

HAPPINESS AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION

In my August article on happiness I shared the results of a comprehensive study revealing that income relates positively to happiness, albeit up until a certain point. In subsequent articles, I am addressing a further question: what factors other than income contribute to happiness? I touched upon this in my September article, which shared the data of the Harvard Study of Adult Development and revealed the value of *good relationships* to happiness. One way to find further answers to this question is to take note of what the regrets are of the dying.

There is one regret that comes up again and again, as witnessed by Bronnie Ware ⁽¹⁾, an Australian nurse working in palliative care, who captures the views of the dying in the following words: *"I wish I had had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me"*. This brings me to the work of Abraham Maslow, who emphasizes the importance of being true to oneself, using the term: **self-actualization** ⁽²⁾:

"If you plan on being anything less than you are capable of being, you will probably be unhappy all the days of your life"

Abraham H. Maslow ⁽³⁾



(7)

Maslow

Abraham Maslow (1908 – 1970) was an American psychologist well-known for his theory of the hierarchy of needs, also referred to as the hierarchy of happiness. Maslow then identified the importance of self-actualization as the last need in this sequence of needs; coming to the fore once basic needs are satisfied ⁽⁴⁾.

His vision being that psychology needed to study the good person, the one who inspires, the one who is living his full potential. He was and remained convinced throughout his career that every human being comes to this world with a positive or at least "neutral" nature, a concept that I am not sure I subscribe to myself.

Maslow's ideas, although not necessarily shared by the mainstream psychology scientific community, became influential in education, management and marketing ⁽⁵⁾. While several of his contemporaries shared similar notions, Maslow was the one who devoted himself to formulating a comprehensive theory, if not a vision ⁽⁶⁾.

"What a man can be, he must be. This need we call self-actualization"

Abraham H. Maslow ⁽¹¹⁾

Maslow and the study of self-actualized people

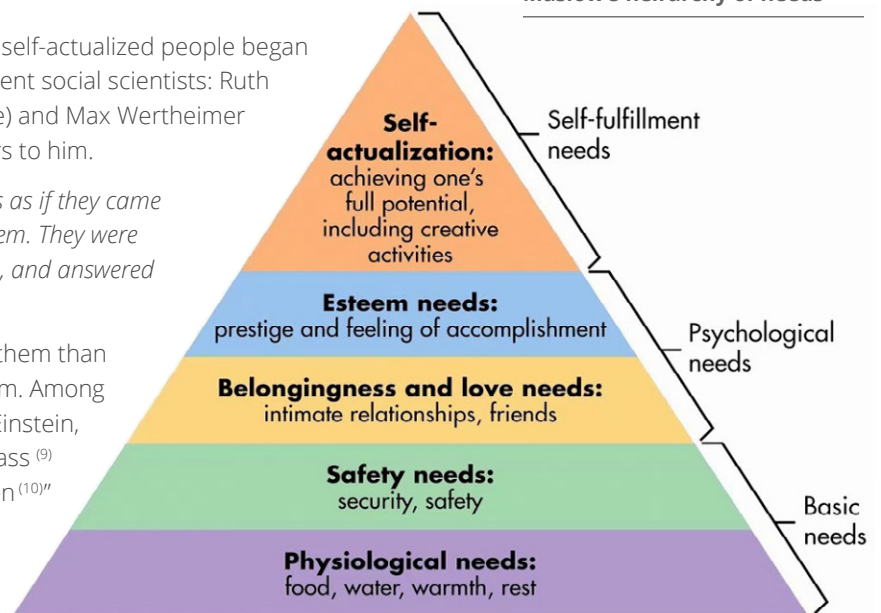
Maslow's "discovery" of what he started to refer to as self-actualized people began when he got to know, early on in his career, two eminent social scientists: Ruth Benedict (a leading cultural anthropologist at the time) and Max Wertheimer (founder of Gestalt psychology) who were like mentors to him.

In his words ⁽⁸⁾: *"They were puzzling. They didn't fit. It was as if they came from another planet...Everything I knew didn't explain them. They were mysteries. They were also very nice and parental with me, and answered questions and let me hang around"*.

Inspired, he started to make even more notes about them than before, and endeavored to study other people like them. Among those he studies were well-known names like Albert Einstein, Jane Addams, Eleanor Roosevelt and Frederick Douglass ⁽⁹⁾ as well as exemplary people among "the common men" ⁽¹⁰⁾

He then integrated his understanding of "self-actualization" into his comprehensive theory about human motivation.

Maslow's heirarchy of needs ⁽¹²⁾



1) www.the-guardian.com/lifeandstyle/1-02-12 "Top Five Regrets of the Dying"
 2), 4), 6), 10) Abraham H. Maslow "Toward a Psychology of Being" Wiley 1998 (first published 1961)
 3), 11) Brainyquote.com

5), 8) "The right to be human: a biography of Abraham Maslow" by Edward Hoffman, McGraw-Hill 1988
 7) Peakon 9) Wikipedia "Maslow" 12) www.transsubstantion.com



Key aspects in Maslow's theory, important for happiness ⁽¹³⁾

There are three aspects to Maslow's vision and theory worth considering when addressing happiness:

1. Never ending need for growth

Inside every human being is a drive for constant and never-ending need for growth;

2. Hierarchy of needs

There is sequence to our needs, a hierarchy. Maslow himself did not put this in the iconic image (shown on previous page) which became so well known ⁽¹⁴⁾. However, the image captures his theory in a simple and easy to understand way.

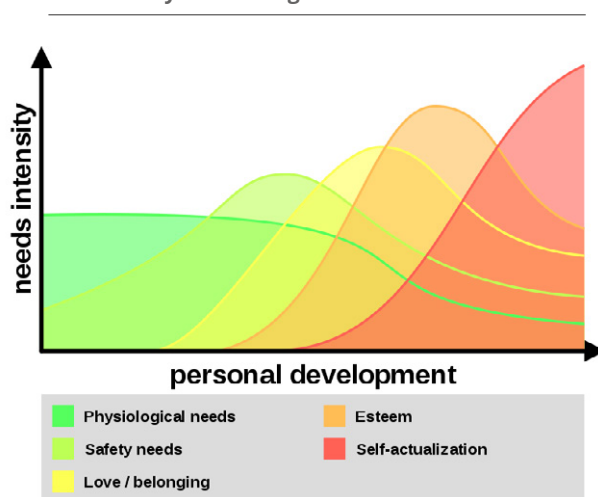
Note: I include also an image which still shows these needs but not in a hierarchal way ⁽¹⁵⁾. Maslow agreed with criticism that we need to allow for some flexibility about the "order" of these needs.

3. Self-actualization as last phase

Once needs for safety, food, love and self-esteem are satisfied the need for self-actualization presents itself. Self-actualization meaning: **the ability to live one's life to the fullest potential and the fulfillment of one's own unique life purpose.**

Maslow stated ⁽¹⁷⁾ that those "living a fulfilled life" also tend to spontaneously choose the true rather than the false, good rather than evil, beauty rather than ugliness, integration rather than dissociation, joy rather than sorrow, aliveness rather than deadness, uniqueness rather than stereotypes.

Maslow's dynamic image ⁽¹⁶⁾



Barriers to self-actualization

Maslow, like many similar-minded social scientists of the time, was struck by the fact that so many people would not demand their own autonomy, would give up the authority of their own life and let others, institutions or ideologies decide for them. So, he identified the power and attraction of hiding, playing it safe and so forth: the attraction of security ⁽¹⁸⁾. For the record, he did not believe this was a force we were born with.

Criticism of Maslow's theory

The main criticism of Maslow's theory is a lack of empirical evidence ⁽¹⁸⁾. Maslow, although trained in behavioral psychology, and in the first years of his career doing laboratory experiments, did not base his theory on strict scientific procedures. It is also difficult (impossible?) to apply rigorous scientific methods on concepts such as needs, let alone of self-actualization.

Note: although Maslow did not study "happiness" itself, his legacy has been taken up by positive psychology which studies the positive effects of the human experience that make life worth living ⁽¹⁹⁾.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs: a potential source of inspiration

It is understandable that psychology in order to be seen as a science and its attempt to be taken seriously wants to focus on "that which can be measured". Still, Maslow's vision is an ambitious attempt to bring together a range of notions existing in social sciences both pre and post-World War 2, culminating, when it comes to happiness, in the suggestion that every human being has innate positive talents and capabilities, which are unique, and once basic needs are met, need to be expressed: happiness being the accompanying result.

"A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself"

Abraham H. Maslow ⁽²⁰⁾

13), 17), 18) Abraham H. Maslow "Toward a Psychology of Being" Wiley 1998 (first published 1961)
14) "The right to be human: a biography of Abraham Maslow" by Edward Hoffman, McGraw-Hill 1988
15), 20) Wikipedia "Maslow" 16) Wikipedia "Maslow's hierarchy of needs"
19) Wikipedia "Positive Psychology"
20) Brainyquote.com



Frank van Lerven CFP®

