89). Maslow’s extremely prolific work was hampered by his death from a massive heart attack on June 8, 1970 at the age of 62. However, colleagues released his unpublished manuscripts and journals posthumously, so Maslow’s work
continues to impact society nearly 40 years after his death. It is striking that even in Maslow’s death, his work continues to self-actualize and to contribute to the development of others’ self-actualizing tendencies.

Edward Hoffman provided a “clear and consistent picture of what Maslow was like as a person, not merely as a prolific writer, compelling teacher, and influential thinker” in *The Right to Be Human: A Biography of Abraham Maslow* (Hoffman, 1988). As the only known biography, which was written with the help of Maslow’s wife, friends, family, and colleagues, this resource is utilized heavily for biographical information in the forthcoming analysis. Hoffman wrote that although he never met Maslow, he considered Maslow to be a mentor, as many who now read the late Maslow’s work consider him a teacher and a leader.

*Childhood*

Maslow’s father emigrated from Kiev, Russia when he was 14 years old, and established a successful business upon attaining adulthood. Samuel Maslow married his first cousin Rose, and Abraham was their first son. Born in New York City on April 1st, 1908, Abraham Maslow was the eldest of seven children (one sister died in infancy). As the first-born son, he occupied a special place within the Jewish family; however his status as the eldest produced specific stressors with which he would have to contend. The addition of a new sibling every couple of years was difficult adjustments for young Abe, and the death of his baby sister Edith was profoundly upsetting to him (Hoffman, 1988). He blamed Edith’s death on his mother’s negligence. Rose Maslow did not take well to her eldest son’s scientific tests of her proclamations “that if you do such and such, God will strike you down” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 2). The young Maslow
became more convinced of his mother’s incompetence and the ridiculous nature of her logic when his experiments demonstrated that (for one example) climbing through a window would not stop him from growing taller—his measurements proved that God “didn’t strike [him] down” when he failed to comply with his mother’s directives (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 2)

**Physiological Needs**

Maslow’s family lived in generally middle-class material comfort. He did not endure chronic starvation or extreme material deprivation as a child. However, the satisfaction and lack of satisfaction of physiological needs, particularly hunger and appetites for food left an impression on Maslow long after his childhood was behind him. Maslow “recalled with rancor how [his mother] always served the choicest parts of the boiled chicken or the cream from the bottled milk, to the younger children, never to him” (Hoffman, 1988). Maslow was not complaining that he had not been fed enough: he was upset that his mother had shown emotional favoritism through her choice of which foods to serve to each child. Hoffman (1988) noted the “the strong, traditionally Jewish cultural association of food and love in such complaints” (p. 7).

Maslow’s mother had a strange way of regulating food consumption in her household that may have led to the young Maslow’s frustration in the meeting his most basic physiological needs. His mother kept “a bolted lock on the refrigerator, although her husband was making a good living” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 7). Maslow described how his mother would only open the refrigerator at certain intervals: “Only when she was in the mood to serve food would she remove the lock and permit her children to take something to eat” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 7). This type of behavior demonstrates that
Maslow’s basic physiological needs may not have been sufficiently met, although his family enjoyed middle class status.

Materially Maslow was not chronically deprived or physically starving, but realistically in terms of the family dynamics, he was regularly deprived of food, safety, love, and esteem during his childhood. These dynamics appear to have deeply influenced Maslow throughout his life. Early frustration combined with the later satisfaction of his own basic needs formed personal foundation of his theory the regarding satisfaction of needs leading to the appearance of higher needs, which reflected his personal experience.

Safety Needs

Although his family enjoyed middle-class status, Maslow’s safety needs were profoundly threatened early in his life: his family was an unsafe emotional climate, and he was confronted daily with real physical threats by violent youth in his neighborhood. Peers as well as teachers and administrators at school harassed him. Maslow recalled other disturbing experiences in his early childhood with anti-Semitic neighborhood gangs, and anti-Semitism unfortunately followed Maslow throughout his life. In an early attempt to seek safety, the adolescent Maslow briefly joined a Jewish gang in the neighborhood. He soon found that the activities of gang members (such as throwing rocks at girls or killing cats) were unacceptable to him. He was eventually excluded due to his reluctance to participate in these activities with his compatriots (Hoffman, 1988).

Maslow’s early safety needs were not well met; so much of his youthful experiences could be described as safety-seeking. His attempt to seek safety in the Jewish gang is just one example; Maslow also buttressed himself in the library outside of school hours in order to protect himself from his dangerous world. In his discussion of safety
needs within motivation theory, Maslow invokes the example of a child who is rejected and abused by his parents, but clings to the parents for protection rather than the expectation of love or affection (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1988). This child’s behavior is motivated by a need for safety, a lower need on the hierarchy, rather than seeking love from his parents, since basic safety is lacking. The example of this child echoes Maslow’s own situation as a youngster, as Maslow himself experienced the prepotency of safety needs in the face of rejecting parents.

Love Needs

Maslow’s earliest memories are decidedly unpleasant and upsetting: his mother was superstitious, strict, and punishing. Maslow characterized his mother as cruel, ignorant, and hostile: He described numerous incidents in which his mother behaved in a cruel way but one instance exemplifies the general tone of interactions between mother and con. Young Abe found two abandoned kittens and brought them home to care for them. When his mother discovered the kittens in the basement, drinking milk from a small dish, she became enraged that her son had “brought stray cats into her house and then used her dishes to feed them, she seized the kittens. Before his horrified eyes, Rose smashed each one’s head against the basement wall until it was dead” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 8).

Maslow described the dilemma he faced when he was required to praise his parents at his Bar Mitzvah: he was supposed to turn to his mother and make obsequious statements about how much he owes her and loves her. But he could not do it. Instead he “burst into tears and fled, just ran away, because the whole thing was so hypocritical [he] couldn’t stand it” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 10). But the meaning was lost on his mother, who
reportedly turned to “the assembled relatives and announced, ‘you see! He loves me so much he can’t even express the words!’” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 203). This demonstrates the impact that the deprivation of love needs had on Maslow’s early life.

Maslow’s love and belongingness needs were largely unmet as a child. He described having no friends and escaping into books, school, libraries, and his studies out of loneliness. The loving kindness of his maternal uncle, Sam Schilosky, “kept him from falling into madness as a child” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 8). His father was largely absent from Maslow’s early life, but they forged a close relationship later in life when the elder Maslow came to live with his son after losing his livelihood in the Depression (Hoffman, 1988, p. 8). However, Maslow never recovered from his feelings of hatred and hostility towards his mother, and they never achieved the slightest reconciliation (Hoffman, 1988).

Esteem Needs

Maslow’s esteem needs were painfully unmet during his childhood. Despite the fact that he was clearly a very intelligent child, he was abused and teased by peers and teachers at school. He believed himself to be ugly and inferior, unacceptable to others. He found it difficult to socialize and instead lost himself in books and experiments. During his early years, Maslow’s “fragile self-esteem was also affected by his family’s frequent moves; the situation made it doubly difficult for the shy youngster to form and maintain friendships” (Hoffman, 1988).

His parents confirmed his worst fears about himself by insulting and nagging him about his appearance, his personality, his activities, and his interests. Maslow described, “My father misunderstood me, thought me an idiot and a fool. Probably, too, he was disappointed in me” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988). Maslow’s cruel mother and
dispassionate father reinforced his conception of himself as unworthy of love, attention, or affection. Maslow’s opinion of himself as a child, framed by the opinions of his family, teachers and others, was extremely poor.

As a child and a young man, Maslow was “acutely self-conscious about his appearance,” consumed by “an aching sense of shame concerning his scrawny physique and big nose” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 5). The young Maslow appeared to suffer from extremely low self-concept, which provide a striking contrast to his self-esteem later in life. In fact, as Maslow grew older, he became more comfortable with his physical body and even espoused nudism as a helpful practice to uplift self-esteem and promote gender egalitarianism (Hoffman, 1988).

Self esteem and insecurity to correlate with each other: any attack on security tends to be an attack on self-esteem (Maslow, 1942). This is particularly salient for children like the young Maslow whose early lack of safety, love, and esteem leave them anxious and socially withdrawn unless they can establish independent, adult social networks. The deprivation Maslow endured as a child may have spurred him to over-compensate for his low self-esteem with academic success. Maslow (1942, 1943b, 1970) claimed that individuals with issues relating to inferiority, regardless of the cause (rejection by others, own perceptions, etc), tend to react in compensatory ways. It seems that Maslow may be speaking from personal as well as clinical experience in this case, since he certainly could be described as insecure during his early life. Maslow compensated for his low self-concept by applying himself to not only his own academic excellence, but also to elucidating the positive aspects of human personality and development, and using scientific knowledge in the pursuit of strategies to improve the
human condition (Maslow, 1942).

The older Maslow described how insecurity in the early years can lead individuals to challenge the situations that brought about the insecurity and take compensatory actions in the future to restore and maintain safety (Maslow, 1942). In this way, the hopefulness that characterizes humanistic psychology may have its roots in the early deprivation of Maslow’s esteem needs. Spurred by the rejections of his parents, teachers, and anti-Semitic peers, the young Maslow began investing in himself, his intelligence, his compassion for humankind, and his passion for social change. Maslow later reflected on his theories in the context of his life, observing that “maybe these trends are responses to coping with anti-Semitism, trying (1) to understand it and (2) to cure it by making universal brotherhood” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 306).

**Self-Actualization**

During his childhood, most of Maslow’s self-actualization desires lay dormant, as he was preoccupied with surviving the difficult emotional climate in which he came of age. It is not surprising when one considers the lack of satisfaction in the basic needs that Maslow did not begin to be motivated by self-actualization needs until later in life. Because of his own experience in childhood, which was focused on attaining basic safety, love, and esteem (and which was largely unsuccessful), Maslow was skeptical that children could in fact self-actualize.

While Carl Rogers asserted that babies were the perfect example of a self-actualizing person, Maslow argued that it was rare for very young people to be truly self-actualizing, since the other needs (especially physiological needs) dominate the organism in the early stages of life. Late in his career, after discussing a recent speech he had given
with his wife Bertha, her insight led Maslow to write in his journal: “every baby and potentially every person, should be regarded as capable of self-actualization and of creativeness” (Maslow, 1979, p. 1200). He noted in his unpublished papers: “in American society today, babies have terribly unequal opportunities for personality growth” in terms of both the basic needs and the growth needs (Maslow, 1996, p. 98, italics in original). Because of Maslow’s difficult early life and his preoccupation with basic needs such as safety and belonging, he appears to have concentrated on self-actualization later in life, once his basic needs were more sufficiently met.

Adulthood

*Deficiency Needs: Physiological, Safety, Love, Esteem*

During Maslow’s adult life, his basic needs were generally well-satisfied, allowing him to pursue goals related to self-actualization. His physiological and safety needs were well met, and he did not suffer from starvation or severe deprivation of material comforts during his adult life. During the Great Depression, there was certainly a general threat to financial security but Maslow may have been somewhat protected from the psychological impact because of his middle-class upbringing in which he had not regularly experienced extreme material deprivation. During the Depression, he was offered a “fat fellowship at Columbia with good possibilities of a job after that” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 71). So even the greatest financial threat of his lifetime did not seem to mar him particularly.

He enrolled in law school (under the pressure of his father to fulfill his father’s unrequited dream) and medical school, but did not finish either because the subjects did not interest him sufficiently to continue investing energy in these pursuits. He eventually
discovered psychology and this career path was lucrative and relatively predictable in uncertain times. He had a solid career, generally uninterrupted by unemployment, and he owned his own home. Maslow bought a house in Newtonville, Massachusetts when his daughters were thirteen and eleven. Maslow’s brothers helped out with the purchase, since they were successful in their business by that time, and Maslow experienced a new level of satisfaction in his safety and security needs living in his own home. He no longer worried about anti-Semitic gangs throwing rocks at him in his neighborhood as he had during childhood, and he generally enjoyed a sense of safety and predictability in life.

What Maslow lacked in satisfaction of love and esteem needs in childhood, he more than made up for in his adult life. His best friend in early adulthood was his cousin Will, whom he trusted and loved unconditionally. Will and Abraham shared respect and love for one another, and Will seems to have been Abraham’s first real friend and confidante. His friendship with Will was profoundly healing and hopeful for both young men, which began to satisfy Maslow’s need to give and receive love. Friendship with Will gave Abraham a feeling of “belongingness” which helped him to partially satisfy his social needs.

As he grew into an independent adult, Maslow became increasingly interested in the development of healthy, mutually fulfilling, realistic interpersonal relationships in the realms of friendship, love, and parenting. Like many young men, Maslow greatly desired to be “more promotable, more respectworthy, more lovable, more admired, [and] more attractive to females” (Maslow, 1979, p. 1226). During his early years, Maslow was painfully shy with women, partially based on his extreme physical attraction to them. He wrote in his journal years later, “I really like women. Therefore I like them as they are. I
hate dyed hair, nose jobs, girdles—even brassieres, cosmetics, fashions of all kinds. I’d prefer them naked, natural, and untouched” (Maslow, 1979, p. 814). But he was limited by his fears stemming from abuse and rejection by his mother; frustration of his love needs during childhood led to withdrawal and diminished efforts to satiate his love needs as a young man despite his interest in women.

A developing romance would help Maslow to meet his love needs in a new way: Abraham Maslow met his future wife Bertha Goodman when he was in high school. Bertha had recently emigrated from Russia, and Abraham became her friend and English tutor. Maslow would always recall his first romantic kiss with Bertha as “one of the greatest moments in his life, a true peak experience” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 26). Since Maslow was extremely timid, Bertha’s sister finally encouraged the couple by playfully grabbing Maslow and shoving him towards Bertha with the declaration, “kiss her, will ya?” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 26). The kiss had a profound impact on Maslow’s self-image as a developing adult; he felt worthy of romantic partnership and sexual love, which bolstered his confidence and self-esteem. Maslow would later recall, “I was accepted by a female. I was just deliriously happy with her” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 26). Bertha’s love and acceptance began to remedy some of the previous damage to Maslow’s capacity for receiving love and trusting in relationships stemming from interactions with his mother and other family members.

Their parents were against the courtship and marriage because Bertha was Abraham’s first cousin and she was a recent immigrant. Despite the family’s protests, the couple wed in an intimate ceremony on December 31, 1928 (Hoffman, 1988, p. 37). Marriage offered Maslow a sense of emotional safety and social satisfaction that he had
never experienced before, and a profound shift began to take place within him. Family life in adulthood offered new meaning, pleasure, and joy for Maslow. He enjoyed being a father, and interacting with his daughters brought great purpose and meaning to his life.

Maslow’s first daughter was born in 1938 and his second daughter was born in 1940: becoming a father changed Maslow’s ideas about human nature, reshuffled his life priorities and propelled his research interests. He relinquished the fantasy of completing fieldwork with isolated populations because he could not bear the separation from his family. He reveled in being a father, and the sense of meaning and connection that it brought him. He enjoyed simple pleasures with his children, such as drives to the countryside, and he regularly gathered his daughters and all the neighborhood children to treat them to ice cream cones. His relationship with his daughters provided deep meaning and fulfillment of Maslow’s love and esteem needs, as well as offering some of Maslow’s peak experiences. When his eldest daughter got married, Maslow had a profound peak experience: he sobbed during the ceremony; though he was embarrassed by this public outpouring of emotion, he was compelled to express the feelings contained in this extremely powerful peak experience (Maslow, 1996, p. 101).

Maslow’s attention to childhood in his academic work stemmed at least partly from his close relationships with his daughters and the observations he made during the time they spent together. Seeing his daughters grow and develop solidified a number of ideas about human development and personality. His perception of Ann’s strong personality as a toddler and the considerable influence that she wielded shattered his previous understanding of personality as a function of culture and upbringing. Watson’s (DATE) claim that he could take any baby and raise it to become whatever kind of person
was desired seemed laughable in the face of this strong-willed little girl; Maslow commented, “It made the behaviorism I had been so enthusiastic about look so foolish I couldn’t stomach it anymore” (Hoffman, 1999, p. 128). The differences in temperament between his two daughters served to confirm that human beings do not enter the world as a blank slate to be shaped entirely by the environment; there are intrinsic and unique qualities of individuals that must inform any comprehensive theory of human nature. By 1943 when he published his first papers on motivation theory, Maslow had integrated these observations and insights about human development with his clinical and empirical experience to create an organismic and integrated framework.

In 1968, Ann gave birth to a baby girl named Jeannie: Maslow’s granddaughter was a source of delight and fascination in the last years of his life, inspiring many peak experiences and leading Maslow to new theoretical ideas. Maslow extolled the child’s virtues in his journal, declaring her completely free of any evidence of “evil,” and proclaiming the 16-month-old a “very philosophical baby” (Maslow, 1979, p. 1175). He wondered in his private writings what it was about babies, about this specific baby, that elicited such a strong reaction in him: “You love the baby—or anyone or anything else—because it’s lovable, loveworthy, calls for love” (Maslow, 1979, p. 1110, italics in original). He compared his yearning to spend time with his granddaughter (whom he saw every few months) to an addiction that desperately needed to be satisfied. Maslow described the same “addiction phenomenon” that arose when he was briefly unable to be close to his family in his early career (Maslow, 1979, p. 1151). During his anthropological fieldwork, he was not able to see his wife Bertha or their infant daughter Ann for several months, and Maslow described in his journal the agony of the separation,
complete with “craziness with pictures, dreams, yearning, impatience to get home, etc.” (Maslow, 1979, p. 1151-2). His stable relationship with his wife Bertha and his pride in his family propelled him to further develop his network of social relationships with increasing confidence.

As his social needs became more fully satisfied through friendly contact with other young couples, through his academic relationships and close friendships, and most profoundly through his marriage to Bertha and role as a father, he seemed to be happier and more secure in his ability to excel academically. When he began his tenure at Brandeis, Maslow was socially happier than he had been at Brooklyn College, making close friends with a circle of men who shared his secular Jewish background and his predilection for stimulating intellectual discourse. These friends remained close for at least 15 years, providing Maslow with a community or support and ample opportunities to pursue social, esteem, and self-actualization goals.

In Maslow’s adult life, his family and social relationships were quite fulfilling, and the satisfaction of his social needs led to the emergence of higher needs for esteem and self-respect. His self-esteem changed dramatically from the inferiority complex he carried as a child, and seems to have been closely tied with his professional identity and successes as a psychologist. Throughout his life, Maslow struggled to accurately evaluate his own competency, without minimizing or exaggerating his contributions. In his journal, Maslow wrote in a moment of self-criticism, “I guess I must have felt that the right to call myself a psychologist was also draining out of me, and in several kinds of situations I’ve felt inadequate, not sufficiently trained, etc” (Maslow, 1979, p. 730). But such comments became more rare as Maslow matured and his confidence grew in
relation to his professional successes. The young adult Maslow emerged on the academic scene as an important thinker, and he remains there, bolstered by his own and his colleagues’ confidence in his work, well beyond the time of his death in 1970.

In contrast to his high self-esteem in adulthood, Maslow experienced extremely low self-esteem as a child and adolescent. Maslow (1942) observed that a description of the possible reactions to the loss of self-esteem could be expanded almost infinitely because of the breadth of responses that feelings of worthlessness, inadequacy, and inferiority produce. Threats and damage to self-esteem may be considered threats to self-actualization because thwarting basic needs hinders the prepotency of higher-level goals. The older Maslow did not outwardly appear to suffer from a lack of self-esteem; quite the contrary he was known to brag about his high IQ and other aspects of his greatness, but this may have been a compensatory mechanism to cope with the low estimation he held of himself during his early life. For example, he may have felt compelled to announce that he is smart (worthy) to acquaintances partially to prove that he is not stupid or worthless the way he was treated as a child.

Over the course of his lifetime, Maslow developed firmly based self-esteem, created through feedback from others and his own assessments of his intellectual and intrinsic value. His churlish egoism was displayed in interactions such as this with colleague Max Lerner: Upon discussing Maslow’s his new book, Lerner joked that “Plato had already written it” and Maslow replied, “Yes, Max, but I know more than Plato did” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 205-206). Before we begin to assign Maslow the character of an egomaniac or an Axis II disorder, Lerner was initially put off by the comment, but he later “realized that his colleague was correct” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 206). Maslow’s self-
esteem in his later life was not based on grandiosity or false ideals; it was firmly-rooted in the well-deserved and ample praise that Maslow received about the quality and usefulness of his work and integrated into his sense of self.

In his unpublished papers, Maslow mused about the difficulty of expressing to others one’s true estimation of one’s own intelligence of worth in a tactful way, likening behaviors that minimize one’s intelligence in the company of other people to “a chameleon-like cloak of false modesty” (Maslow, 1996, p. 49). Since it is not generally accepted for extremely intelligent people to say, “I am a very smart person,” this creates tension and social stress for intelligent people who must somehow navigate social interactions between the extremes of hiding their true skills to be more acceptable to their peers and bragging about their superior aptitude (Maslow, 1996). Maslow noted that honest expressions of a high estimation of self “generally arouses counterreactions, hostility, and even attacks” (Maslow, 1996, p. 49).

Even his own wife appeared to view him as boastful, since Maslow complained in his personal journal: “Bertha says I’m arrogant and grandiose like Freud. I’d say it’s different” (Maslow, 1979, p. 746-7, italics in original). Maslow resisted a view of himself as egotistical, and he launched a tirade in his personal journal, drawing distinctions between his own confidence and Freud’s noted arrogance. “The self-confidant, stubborn, creative arrogance which is necessary for any big job and for real independence and courage is quite different” from the narcissism and egotism that Freud and other theorists displayed in Maslow’s opinion (Maslow, 1979, p. 746-7). This section of the journal seems to be Maslow’s somewhat ill conceived and unsuccessful effort to convince himself that he was not offensive and grandiose like Freud.
Despite his great success and considerable evidence that he bragged about his intelligence, Maslow continued to be concerned that others did not or would not accept him. His nomination for APA presidency helped him to feel accepted and to meet some important social belongingness needs that he felt had been frustrated earlier in his life and career. He was completely “astonished” at his nomination to the presidency of the APA, noting in his journal that “apparently I’ve read the situations incorrectly, feeling out of things, alienated from the APA, rejected and rejecting” (Maslow, 1979, p. 730). While Maslow worried that his hotly criticized ideas and challenges to the psychological establishment has put him at a professional disadvantage, it was his role as a maverick that earned him the honor of the presidency. Maslow’s decision to accept the nomination appears to have been based more on personal factors than professional ones; as he admitted in his private journal, “If it hadn’t been so unexpected and so pleasant also to be back in the [APA] family again, I’d surely have declined the nomination” (Maslow, 1979, p. 739).

_Growth Needs: Self-Actualization_

Maslow exemplifies the process of self-actualization: his satisfaction of the basic needs opened up the desire to achieve his highest potential, which he pursued relentlessly until his death in 1970. Self-actualization needs occupy the position of the highest relative prepotency in Maslow’s model, and they include cognitive, aesthetic, and potential-fulfilling motivations for behavior. Because self-actualization is a process rather than a static state, it is necessary to track Maslow’s intellectual development over the course of his adult life, in order to trace the path of his self-actualization. The following includes elements of meta-analysis, because Maslow’s process of developing his own
self-actualizing potential parallels his academic development of the theory of self-actualization.

Maslow kept a journal, not only to organize his personal thoughts, but because he was conscious that he might not be able to finish all of the work he had started in his lifetime, and he wanted future scholars to find his unfinished works in some semblance of an order from which they could continue the work he had started. When he had his first heart attack, he became mobilized, compiling a list of individuals who could publish his journals posthumously. He was making plans to continue self-actualizing after his death, writing in his journal: “Of course I’ll keep writing, but if I died now a really perceptive man could do with what I’ve finished up to now” (Maslow, 1979, p. 895). His last journal entry ends with this line, appropriately summing up a lifetime of contributions to a rapidly expanding field: “So again I must say to myself: to work!” (Maslow, 1979, p. 1309, italics in original).

Maslow became interested in peak experiences, which he associated with extremely good inner health and self-actualizing tendencies. He described peak experienced using 20 common features, including temporary disorientation, feelings of wonder and awe, great happiness, and a “complete momentary loss of fear and defense before the grandeur of the universe” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 226). Maslow argued that peak experiences “often leave profound and transformative effects in their wake” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 226).

Maslow described several peak experiences related to his own intellectual growth: three nights before giving a speech on “Peak Experiences ad Acute identity Experiences” at a memorial for Karen Horney, he awoke in a “state of inspired euphoria” and wrote for
several hours with impassioned focus (Hoffman, 1988, p. 260). His wife suggested that he share his personal experience with his academic colleagues, and Maslow carefully considered exposing his own peak experiences. Upon gazing at the audience, Maslow decided he did not feel comfortable sharing his personal experiences in this venue, and he presented his official paper. Afterwards, he questioned his decision, and it seemed to bring up issues for Maslow about how much of his personal life to share with colleagues.

Key thinkers in the field of psychology influenced Maslow’s thinking about human needs, whose contributions to Maslow’s theories of motivation and self-actualization have been profound. This analysis traces Maslow’s intellectual development by highlighting the scholars and mentors who influenced Maslow in his own process of self-actualization as he created the theory.

*Titchener.* Titchener was one of Maslow’s first psychology professors, and the structuralism that Titchener espoused initially discouraged Maslow from the field that would later become his life’s work. Titchener’s approach to psychology “could not have been further removed from Maslow’s impassioned social goals” and he found structuralism to have “nothing to do with people” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988). Initially put off by his initiation into the field of psychology, Maslow studied medicine, anthropology, and other fields before discovering more activist branches of psychology.

*Sumner.* Maslow’s work was strongly influenced by Sumner’s *Folkways*, which Maslow read in the 1920s. *Folkways* “struck Maslow with the force of revelation: Sumner was not simply describing the archaic past, but Maslow’s own life as well” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 31). Sumner’s work inspired Maslow to employ his “intellect for creating a better world,” to overcome the pain and hatred in his past (“exemplified by his
mother and the boys who had thrown rocks at him”) and to make improving the state of humanity his life’s mission (Hoffman, 1988, p. 31).

Friends and colleagues have commented that the one character flaw that Maslow displayed was “a messiah complex”: His personal mission to “change the human condition” consumed him (Hoffman, 1988, p. 211). Maslow himself agreed, in light of his heart attack, that he had worked too hard and that he viewed his work with a “kind of messianic quality, as if only I were available to bring the message” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 309). In his journals, Maslow makes it clear that he views himself as a kind of Bodhisattva (an enlightened being who chooses to delay entering nirvana out of compassion for other human beings still suffering). He described the path this way: “We want to help and need in order to grow and as an expression of being grown; but the best helper is the best person, so the best way to become a better helper is via becoming a better person” (Maslow, 1979, p. 974). Much of this orientation toward life (minus the Buddhist concepts) can be drawn to Maslow’s early reading of Sumner, which inspired the budding academic throughout his career.

Watson and Pavlov. Behaviorism had its origins in animal science, descended from Ivan Pavlov’s famous experiments where dogs were conditioned to salivate to the sound of a bell. Watson had drawn from the animal work of early behaviorism and applied the principles to human beings with astounding results. He proposed in The Psychologies of 1925 (1927) that behavioral techniques could be used to target change in social behavior including “racial prejudice, ethnic snobbery, and the use of physical punishment in child-rearing and education” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 34). Watson’s The Psychologies of 1925 hit Maslow “with the force of a bombshell,”
promising a new science of psychology which excited Maslow to a point of euphoria and intoxication (Hoffman, 1988, p. 33). He later described dancing “down Fifth Avenue, jumping and shouting and gesturing, trying to explain to [Bertha] what it meant” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 33). For Maslow, Watson provided a “clear alternative to the moral vacuum of Titchener’s scientific approach” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 33). Upon discovering Watson’s work, Maslow’s vision of his life’s path became further solidified as he determined psychology to be his career of choice. The training that Maslow received early in his career was decidedly experimentalist-behaviorist, and he focused his studies on biological sciences, chemistry, zoology, physics, and animal behavior (Hoffman, 1988).

Harlow. Maslow was Harry Harlow’s first doctoral student and research assistant; they coauthored a series of articles in the *Journal of Comparative Psychology* in the early 1930s, reporting their findings on delayed reactions and memory tasks in various primates. Maslow published several other articles based on his primate research including several papers derived from his doctoral work and his research on sexual dominance in monkeys. Harlow became the leading primate researcher in the United States, and at the apex of his dominance in the field, he remarked that Maslow’s doctoral work had “stood as definitive in the field for approximately thirty years” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 62; see also Harlow 1955, 1974). In his primate work, Maslow was hesitant to draw analogies between animal behavior and human life.

Freud. Maslow became acquainted with Sigmund Freud’s work in the early 1930s, when he read *The Interpretation of Dreams* and experienced another round of revelations. He later recalled, “The reason I was so impressed with [Freud’s work] was
that it fitted with my experience and nothing else did that had been offered me. Also I could see in new ways things I hadn’t seen before” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 57). His continued interest in Freud led him quickly to Alfred Adler, whose ideas he found enthralling (Hoffman, 1988).

**Adler.** Maslow developed a close relationship with Adler, whose death in 1937 unfortunately ended their friendship. However, Maslow continued to draw upon Adler’s ideas for the rest of his career: “it would be no exaggeration to characterize Maslow as one of the first American psychologists to recognize and build upon Adler’s work” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 102). Maslow was profoundly influenced by Adler’s *Social Interest* and often cited it in his articles, including the hierarchy of human needs. Adler turned Maslow’s attention to the “notion of social interest as a basic human trait” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 105). Most importantly, Adler influenced Maslow with regard to his “optimistic and progressive outlook” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 106). Adler demonstrated to Maslow that it was possible to maintain a positive view of human beings and human nature even in the face of contemporary theorists like Freud whose theories and writings were steeped in “gloom about the human condition” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 106).

**Wertheimer.** In 1935, Maslow became acquainted with Max Wertheimer, the founder of Gestalt psychology, whom he considered to be a “genius as a psychological thinker” (Hoffman, 1988, 92). “Few other American psychologists of the time were as affected by the Gestalt founder as Maslow was” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 93). Maslow was so impressed by Wertheimer that he began an informal study of his mentor to understand what made him so great: this initial curiosity about his teacher eventually led to his theory of self-actualization and his fascination with self-actualizing people. Maslow also
identified Ruth Benedict as a self-actualizing person, and these two mentors deeply informed his theory of self-actualization and human motivation.

*Benedict.* In the 1930s, Maslow developed a keen interest in anthropology and its study of human cultures. His work with Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict impacted Maslow profoundly as a psychological thinker, and solidified his commitment to interdisciplinary studies. Maslow completed lengthy anthropological fieldwork with Blackfoot Indians in 1933-1937, which led to his renouncement of cultural relativism in favor of a more universalistic view of the human condition. This fieldwork, and the relationships he developed with the Indians and anthropologists with whom he worked, left a impression on Maslow that profoundly influenced his thinking about human needs and motivation.

*Horney.* Maslow studied at the New School with Karen Horney, who has been aptly described as “the first ardent feminist thinker and critic of Freud within the ranks of the psychoanalytic movement” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 96). When Horney presented lectures, “Maslow was there, avidly taking notes, asking thoughtful questions, and raising interesting issues from his background as an experimental psychologist” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 98). He frequently cited Horney’s (1937) *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time,* highlighting it in the theory of motivation. One of the most important impacts that Horney had on Maslow was her ability to retain fundamental principles of psychoanalysis while “still searching for new paths to understand human nature and potential” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 99).

*Fromm.* Eric Fromm also had a profound influence on Maslow: the two met in 1936 and “although they had quite different personalities, intellectually they suited each
other well” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 101). In addition to Maslow attending Fromm’s lectures, they socialized outside of the classroom and developed a friendship that cooled when Maslow started behaving more like an intellectual equal than a fawning student. Fromm’s “passionate concern for social justice and world betterment” and his “humanitarian outlook” inspired Maslow in his quest to improve the human condition (Hoffman, 1988, p. 101). Although their friendship was reduced to occasional professional meetings later in life, the impact of the friendship while it lasted was deeply important for Maslow, because it affirmed the values of social justice and social change at a time in his early career when he was quite impressionable. In late 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked, Maslow found himself crying while watching a “poor, pathetic parade” and in that moment he had “a vision of a peace table, with people sitting around it, talking about human nature and hatred and peace and brotherhood… I realized that the rest of my life must be devoted to developing a psychology for the peace table” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 148). Maslow reflected that what he witnessed and felt that night changed his life, and in this way it can be considered a peak experience.

Goldstein. Kurt Goldstein was a seminal figure in the field of neuropsychiatry as well as a friend and colleague of Maslow (Hoffman, 1988, p. 106). Goldstein’s (1939) *The Organism* excited Maslow because of its “broad philosophical stance, one based on biology’s solid ground” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 109). Maslow first cited Goldstein in 1941 and afterwards he cited Goldstein in numerous publications, including the theory of motivation (Maslow 1941, 1943a, 1943b, 1970). Virtually no other theorist at the time of Goldstein’s writing was rooted in organismic functioning: Maslow was fascinated because he was interested in cultural and social issues, but he has never lost his respect
for scientific research and he had struggled himself to balance his orientation toward both (Hoffman, 1988, p. 109). In Goldstein’s work, Maslow saw a model that could encompass complimentary biological, psychological, cultural, and social factors. Goldstein also influenced Maslow to view human beings holistically, rather than reducing people to a “bag of symptoms” (Goldstein as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 109). Maslow considered Goldstein to be a mentor and a model of self-actualization; when Maslow was chairman of the psychology department in the 1950s, Maslow hired Goldstein to join the faculty.

Goldstein disapproved of what was probably his single greatest contribution to Maslow’s work: Goldstein originally coined the term “self-actualization” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 109). Goldstein’s original definition was vague and philosophical, describing the “innate desire or predilection of every organism, including the human being, to achieve its potential” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 109). Goldstein basically used the term to mean what every living thing does: to try to grow, to become more, and to ultimately fulfill its biological destiny. Maslow constricted the term to refer to a specialized set of behaviors and needs that (a select few) human beings engage in: he used the term quite specifically, changing its connotation. Maslow “synthesized his own theory of human motivation and personality” using a more concrete definition of self-actualization as a natural drive that is predicated upon other basic needs being partially fulfilled (Hoffman, 1988, p. 110). Maslow himself described an experience in which his self-actualization needs were frustrated by a certain faculty position. Maslow lamented in his journal: “I feel ineffective, not well used, not using my full power…. This is a job in which I cannot grow, or enjoy myself, or be fully functioning” (Maslow, 1979, p. 935, italics in original).
He was profoundly unhappy until he found different employment that allowed him to pursue more satisfying self-actualization goals.

In November of 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, and most people who were alive at that time can tell you where they were when it happened and their responses to the tragedy. That day, Maslow recorded in his journal: “News of Kennedy shooting. My reaction to these things has been sadness and depression, then anger about the gun laws, then a determination to get to work, to my job of understanding individual and social illness, violence, malice, and stupidity” (Maslow, 1979, p. 1044, italics in original). Maslow’s initial response to the nation’s loss was to redouble his efforts to address social problems and attempt to describe a society that would more adequately provide for not only the basic security needs of the population, but would also facilitate their process of self-actualization. In Maslow’s view, culture and society could be molded to influence human beings to avoid what Maslow described as social illness, violence, malice, and stupidity.

Maslow had his own close encounter with death when he suffered a heart attack in late 1967. He survived due to exemplary medical care, and his near-death experience had a profound impact on his orientation toward life and self-actualization. In his journal, Maslow wrote that this recent experience had made everything “more intense, beautiful, precious, poignant, etc.” (Maslow, 1979, p. 997). Waxing philosophical, Maslow continued: “If you are reprieved from death, not only can you thereafter be comfortable with it, but also changes life itself” (Maslow, 1979, p. 997). He told friends about how happy he had been, recovering in the hospital from his heart attack, because he had finished his “mission” with the metamotivation paper, so he felt profoundly satisfied with
his life’s work (Maslow, 1979, p. 997).

**Synthesis**

It is not surprising that a person whose life followed this hierarchy according to the satisfaction of needs in a specific order would develop a theory based on the outline of his own experience. The parallels between Maslow’s own life history and the development of his theory of motivation are difficult to ignore. As a child, he was motivated primarily by physiological and safety needs, while his love and esteem needs were thwarted and his potential for self-actualization lay dormant. As a young adult, he began to meet his social and esteem needs, which for Maslow led to the possibility of self-actualizing. Maslow was fairly well satisfied in his basic needs throughout his adult life, and despite the deprivation he experienced as a child; he reached toward his full potential and arguably reached it. Maslow’s theory is anything but universal: it is deeply personal and phenomenological. Maslow cited case examples in his major theoretical papers that resonate strongly with Maslow’s life story, as he consciously and unconsciously reflected his own perspective.

Early deprivation of basic needs is associated with a myriad of negative outcomes, and Maslow argued this point with increasing assertiveness beginning with the 1943 motivation papers and continuing with later publications (Horney, 1937; Maslow, 1954, 1970). Chronic frustration of basic needs in childhood almost inevitably damages the developing person and causes emotional damage that persists throughout life (Horney, 1937; Maslow, 1970). Individuals who are preoccupied with and frustrated by the lower needs tend to compensate for this damage in a variety of ways, including the development of neuroses and enduring psychopathology (Maslow, 1942). Maslow
appears to have compensated for his early deprivation by applying himself to his academics, focusing on human strengths, and pursuing scientific strategies to improve the human condition (Maslow, 1942).

Maslow engaged in psychotherapy to address the deprivations and rejections that had shaped his childhood, especially his mother’s cruelty and his early experiences of anti-Semitism (Hoffman, 1988). Therapy can be helpful but it cannot fully restore what has been denied during the early years (Hoffman, 1999; Maslow, 1970). Maslow reported some alleviation of subjective distress, but his underlying hatred of his mother formed an insurmountable obstacle.

Despite his concerted efforts in psychotherapy and the context of a supportive wife and nuclear family, Maslow was unable to process these experiences of maternal rejection and deprivation of love. After moving out of his parents’ house as a teenager, Maslow only saw his mother a few times before her death and he refused to attend her funeral. Although Maslow never directly reconciled with his mother, he established the safety he needed by maintaining a distance from his mother that reflected his feelings and the circumstances. Maslow reflected, “I know certainly of the direct consequences of having no mother-love. But the whole thrust of my life-philosophy and all my research and theorizing also has its roots in a hatred for and a revulsion against everything she stood for” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988). In fact, Maslow later reflected on his theories in the context of his life, observing that perhaps his theoretical work on the positive side of human nature may hearken back to his early experiences of anti-Semitism in his community, rejection by his family, and isolation from peers. (Hoffman, 1988).

The psychobiographic study of Abraham Maslow contributes to the understanding
only of his phenomenological experience it contextualizes the development of his theories, and it also offers unique insights into human motivation and personality. While case studies may not be broadly generalizable, Maslow’s life story provides a human context to explore the theoretical concepts of self-esteem, deprivation, and self-actualization. Maslow’s experiences with early deprivation of social needs in his early childhood coupled with his bonding with an adult partner with whom he created his own family suggests that individuals who have experienced early trauma may be able to overcome the limitations of their childhood deprivation to lead socially fulfilled and balanced lives. The path that Maslow took on his life’s journey from a childhood characterized by emotional deprivation to become a celebrated humanist offers an example of an individual who overcame chronic deficits in the satisfaction their basic needs to strive toward improvement and self-actualization.

Empirical and Theoretical Criticism of Motivation Theory

Maslow’s model has held up to criticism by social scientists, clinical practitioners, and armchair philosophers alike. Reviewers have discovered some flaws, exceptions, and counterevidence for the theory as originally proposed but the hierarchy of human needs remains popular despite substantial critique. This analysis presents four main criticisms of Maslow’s (1943b, 1970) theory of motivation with specific reference to the hierarchy of human needs. First, the implications of the directionality of needs prepotencies in Maslow’s model are explored in light of empirical findings regarding deprivation and gratification. Then, the failure of the model to accommodate the role of culture and the dismissal of cultural relativity inherent in the framework Maslow proposed will be addressed. Third, conflicting results support and refute Maslow’s original categories of
needs so there is no consensus regarding the relative accuracy of Maslow’s categories in the absence of rigorous scientific investigation. Finally, Maslow’s theory is difficult to test because of the nature of the subject matter, the difficulty with defining the concepts and the high degree of overlap, for example between love and esteem, or physical and safety needs. Current research has been conducted based on divergent operationalizations of Maslow’s concepts: more carefully planned and coordinated studies are needed to clearly identify, observe, operationalize, assess, and analyze the role of various needs in determining human behavior.

**Deprivation: The Chronically Hungry Person**

Maslow (1943b) argues that a person who is lacking in all of the basic needs including physiological, safety, love, and esteem would likely crave food above all else. In the Maslow invoked the example of a chronically hungry person for whom no other interests exist beyond food: “he dreams food, he remembers food, he thinks about food, he emotes only about food, he perceives only food and he wants only food” (Maslow, 1943b, p. 374). The chronically hungry person’s behavior is assumed to be entirely motivated towards the goal of obtaining food, rather than seeking love, self-esteem, self-actualization or any of the higher needs according to Maslow’s theory of motivation. Maslow (1943b) asserts that the chronically and dangerously hungry man may be described as living on bread alone—*when there is no bread*. While he is actively hungry, values such as freedom, love, and community may be “waved aside as fripperies which are useless since they fail to fill the stomach” and utopia is envisioned as a place with plenty of food (Maslow, 1943b, p. 374). This simplified explanation of the motivation of chronically deprived people does not a comprehensive depiction of the experiences of
chronically hungry people and it fails to take into account a variety of interactive factors at different levels of the social ecology that impact the motivation and behavior of people under extreme physiological stress.

Maslow argued that a starving person would “willingly surrender his need for self-respect in order to stay alive,” but as soon as he is able to provide for his physiological needs, he will no longer trade his self-respect for food (Hoffman, 1988, p. 154). Maslow also argued that people who have been accustomed to prolonged starvation are partially enabled thereby to withstand deprivation (Maslow, 1943b). However, the opposite is also true: deprivation often leads to increased susceptibility to risk factors: chronically starving people are physiologically more vulnerable. The paradigm that considers traumas to be some type of inoculation against future vulnerability must tread cautiously and employ ecological person-centered models that can accommodate the influence of multiple factors interfacing simultaneously on various levels. Maslow (1943b) later asserted that chronic deprivation can lead to increased psychological vulnerability, and in his 1970 version of the theory he made an extremely strong case for the impact of frustration of basic needs particularly during the early years.

Maslow (1943b) acknowledged that the behavior and motivation of individuals with a severe and pervasive psychological disorders may not be well explained by this theory. Maslow proposed that people who experienced extreme emotional and/or physical deprivation early in life may be permanently damaged in terms of the social, esteem, and self-actualization needs. Individuals develop coping mechanisms in the face of ongoing stressors: in the context of chronic deprivation of basic needs, the person may disconnect from the higher needs, since they may seem hopelessly out of reach. Adults who were
starved for love and care as infants may have lost the desire and ability to give and receive affection. People with a traumatic attachment history may not engage in the same process of moving up the hierarchy of needs as the lower needs become satisfied (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1988; Maslow, 1943b). These individuals may reach a point in life where the lower needs are satisfied (for example secure access to food and a place to live), but the needs for social contact may not emerge because of the profound early damage in this area. She will not continue to ascend the hierarchy of needs toward self-actualization if she has lost hope.

Although Maslow invoked “the chronically hungry man” as his primary illustration of his theory’s utility, he noted that the extreme case is not the ideal model from which to derive general theories of human behavior. Research and theory has tended to generalize to the human experience by looking at emergency situations, which are by their very definition rare events. Maslow asserts that “obviously a good way to obscure the ‘higher’ motivations, and to get a lopsided view of human capacities and human nature, it to make the organism extremely and chronically hungry or thirsty” (Maslow, 1943b, p. 6). Maslow (1943b) criticized theories that rest on observations of human behavior under extraordinary conditions, cautioning against extrapolating from human behavior in emergencies to human behavior in more typical situations. Maslow asserted that those who attempt to measure the goals of humankind based solely upon “behavior during extreme physiological deprivation is certainly being blind to many things” (p. 6).

It is important to observe human behavior under more normal circumstances in order to develop a generally applicable theory that is not distorted by extreme environments. Maslow’s theory of the hierarchy of human needs attempts to account for
the experience of the chronically hungry and the chronically satisfied within the same model, but the model’s structure does not allow enough flexibility to account for the extremes of satisfaction and deprivation as well as the normal experiences of the general population.
Gratification: The Chronically Satiated Person

According to Maslow’s model, once a particular need is satisfied, other needs emerge: while food-seeking primarily motivated the chronically hungry man, the chronically gratified man is not motivated by basic needs. Empirical studies show scant support for the concept of gratification as a direct motivator for human behavior (Hall and Nougaim, 1968; Lawler and Suttle, 1972; Trexler and Schuh, 1964; Wofford, 1971). Maslow’s theory has only been partially borne out by empirical studies: gratification was supported as an important concept in the motivation of human behavior, but there was no clear hierarchy or order in which needs appear to become predominant. Two longitudinal studies provided the most appropriate methodology and the strongest overarching framework to analyze the dynamic and multilayered subject of human motivation and needs (Hall and Nougaim, 1968; Lawler and Suttle; 1972). These studies indicate no support for the gratification mechanism for the emergence of higher-level needs. Two additional studies found evidence to contradict Maslow’s proposition that gratification leads to the prepotency of higher-level needs (Trexler and Schuh, 1964; Wofford, 1971).

The role of gratification in the emergence of higher needs appears to be the weakest conceptual link in Maslow’s theory, because it is easily refutable by simple observation of behavior. Need or satisfaction seeking does not motivate a significant proportion of human behavior. Maslow offered the example of a person who has finished dinner: he is no longer hungry “nevertheless ice cream is gladly eaten where bread or soup or potatoes may be entirely refused” (as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 56). Similar phenomena are noted in primates who beg for treats but not for normal foods once their physical hunger is sated.
Similarly, physiological needs may be ignored or relegated in favor of higher needs, such as social acceptance: when teenager is hungry but her friends are not, so she may delay eating. A hungry factory worker may wait for the proper lunch break rather than risk the financial or social consequences of ceasing work to eat based solely on her physiological urges. A satiated person purchases groceries, showing that the sated hunger drive is still an active determinant of behavior even while the need is supposedly not dominating the organism’s behavior. This logic may be applied to other needs beyond physical hunger: for example people who make new friends even though they already have a strong social network that satisfies social needs.

When a need is chronically satiated, it may be taken for granted (Maslow, 1943b). Children who grow up surrounded by great wealth may easily take it for granted, children who are well-loved may undervalue their family, and children who are never in danger forget how it feels to be threatened. In this way, people whose needs have been well satiated may not fit the model extremely well, but Maslow added a second way in which chronically gratified people may not fit the model. People who have been satisfied in their needs, particularly early in life, seem to “develop exceptional power to withstand present or future thwarting of these needs simply because they have strong, healthy character structure as a result of basic satisfaction… It is just the ones who have loved and been well loved, and who have had many deep friendships who can hold out against hatred, rejection or persecution” (Maslow, 1943b). However, this can be paradoxical: people whose needs have been consistently satisfied can be extremely shocked in an emergency situation in which basic needs are suddenly deprived and may display more distress than their more “hardy” counterparts who have more experience coping with
adversity.

Because of the paradoxes inherent in human nature, a directional model based on a predetermined hierarchy is not adequate as a theory for motivation. The complex interrelationships between psychological development, personal and situational factors, social networks, the historical context, and the ecological environment must be integrated to create a broad and flexible model of human needs that is responsive to all of the factors that impact motivation of human behavior. The hypothesis that gratification is the means through which higher needs emerge has been contested in the social science literature, but further research is needed to address the true mechanisms of need prepotency (Hall and Nougaim, 1968; Lawler and Suttle, 1972; Trexler and Schuh, 1964; Wofford, 1971).

Cultural Relativity and Universalism

In his early years, Maslow espoused a certain cultural relativism, believing that people were fundamentally shaped by their cultures and must be viewed within a social context. His anthropological fieldwork with Blackfoot Indians changed his opinion on the subject, and he emerged as a proponent of universalism that is exemplified by his construction of human needs. Maslow (1943b) proclaimed that anthropological evidence indicates the fundamental desires of all human beings do not differ as much as their everyday conscious desires, which are more overtly shaped by culture and circumstance. However, Maslow (1943) was conscious that his theory was not completely generalizable to every culture, every person, or every circumstance: “no claim is made that it is ultimate or universal for all cultures” (Maslow, 1943b, p. 15). He insisted that his aim was not to create an ultimate list of desires for all cultures which he acknowledged may be neither possible nor productive ”(Maslow, 1943b).
Maslow (1943b, 1970) balanced an overarching sense of universalism among the basic human needs with an understanding of how culture and social experiences shape the manifestations of the more universal human needs underlying them. Physiological needs can be considered universal in all cultures, because they are based on biological realities that are shared among all human beings. The ways in which those needs were expressed, met, and responded to would be culturally determined. As Maslow proposed, “Certain drives there are, and satisfied they will be in one way or another, regardless of the governmental, economic, and social taboos extant at the time” (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 73). People have certain inherent human drives and needs according to Maslow, and while culture or social environment may influence the manifestation or relative importance of these needs, the underlying needs are common across cultures.

Various cultures may provide completely different ways of satisfying the need for self-esteem (for example) but the fundamentally the need was universal and the manifestation was culturally unique. Culture and environment could also influence the relative prepotency of different needs. The hierarchy of the higher needs (love, esteem, and self-actualization) would probably change significantly by cultures, especially since cultures vary significantly in terms of the value of the individual or the social group, which could reverse the hierarchy between love needs and esteem needs. Later in life, Maslow qualified his position on universalism relative to self-actualization, saying, “I have been studying self-actualization via autonomy as if it were the only path. But this is quite Western, and even American” an orientation (Maslow as quoted in Hoffman, 1988, p. 243). Maslow’s theory of motivation, while useful and commonly applied to broad populations, may not be universally useful or valid. It is necessary to form a model of
motivation that is flexible enough to take cultural factors into account while maintaining broad generalizability and applicability to the human condition.

Adler (1977) used Maslow’s hierarchy to understand the experience of refugees arriving in Israel. He found that no matter what level of psychological development the individual had attained in their country of origin, they tended to be pushed by various factors to the bottom of the hierarchy. During the first two months, the refugees were primarily focused on safety and physiological needs, particularly housing. After the basic satisfaction of these needs, a set of social needs was observed to emerge. The final stage of adjustment is when the refugee’s needs are well satiated and the individual is functioning in the new environment. Adler’s (1977) study was one of the only empirical works to find support for Maslow’s theory; it is interesting to note that Maslow’s categories and the mechanism of need emergence (through gratification of needs) is reflected exactly according to Maslow’s (1970) theoretical assertions although it represents a population that is significantly different from the population upon whom the theory was originally modeled.

Maslow cautioned against focusing solely on extrinsic factors such as culture, the environment, the situation or the field and suggested a humanistic view of motivation (Maslow, 1943a, 1943b, 1970). He was concerned that a preoccupation with culture would lead to devolution of motivation theory and warned that unless we are willing to relinquish our search for understanding of the person in favor of understanding the world around her, we must continue to place the universal features of the human experience as primary in the development of motivation theory, considering cultural and situational analysis as supporting but secondary components of human behavior (Maslow, 1943a,
The integration of an ecological framing for Maslow’s hierarchy of needs could bolster the cultural responsiveness and allow for flexibility in the construction of locally relevant models of human needs.

Categories of Needs

There is very little evidence to support the five distinct categories that Maslow proposed (Centers, 1948; Friedlander, 1963; Shafer, 1953; Wahba and Bridwell, 1987). Some studies indicated empirical support for certain need categories but not the overall collection of categories constructed by Maslow. Alderfer’s (1966, 1969) empirical studies showed limited support for certain needs and reconstructions of Maslow’s categories. However, the research did support a more broadly defined categorization of human needs: lower needs including physiological and basic safety, and higher needs including socialization, identity, cognitive development, self-actualization, and growth (Alderfer, 1966, 1969; Centers, 1948; Friedlander, 1963; Shafer, 1953).

There was no consistent support across studies for the overall needs classification that Maslow described in his theory of motivation; however self-actualization emerged as an independent factor in some studies (Alderfer, 1966, 1969; Centers, 1948; Friedlander, 1963; Shafer, 1953). There was some indication that loosely differentiated higher-level and lower-level categories of needs may exist, but in some studies high- and low-level needs clustered together independently from the needs categories that Maslow proposed (Alderfer, 1966, 1969; Centers, 1948; Friedlander, 1963; Shafer, 1953; Wahba and Bridwell, 1987).

Three studies did not impose a theoretical framework in their statistical analysis and allowed their models to be shaped by factor analysis (Centers, 1948; Friedlander,
1963; Shafer, 1953). The categories of needs and the significant factors did not
reconstruct Maslow’s needs hierarchy or any of the categories he outlined. Many of the
studies found self-actualization to be a documented and independent human need. This
appears to be the most salient positive research finding from Wahba and Bridwell’s
(1987) meta-analysis: even when Maslow’s other needs did not emerge through factor
analysis, a type of need related to actualizing one’s potential did emerge consistently
across the research studies.

The lack of consistency in outcomes between the various studies is likely due to
the dramatically divergent interpretations of Maslow’s theory, as well as the diverse
contexts, aims, and methods of these studies. Empirical evaluation of this theory is
confounded by the challenge of operationalization since its concepts are not well-defined
and the terminology has been swept so far from its original meaning and intentions by the
momentum of popular psychology and the business sector. Rigorous scientific
investigation is needed to elucidate the relationship between types of human needs, since
the current literature is insufficient to determine whether Maslow’s categories are invalid
or whether the methods of inquiry merely have not been robust enough to sufficiently
measure and evaluate the validity of Maslow’s categories. Further studies with the
explicit aim of operationalizing, understanding, and contextualizing human needs in the
context of well-being must be undertaken.
Methodological Limitations

There significant conceptual, methodological, and measurement problems with the existing research on motivation theory (Adler, 1977; Beer, 1966; Graham and Balloun, 1973; Heylighen, 1998; Wahba and Bridwell, 1987). Each study reviewed in this analysis defined and operationalized Maslow’s terms differently, used different instruments, and had significant methodological limitations. One of the problems was that Maslow’s theory was clinically derived using the individual as a unit of analysis, but most of the studies aggregated to the group level, using the group as its unit of analysis. Additionally, Maslow’s theory is based on causal logic: the satisfaction of lower needs cause the emergence of higher needs. Because most of the studies were correlational in design, it is not possible to investigate causal relationships through these methods and any claims drawn from these research findings should be subject to heavy skepticism. Most studies were conducted within the business sector with managers focused on their satisfaction with their current job. These types of situation-specific analyses do not provide a representational sample from which to make broad claims about the validity of the theory of motivation (Trexler and Schuh, 1969).

None of the studies included observable behavior, and most studies used self-report to collect their data. Self-reporting is known to be a questionable method for behavior analysis, especially relevant to the study of human needs, because motivation may occur at the subconscious level, and it would be difficult to accurately report motivations about which one is consciously unaware. Some conscious wishes or goals are in conflict with unconscious desires, and it is not uncommon for desires and behaviors to deviate dramatically from one another. Maslow noted that the relationship between the
conscious desire and the ultimate unconscious aim that underlies it may not be direct, and the relationship may be contrary, as in reaction formations (Maslow, 1943a). It is necessary to include both self-report and observations in any study which attempts to test Maslow’s theory, since include one or the other could constrict and therefore invalidate the results.

Several studies used the Need Satisfaction Questionnaire (NSQ) as the primary measurement, and there are documented methodological problems resulting from response bias in this instrument (Alderfer, 1969; Lawler and Suttle, 1972; Wahba and Bridwell, 1987). The NSQ reflected in an unusually high correlation rate between fulfillment and importance of needs. The administration of the survey directs the participants to answer the fulfillment and importance questions in rapid succession, which may confound the subject’s response. Future studies should allow sufficient time to pass between the questions about levels of fulfillment and relative importance of needs so that the error introduced by the methods can be reduced.

Methodologically speaking, the research studies were not designed to answer causal questions or to accommodate multi-motivated behavior. These problems with basic methodology should raise a red flag about the validity of the findings, because clearly the methods were not properly fitted to the research question or the theory itself. It is scientifically irresponsible to dismiss a theory that has been in clinical and practical use for half a century based on a handful of poorly designed and scattered studies. Some elements of Maslow’s theory were supported by the research findings, but the empirical studies examined for this analysis yielded contradictory results, so it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions in the absence of continued investigation.
Directions for Future Study

One of the most serious problems with this body of literature is the dearth of recent scholarship and the lack of scientific rigor and operational precision that characterize the existing studies. Important methodological considerations must be incorporated into future research design, including the crucial issue of operationalized definitions for key terms. Many researchers have echoed the concern that the variables must be clearly defined and the definitions must be publicly available to those who aim to incorporate the new study’s findings into a larger synthesis (Adler, 1977; Berkowitz, 1969; Cofer and Appley, 1964; Deci, 1975; Wahba and Bridwell, 1976). Diverse, large samples should be recruited to improve generalizability; case studies and qualitative methods should be employed to provide the phenomenological perspective and inform the quantitative analysis. Multiple measures should be employed and attempts to validate or triangulate measures should be maximized. The development of standardized measures will contribute to the rigor of future studies and the feasibility of meta-analysis; this research should be linked closely with the development of consistent operationalizations of the key components in Maslow’s theory of motivation.

Longitudinal designs offer the most effective way to measure the dynamic nature of human needs and motivation over the course of the lifespan. Wherever possible, research studies should employ long-term studies that utilize multiple measures and mixed methods of data collection. These designs offer the opportunity to address the specific components of the motivation theory according in ways that accommodate the evolutionary nature of human needs and behavior.

Suggested Areas of Study:
1. **Operationalization and common conceptualization** of the terms and key components of motivation theory, including gratification, deprivation, human needs, and specific categories.

2. **Investigate and identify new and emerging areas of human needs** which can be compared to Maslow’s categories

3. **Investigate the mechanisms and consequences of gratification** on human psychology and behavior

4. **Investigate the mechanisms and consequences of deprivation** on human psychology and behavior

5. **Studies that feature an ecological framework** in which needs interact in a dynamic constellation with the person and the environment

6. **Cross-cultural studies to investigate human needs in a variety of contexts**, especially with people who experience a disproportionate degree of deprivation (such as refugees, trauma survivors, or people living in poverty).

Maslow hoped that future researchers would investigate the validity of his theory through research and practice. Maslow did not intend to write the ultimate theory on motivation at the time of its original publication in 1943; he intended to continue working on it, and he hoped others would further test and develop his ideas. To provide directions for future research, Maslow concluded his article with a set of parameters and relationships that were not addressed in the current article. He hoped to inspire others to investigate and elucidate some of the relationships he did not have the space to address in this theory proposal.

Maslow identified the problem of values in any definitive motivation theory and the redefinition of motivational concepts (such as drive, desire, wish, goal, etc). He questioned the relationship between appetites, desires, needs, and what is generally good for the organism (for example, why do people eat candy when they are not even hungry and it is bad for the organism?), and he brought up the implications of motivation theory for hedonistic and selfishness theories. He later worried that his theory would be used to justify individualistic pleasure-seeking behaviors, which it was, and he spent much of his
later career trying to convince people that his theory did not promote selfishness or hedonistic pleasures.

Maslow stressed the need for more research into the implications of this theory for psychotherapy, interpersonal relations, the connection between needs and cultural patterns, and theories of society. He also brought up the principles of success and failure in need-satisfaction-seeking behavior, aspiration level, and the role of uncompleted (contemplated) acts in the development of motivated behavior. Finally, Maslow noted the role of association, habit, and conditioning in the motivation of human behavior and directed future studies to examine the relationship of motivation theory to Alport’s theory of functional autonomy, which distinguishes between drives and motives. Unfortunately most of these areas remain unstudied: social science has largely failed to test Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs or the theory of motivation he proposed.

Two theorists have proposed alternate theories of motivation based on the concept of need. Manfred Max Neef (1991) argued that fundamental human needs are non-hierarchical, and are ontologically universal and invariant in nature. Clayton Alderfer (1966, 1969) based his theory on Maslow’s original work, but he conducted empirical research to smooth out some of the rough edges in Maslow’s theory.

Manfred Max-Neef (1991) developed a theory of motivation with a different framework of needs than Maslow included. His model takes into account multiple dimensions of need, satisfiers, and action categories. The nine “axiological” needs Max-Neef identified are: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, identity, idleness, creation, and freedom. These needs are organized according to four “existential;” categories: being, doing, having, and interacting. According to this theory,
five different kinds of satisfiers are arranged in a matrix within a particular group, according to the relative success in satisfying their related needs. The “satisfiers” that Max-Neef proposed are destroyers or violators which fail to completely satisfy needs, pseudo-satisfiers which generate a false sense of satisfaction, inhibiting satisfiers which satisfy one need while inhibiting the satisfaction of other needs, singular satisfiers which satisfy one need without influencing the others, and synergistic satisfiers which satisfy several needs at once.

Clayton Alderfer proposed a modified theory of motivation based on a smaller set of categories similar to Maslow’s: existence needs, relatedness needs, and growth needs (Steers and Porter, 1987). This has been dubbed the “ERG” model, and it has gained popularity in the literature, in research, policy, and practice. On the surface, it appears that Alderfer simply combined the physiological and safety needs into the existence needs, and collapsed the love and esteem needs into the new relatedness category. However, Alderfer also proposed that gratification and frustration of needs leads to changes in the motivation of behavior. Alderfer proposed that people who experienced extreme frustration in the higher needs may display a “frustration-regression” reaction that would cause the lower needs to reemerge as prepotent motivators of behavior.

However, none of these models explain how and why people whose basic needs are chronically deprived self-actualize in spite of their other needs being extremely unsatisfied. The hierarchical approach to human motivation has drawn criticism because it seems to imply that self-actualization is not possible within a context of chronic deprivation, such as in populations living in impoverished countries. Maslow stated, “We should never have the desire to compose music or create mathematical systems, or to
adorn our homes, or to be well dressed if our stomachs were empty most of the time, or if we were continually dying of thirst, or if we were continually threatened by always impending catastrophe, or if everyone hated us” (Maslow, 1943). Yet there are examples of people who were engaged in satisfying higher level needs despite horribly deprived conditions such as concentration camp survivors (Frankl, 2000).

As human beings, we are not uniquely motivated by our material or physiological concerns. There is something deeper and more important to the human psyche that desires connection, self-esteem, knowledge, beauty, and transcendence. These needs remain and manifest themselves even in the most deprived individuals, such as concentration camp detainees who composed symphonies on toilet paper, or mathematicians who worked out formulas in their heads within the squalor of POW camps, or children who grow up in impoverished countries and manage to succeed academically and eventually lift themselves out of poverty to pursue self-actualization goals. At worst, Maslow’s theory predicts that these people do not exist; at best, it proposes that they are rare exceptions—unexplained by the model.

Maslow’s theory is helpful for understanding some aspects of motivation, but it is not sufficient as a grand theory to explain human behavior. An ecological model with more flexible, interactive hierarchies of needs is necessary to address the conceptual and practical limitations in the Maslow’s hierarchy. Maslow’s (1943b, 1970) theory is often accompanied by an illustration of the triangle with the needs neatly stacked on top of one another indicates a fixed order that may not be entirely accurate (See Figure 1). Maslow (1943b) acknowledged that the hierarchy is presented in a fixed order, but it is not as rigid as the theory seems to suggest. Maslow admitted privately in his journal, and to
some extent in public discourse, that “the mere fact that the higher levels and states exist
doesn’t prove that they are better. Nor even in itself does the fact that the people yearn for
them, strive for them, value them” show that they are better or more developed in some
way (Maslow, 1979, p. 1229).

The process by which needs are satisfied and new needs emerge is not as clean in
real life as it is described in the theory: Wahba and Bridwell (1987) found no evidence in
their meta-analysis of over a dozen studies that higher needs emerge because lower needs
are satiated. Maslow was careful to state in his original theoretical proposal that lower
needs do not have to be perfectly satisfied in order for higher needs to emerge. Needs
may be partially or fairly-well satisfied when higher needs begin to dominate behavior,
and multiple needs may motivate behavior at once. Maslow acknowledged that human
behavior is usually multi-motivated, since almost nobody is completely satisfied in all (or
even most) needs. A model that takes into account the overlapping and cyclical nature of
needs, satisfaction, and frustration may be well-suited to describe the motivation of
human behavior (See Figure 2).

Implications for Society and Social Welfare

Maslow’s theory has been criticized because it appears to overemphasize the
individual’s well-being and need gratification, underestimating the importance of society,
culture, and the physical environment (Huitt, 2001). Maslow wrote that he later regretted
the emphasis on personal fulfillment in his theory. Upon further consideration, Maslow
thought that the theory did not contain sufficient references to social harmony or benefit
to the larger group as motivators of behavior. He worried that his theory was invoked to
justify hedonistic and selfish behavior to the detriment of society, and he was consumed
with remedying the fallout from this misguided application of his principles. Despite the changing political climates in which Maslow worked over nearly forty years, he always maintained the vision that his theories would be used to improve the human condition. During World War II, Maslow began to apply his theory of self-actualization to the task of improving conditions in the world.

Although Maslow “very much wanted to see his psychological work put to larger, humanitarian ends, the mood of the early-to-mid-1950s conspired against it” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 227). McCarthyism “frightened most American scholars” and restricted the study of anything that might be construed as socialist or communist in nature, including projects aimed to improve social welfare and the general human condition. In 1954 the Senate censured McCarthy and his influence waned: Maslow was once again free to advocate openly for the role of psychology in the betterment of the human species. His work during the late 1950s and 1960s profoundly influenced the structure of the workplace (the main arena of social interaction in American society), but the impact Maslow hoped to have on society’s self-actualization process has yet to be completely fulfilled.

Maslow mused in his unpublished writings about the “good society,” asking himself: “How do we move forward toward the good society? What is the good society?” (Maslow, 1996, p. 72). Maslow speculated that the ideal society was one that enabled each member to achieve his or her full potential, and he started thinking about what kind of society would allow for that type of development. Maslow was preoccupied with developing a blueprint for a society that would propel its members to self-actualize. Answering his own questions, Maslow explained that the good society in his view “can
be defined in terms of its ability to provide basic-need gratifications for its members. ....

defining the good society as *that which makes possible self-actualization for its members*” (Maslow, 1996, p. 84-85, italics in original).

Motivation theory suggests that when basic needs are met, higher needs emerge as
prepotent. As individuals satisfy the lower needs for physiological homeostasis and
physical safety, they begin to pursue higher goals related to socializing, developing a
positive identity, and attaining their ultimate potentials. Maslow noted in his unpublished
works that “any social system, however good or noble its set of laws, ultimately *must* rest
on good people” (Maslow, 1996, p. 151, italics in original). If people were not
preoccupied with securing food and shelter, or seeking safety in a dangerous
neighborhood, they could be more focused on developing prosocial relationships, self-
esteeem and skills development, and processes of self-actualization.

Maslow coined a set of terms relating to the idealized society he imagined, calling
it “Eupsychia.” The most specific definition of Eupsychia is the culture that would be
produced by 1,000 self-actualizing people living together on an isolated island, but it can
also indicate more simply a society that satisfies basic needs and “presents the possibility
for *self-actualization* in all of its members” (Maslow, 1996, p. 205). Maslow also wrote
about “Eupsychian” actions that move toward psychological health and improvement;
these actions are undertaken in the service of creating the conditions for Eupsychia.

Maslow posited that if a society were to take individual and idiosyncratic
differences among human beings seriously, then society must be pluralistic in nature, “a
smorgasbord of *many* kinds of life from which to choose in accordance with one’s own
bent and taste” (Maslow, 1979, p. 1248). This type of society would be flexible enough
to provide for the needs of diverse individuals, families, and sub-communities within it. Maslow mused in his unpublished papers that “art as a path to self-actualization would not work for everyone” because it would “leave some persons cold,” but art could be a powerful tool for those members of society who are aesthetically inclined (Maslow, 1996, p. 125). The same argument follows for any other human interest, such as music, dance, sports, politics, academics, design, and fields.

Given the diversity of needs and personalities in a given community, Maslow noted that “individual’s interests and those of his or her team or organization, cultures or society may be at odds” (Maslow, 1996, p. 32). In light of this difficult and nuanced reality, Maslow pondered in his private journal: “How to maximize personal self-actualization while minimizing social costs?” (Maslow, 1979, p. 1248, italics in original). He also wondered about how much responsibility the self-actualizing person in society should take for those members of society who are struggling with the basic needs (Maslow, 1996, p. 31).

The phrase “Welfare State” has been treated since the Reagan years like a four-letter word, but it is certainly not deserving of this connotation. Welfare states support the basic needs of all members by providing a safety net for those who need it, and by establishing a basic level of material subsistence beneath which members of society are not permitted to fall. The level of commitment to basic welfare (or wellbeing) of community members marks more advanced societies: unfortunately the proliferation of wealth in the modern world has not been followed by the development of social structures to protect the most vulnerable members of society from exploitation and poverty. True welfare states consider extreme poverty and deprivation to be violations of
basic human rights, and they maintain a high level of functioning among members.

Social Welfare in the 21st century should focus on developing systems to address the basic needs of all people in society, with a special focus on vulnerable or disempowered populations. If housing and food were not the main sources of worry and behavior motivation for the American workforce (not to mention the American family), people would be able to reach higher levels of social, moral, personal and spiritual growth because they would not be distracted by the pursuit of lower needs. If the state took care of the tangible physical needs described by Maslow in the foundational level of the needs hierarchy, great social change could take place, as individuals and communities begin to self-actualize. When people’s basic needs, are met, they strive toward love, esteem, and self-actualization goals rather than constantly trying to avoid danger and starvation. In a society that cares for the basic needs of all members, each individual becomes empowered to attain his or her full potential, enriching society with innovation, creativity, productivity, beauty, and excellence.

Abraham Maslow has contributed a great deal to modern social welfare: the concept of self-actualization revolutionized the prevailing opinions about human nature in the social sciences and popular culture. In concert with other humanistic works, a more positive paradigm of human development was created in American culture. While the theory may be limited in some ways, it continues to provide a valuable framework for social work research, policy, and practice. Maslow’s concept of self-actualization could be useful in working toward a more well-performing society populated by more highly functioning individuals.
MASLOW’S ORIGINAL HIERARCHY

- Physiological Needs
- Safety Needs
- Love/Social Needs
- Esteem Needs
- Self-Actualization

UPDATED VERSION OF NEEDS HIERARCHY

- Physiological Needs
- Safety Needs
- Esteem Needs
- Love/Social Needs
- Self-Actualization
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