Maslow’s Theory of Motivation: A Critique
Andrew Neher
Journal of Humanistic Psychology 1991; 31; 89
DOI: 10.1177/0022167891313010

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jhp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/31/3/89

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
Association for Humanistic Psychology

Additional services and information for Journal of Humanistic Psychology can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://jhp.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://jhp.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations http://jhp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/31/3/89
MASLOW’S THEORY OF MOTIVATION: A Critique

ANDREW NEHER is a professor of psychology at Cabrillo College, where he teaches courses in medical psychology and life history studies, among others. He also has a private counseling practice. He is the author of numerous articles, chiefly on the physiology of altered states of consciousness and research methods. His book, *The Psychology of Transcendence*, has recently been published in a new edition by Dover Press.

Summary

This critique of Maslow’s theory of motivation examines all of its major components. The theory is summarized and its basic propositions are analyzed in the light of internal logic, other relevant theories, and related research. This examination points up many deficiencies in Maslow’s theory, which enjoys wide acceptance, especially among humanistic psychologists. Suggestions are made regarding modifications to the theory that would remedy many of its more serious problems but at the same time preserve its perceptive insights.

This critique will evaluate Abraham Maslow’s theory of motivation, including each of its basic propositions. Although other critics have addressed various aspects of Maslow’s theory, no one, as far as I know, has taken on Maslow’s basic theory *in toto*.

Two decades after his death, Maslow is still revered as one of the founders and guiding lights of humanistic psychology. Unfortunately, humanistic psychologists have yet to probe the flaws in Maslow’s theory in any concerted or thorough fashion. Why is this? Maybe it stems from motivations such as loyalty to the cause, but

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Early drafts of this article were read by Steve Andreas, John Chandler, Zoe Close, Frank Goble, Willis Harman, Bob Kantor, Anya Neher, Linda Neher, Jeanne Riddell, Suellen Rubin, Ted Sarbin, Walter Shelburne, Topsy Smalley, and Brewster Smith; their assistance is much appreciated.

*Journal of Humanistic Psychology, Vol. 31 No. 3, Summer 1991* 89-112
it may also relate to the tendency of humanistic psychologists to be "accepting" rather than "critical."

Of course, Maslow is known outside of humanistic psychology circles. Maslow himself sought to apply his theory to fields in the borderlands of psychology, where it still wields influence in some quarters—for example in the fields of management (Maslow, 1967), religion (Maslow, 1964), and science (Maslow, 1969). In addition, Maslow is routinely cited when general psychology texts discuss humanistic psychology. Texts in "adjustment" courses, in particular, tend to pay him much attention, sometimes to the extent of recommending that students evaluate their own lives to see how well they conform to Maslow's ideas concerning the "good life."

On the other hand—the field of management excepted (e.g., Huizinga, 1970)—Maslow is seldom cited in the research literature on motivation, which means that his theory, to a significant extent, lies outside the mainstream of testing and critical evaluation that is the lifeblood of any vital theory.

Thus there are many reasons to take a close look at Maslow's theory and bring its flaws into the light of day. This article is a contribution to that effort.

**MASLOW'S THEORY OUTLINED**

Most of Maslow's basic theory is found in the 1970 edition of his book, *Motivation and Personality*, although I will draw from some of his other works from time to time. According to his theory

1. Each of us is endowed at birth with a full and, to an important extent, unique complement of needs that, allowed expression by our environment, will guide our growth in a healthy direction.
2. These needs function in a hierarchical manner. The bottom step of Maslow's 5-step hierarchy, or pyramid, includes physiological needs (for food, water, and so on). Then come safety needs; next, needs for love and intimacy; then self-esteem needs; and, finally, at the apex of the pyramid, self-actualization (e.g., intellectual and esthetic) needs. By *hierarchy* is meant that needs lower on the pyramid must generally be satisfied before needs at higher levels are "activated." For example, starving people (deprived on level one) will find it difficult to be very concerned about their relationships with others (needs on level three) until they are fed.
3. Needs on the first four levels are called deficiency-needs (or D-needs) because they drive us to gratify the need, at which point the need lapses in its importance to us until deprivation again motivates us to take action to satisfy the need. Self-actualization needs (on the fifth and highest level), on the other hand, are called being-needs (or B-needs) because, among other unique features, they sustain our interest without our being driven by feelings of deprivation.

4. The level of self-actualization, the end-point of the process outlined above, constitutes the highest level of human experience.

To illustrate his theory, Maslow described a number of people he considered self-actualizers, including such well-known figures as Abraham Lincoln and Eleanor Roosevelt. All of these people, according to Maslow, share various personality traits (which Maslow subsumed under rubrics such as being-cognition and being-values). These include being relatively creative, spontaneous, able to see the “large picture,” nonjudgmental, and rich in emotional life; in particular, self-actualizers are more apt to experience euphoric heights of emotion that Maslow labeled peak experience.

To summarize, we are born with certain needs, some of which, such as hunger, are prepotent in that they occupy our attention until they are satisfied. But such motivations are not what make us fully human. Only by living a life in which these lower needs are satisfied can we rise to our full human potential, becoming self-actualized, as we free ourselves to become involved in higher pursuits such as art, literature, and science, and to experience the finer human qualities of broad understanding, tolerance, and the sublime emotions.

Stated in rough outline, Maslow’s theory finds ready acceptance with many people. The theory seems reasonable and fits many of our preconceptions: For example, of course hungry people are concerned with little else besides finding food. But as we take a closer look we will see that almost every aspect of Maslow’s theory is burdened with a multitude of problems.

We will see that many of these problems stem from the extreme stands that his theory, as a close examination will show, tends to take. The problem of overstatement is not unique, of course, to Maslow. It is a common trait of theorists who attempt, as Maslow did, to develop a perspective in opposition to prevailing theories. In Maslow’s case, the prevailing theories of motivation stemmed
from psychoanalysis on the one hand and behaviorism on the other. Thus we should not be surprised that Maslow overstated his case in an attempt to make his theory distinctive when compared with competing theories.

Other problems involve some of Maslow's more peripheral statements that contradict many of the assumptions of his own theory. To some extent, Maslow seemed to have second thoughts about his theory, but these modifications never filtered down to his general theoretical statements. This might have been intentional, in part, because these qualifications to his theory have the effect, as we shall see, of "watering it down" and making it less distinctive. But perhaps the most significant basis of these inconsistencies was Maslow's tendency, which he himself recognized, to be impressionistic, rather than conceptually rigorous, in his thinking and writing (Daniels, 1982, pp. 62, 70-71).

Finally, still other problems concern the internal logic of his theory.

MASLOW'S THEORY CRITIQUED

Let us evaluate the various components of Maslow's theory in the order that they were presented earlier.

1. Each of us is endowed at birth with a complete, and, to some extent, unique complement of needs that, allowed expression by our environment, will foster our growth in a healthy direction (Maslow, 1970, pp. 77-104). Few psychologists would disagree that our lower needs in general (hunger, need for intimacy, and so on) are innate. But many would question whether, in general, the higher needs (intellectual, esthetic) are innate as Maslow claimed (1970, pp. 100-101). Although there is good evidence for the innate nature of some of the higher needs (e.g., the curiosity drive; Eisenberger, 1972), others, such as esthetic motivations, are probably largely shaped by cultural experience. Maslow's tendency to downgrade the role of the environment in forming the human psyche has been noted by several critics (e.g., Aron, 1977; Daniels, 1982; Geller, 1982; Smith, 1973) and seems to be related to his rejection of the behaviorist perspective, which traditionally committed the opposite error.
of viewing environmental influence as all-important (Maslow, 1970, pp. 88-89). According to Maslow,

once [lower needs are met] each person proceeds to develop in his own style, uniquely, using these necessities for his own private purposes. In a very meaningful sense, development then becomes determined from within rather than from without. . . . The role of the environment is ultimately to permit him or help him to actualize his own potentialities [because] he “knows” better than anyone else what is good for him. (1968, pp. 34, 160, 198)

To sum up, Maslow believed that, given basic support and nurturance from the environment, our inborn needs are sufficient to foster our psychological growth in a healthy direction.

Thus it is clear that Maslow is squarely in the camp of the nativists, who stress the role of hereditary influences in human experience. In this regard, he is in accord with many other humanistic psychologists (e.g., Carl Rogers) and, as a consequence, suffers along with them from a number of difficulties.

If the most culture can do, or should do, is provide for basic needs and freedom of expression, then most of the structure of cultures around the world must be viewed as potentially disruptive. In particular, child-rearing practices may conflict with innate needs of children to develop in directions other than those sanctioned by the culture. As Maslow said, “Our human instincts [including our needs] are so weak that they need protection against culture, against learning—in a word, against being overwhelmed by the environment” (1970, p. 103). Of course, as Maslow admitted (1970, p. 278), our culture is relatively tolerant, but he believed that we still need to tip “the balance [even more] in favor of spontaneity, the ability to be expressive . . . creative, etc.” (1968, p. 198).

Let us take Maslow at his word, and let us take language as our example. According to the widely accepted Sapiรรr-Whorf hypothesis, the particular language we speak determines to some extent the way in which we are able to think about the world (Whorf, 1956). If this is so, then teaching our own language to our children has the effect, in part, of putting their thoughts in an intellectual straitjacket—perhaps, unfortunately, in ways that conflict with their innate needs to conceptualize the world in their own unique fashion. So perhaps we should “protect” our children from hearing our language so that they can create their own. But, of course, we
know that, although children inherit a genetic ability to learn language that they hear in their environment (Piattelli-Palmarini, 1980), they do not inherit the ability to create, from scratch, their own language (Malson, 1972). And, if they could, can you imagine the problem of attempting to communicate with one another, each of us in a different language? Much the same could be said, of course, of a multitude of other cultural traits that serve as a common basis for human relations in any culture.

One way to understand our need to learn the folkways of our culture is to remember that the trend in human evolution has been away from strong genetic programming. Instead, we develop our “humaness,” to a significant extent, through being socialized into the norms of our particular culture. In fact, our genetic heritage seems to consist, to a large degree, of a potential to adapt to any of the wide variety of cultures that have ever existed; that is, our genetic endowment seems very flexible in this regard. And, although we each inherit a unique mix of needs and potentials, these require for their development a context of cultural inputs (language, and so on) that are, at least initially, imposed upon us. This is because, as young children, our nervous systems are not sufficiently developed to allow us to choose from among these inputs. Of course, parents should be sensitive to their children’s unique individual needs, but it is hardly possible to tailor basic cultural inputs (language is a good example) to the individual. Naturally, as we mature most of us are increasingly able to choose the life experiences that best “fit” us, but these choices are a product of the unique mix of genes and culture that each of us embodies by the time we are old enough to make these choices.

In sum, Maslow’s list of needs ignores considerations such as these. It does not include the need to learn language or any of the other cultural traits that create our humanness and bind us socially. To repeat, his theory implies that the imposition of cultural norms is unnecessary at best, and, at worst, destructive of our unique potential as individuals. In this regard, he and many other humanistic psychologists are in the mainstream of Western values that tend to glorify the individual.

Maslow’s failure to acknowledge the need to learn cultural norms may have stemmed from more than one source. On the one hand, he may have assumed that, with the advent of pluralistic societies such as ours, we all need to pick and choose our own path,
and that the best basis for this is the unique mix of needs we each inherit. But, as has already been pointed out, this assumption is undermined by the fact that we are helpless as children to “pick and choose” until we have already been socialized into the language patterns and other basic norms of our particular culture. Of course, if Maslow’s theory does apply only to pluralistic societies, then it is culture specific rather than universal in application. On the other hand, Maslow may have been reacting against the obvious failures of our own society, his solution being to base human development on the “wisdom” of the unique biological makeup of each of us rather than on bankrupt cultural priorities. However, a good argument can be made that extreme individualism, whether or not it is founded on the notions of individual biological uniqueness that Maslow favored, in fact, fosters much of the social alienation and dehumanization that plagues our society. One critic noted the “irony that those as deeply concerned about the human condition as . . . Maslow . . . should have developed a theory the practical recommendations of which sustain and strengthen the very dehumanization against which in part they are reacting” (Geller, 1982, p. 72).

Thus the nativist position is more than just a theoretical issue. For example, we have all known parents who have hesitated to “put their own trip” on their child, for fear of violating their child’s unique nature, to the point where they became ineffective as parents. And we have all known children who have, in conformance with pop-psych beliefs, agonized over who the “real me” is as distinct from the “me whom my parents created.” But these hesitancies and agonies, of course, are predicated on the notion that there is a more or less complete, original “me” waiting to blossom given only a nurturing and accepting, but otherwise neutral environment. So whether or not the assumptions of Maslow—and other nativists such as Carl Rogers—are valid is a very significant question, with very real ramifications.

Another difficulty with the nativist position concerns its internal logic. If all that we require to become self-actualized is that our culture provide for our basic needs and freedom of expression, then our genetic potential is indeed potent. As Maslow said, our “inner nature . . . tends strongly to persist” (1968, p. 190). But, if this is so, then why was Maslow, in agreement with many other humanistic psychologists, so fearful that our culture will misdirect us in
ways that violate this potential? Elsewhere Maslow said that “this inner nature . . . is weak and delicate . . . and easily overcome by . . . cultural pressure” (1968, p. 4). Maslow seemed to want it both ways—a strong innate tendency to self-actualize on the one hand, but also a disturbing weakness in the face of cultural dictates on the other. But, of course, he cannot have it both ways. At least one assumption must be wrong—or, more likely, less extreme versions of both might be correct.

A final issue related to Maslow’s nativist position concerns values rather than logic. Along with other nativists, Maslow maintained, in essence, that we have to live with whatever the genetic roll of the dice provides us, because environmental influences (other than providing for our needs) are viewed either as relatively insignificant or as potentially insensitive to our innate tendencies (Daniels, 1988, p. 25). Where behaviorists have traditionally said “You can become whatever you want, and we’ll show you how,” Maslow, and other nativist theorists, have said, “You can become what your native potential allows you to become, and nothing else.” Although the behaviorists are undoubtedly overly optimistic in their view, Maslow seems overly pessimistic. In this case, Maslow goes against the grain of Western values, which maintain that practically unlimited possibilities are open to any of us.

To summarize, Maslow’s tendency to emphasize the role of our innate needs in directing the course of healthy psychological development, and his tendency to downgrade the importance of cultural input in this process, leads to a view of human development that is one-sided and consequently very difficult to support. Thus we start to see some of the problems that stem from Maslow’s tendency to take extreme stands.

Now let us move ahead and examine the second component of Maslow’s theory.

2. Our needs function in a hierarchical fashion, so that our basic needs (for food, etc.) are prepotent, in that generally they must be satisfied before we can feel “free” of them and move on to satisfy our higher needs (Maslow, 1970, pp. 35-51). Actually, in advanced societies our physiological and safety needs (the first two steps on Maslow’s need-pyramid) are often satisfied, whereas the next two steps—needs for love and for self-esteem—constitute stumbling blocks for many people. In simpler societies, on the other hand, the
situation is often the reverse. In such societies, people may periodically go hungry and suffer from life-threatening illnesses, but nevertheless, unless these problems are severe (Turnbull, 1974), people in these societies typically exhibit strong social ties and a strong sense of self. In fact, it appears that a certain degree of hardship in meeting basic needs can bring people together and give them a sense of purpose as they cooperate to overcome adversity. Most of us can probably recall experiences of our own that illustrate this process. For example, many couples say that struggling together to make ends meet when they were young fostered strong bonds between them, compared with their later years when they had finally achieved a life of ease and comfort. If these examples are valid, they stand Maslow's need-hierarchy on its head: In these instances, deprivation at lower-need levels (survival needs) seems to facilitate need satisfaction at higher levels (e.g., the achievement of intimacy) rather than hinder it as Maslow would predict.

Aside from such anecdotal evidence, some researchers, particularly in the field of management, have attempted to test Maslow's hierarchy in a more systematic fashion. In general, these researchers have wanted to determine if Maslow's theory can clarify the factors involved in job choice and job satisfaction. Here is a sampling of these studies, many of which are summarized in Wahba and Bridwell (1979).

Some of these studies have been designed to test Maslow's particular ordering of needs in his hierarchy. Briefly, the results of these studies are equivocal; results range from some support (Graham & Balloun, 1973; Mathes, 1981; Wuthnow, 1978), to no support (Miner & Dachler, 1973), to outright refutation (Wofford, 1971).

Other studies have attempted to test Maslow's assertion that need satisfaction leads to a diminution of that need in the future. These studies show a similar spread, from some support (Alderfer, 1969; Graham & Balloun, 1973), to no support (Lawler & Suttle, 1972), to results that indicate that need-satisfaction leads to heightened salience of the need (Hall & Norigaim, 1968)!

Obviously the research picture is rather equivocal. However, research of this nature seldom yields definitive answers and should not be considered, in and of itself, the last word. Thus let us take a closer look at Maslow's assertion that "need gratification dimin-
ishes the strength of the need,” because, in spite of its quality of seeming obvious, I believe it is highly questionable.

First of all, no one denies that need satisfaction leads to a temporary decrease in the strength of a need. But most needs are cyclical, in that they are satisfied for a time, only to resurface later. Hunger and sex are obvious examples. What Maslow meant is that, over the long term, the strength of a need that is readily and easily satisfied will decline. For example: “If a mother kisses her child often, the drive itself disappears and the child learns not to crave kisses” (Maslow, 1970, p. 63). As with much of Maslow’s theory, this statement seems reasonable at first glance. It certainly ties in with much of our experience, as well as with other theories, such as psychoanalysis, that are widely accepted: When we express our needs, we are less “bothered” by them. But there is another possibility. Behaviorists would probably maintain that kissing, for example, is usually more valued by adults than by children, partly because of the pleasures that have been associated with it on so many different occasions. And, strangely enough, we can probably all think of examples from our own experience that support this alternative perspective. So which is it? Over the long term, do needs “dry up” or “well up” when they are satisfied? Unfortunately, there is no ready answer to this question, and psychologists remain divided on the issue. If Maslow meant that we should oversatisfy our needs (e.g., eat until we are sick of eating) then we would probably agree that needs would tend to “dry up,” but there is no indication that he had this in mind. The point is that Maslow’s assumption—that satisfying needs reduces their strength in the long run, which is so crucial to his theory as a whole—is much more tenuous than he indicated. It is important to keep in mind that Maslow put himself in such a tenuous position because he was intent on eliminating the lower needs, in this process, as a motivational force in our lives; this was his prescription for moving up the needs hierarchy to the level of self-actualization.

At this point, we need to examine another of Maslow’s assumptions that is not obvious on first inspection—namely, that the highest level in his need hierarchy, self-actualization, is, ideally, autonomous. It is obvious that our motivations to engage in creative, intellectual, or esthetic pursuits (pursuits on the highest level of the hierarchy) may, in fact, stem from lower needs—such as needs to gain social recognition, enhance our self-esteem, or
even, perhaps, to satisfy physiological survival drives. In general, both psychoanalysts and behaviorists would agree with this view, citing mechanisms such as sublimation on the one hand and conditioned associations on the other. Maslow himself made the point that "the cognitive capacities . . . are a set of adjutitive tools, which have, among other functions, that of satisfaction of our basic needs. . . . Acquiring knowledge and systematizing the universe [are], in part, techniques for the achievement of basic safety in the world" (1970, pp. 47-48). But, of course, it is central to Maslow's theory that these lower motivations, when they are present, detract from the true essence of self-actualization. In Maslow's theory, remember, the road to self-actualization requires having already satisfied these basic needs. This means that Maslow must, as he said, "distinguish the artistic and intellectual products of basically satisfied people from those of basically unsatisfied people" (1970, p. 46), to make sure their accomplishments are not contaminated by lower needs. Not an easy task.

If the self-actualization needs are, ideally, autonomous, how then did Maslow explain the mechanism through which this occurs? His main theme, of course, was that the self-actualization needs evolved biologically (Maslow, 1970, pp. 100-101). The problem was that he was not clear how this came about. Now, our higher needs might have evolved to serve lower needs, and/or they might have evolved because they are adaptive in their own right. If they evolved to meet our lower needs, then we must somehow explain how, on a biological level, they have become autonomous. If they evolved because they are adaptive in their own right, we must postulate that creative, intellectual, and artistic endeavors facilitate survival in and of themselves and thus have been incorporated into the gene pool. As far as I know, Maslow never discussed these possibilities. Maslow's chief explanation for the autonomous nature of the self-actualization needs invoked Gordon Allport's (1937) notion of "functional autonomy [in which the higher need] develops only on the basis of the lower, but eventually, when well established, may become relatively independent of the lower" (Maslow, 1970, pp. 103-104). For example, consider the following scenario: Let us imagine that you have a natural talent for music for which you are praised (which satisfies social recognition and self-esteem needs) in your younger years. As you grow up, your interest in music itself is enhanced because of its association with social
rewards, and thus you develop your musical skills more and more “for their own sake.” Also, behaviorists would predict this increasingly autonomous interest in music on the basis that the “schedule” of social reinforcement becomes intermittent and unpredictable. But, as reasonable as this scenario is, it is a poor fit with the rest of Maslow’s theory. It requires some initial degree of lower-need deprivation, which violates his conception of the self-actualizing process, and, because it derives from an environmentalist perspective, it goes against the grain of his biological bias. Actually, it is questionable whether Maslow truly understood the implications of the functional autonomy theory. In sum, Maslow never adequately accounted, as far as I can determine, for the autonomous nature that he postulated for the self-actualization needs.

Now let us address in greater detail Maslow’s belief that satisfaction of lower needs leads to self-actualization. This is such an important assertion that we need to be clear concerning what Maslow said about it: “Gratification of any basic need . . . is a move in the healthy direction” (1970, pp. 61-62), and “a man who is thwarted in any of his basic needs may fairly be envisioned simply as . . . less than fully human” (1970, p. 57). Seems pretty clear. Then what can we make of a statement such as “the complete absence of frustration, pain or danger is dangerous. To be strong, a person must acquire frustration-tolerance” (1968, p. 200). Obviously there is a contradiction here: Maslow said that thwarting of basic needs is unhealthy, but also that lack of frustration is unhealthy. Despite such contradictions, it is clear that Maslow’s theory favors a high level of need satisfaction. So let us go back to his basic theoretical position and see why, in fact, it does present great difficulties. Let us imagine what kind of circumstances would produce consistent gratification, remembering that partial gratification will produce less movement toward self-actualization. Using the hunger drive as an example, perhaps the only way that consistent gratification could be achieved is through eating small amounts of food almost continuously (although intravenous feeding would achieve a similar result). We can imagine similar conditions for other needs—for example, sexual gratification should be available just as soon as the urge arises. Do not make the mistake of dismissing this as farfetched. To the extent we allow ourselves to be hungry, or sexually unsatisfied, our efforts will be directed towards satisfying our lower needs rather than towards self-
actualization. Following this logic, then, parents who want to raise self-actualized children should strive to meet their basic needs as soon as they arise, ideally before the children begin to feel much deprivation or motivation to make efforts to satisfy these needs. Now, if you are beginning to think that this approach might lead to problems, you are not alone. Researchers have found, not surprisingly, that parents who "pamper, indulge, and fawn over the youngster in such ways as to teach him that his every wish is a command to others" (Millon, 1969, p. 263) tend to raise children who are narcissistic, are exploitive of others, have little self-control, and lack competency skills (Millon, 1969, pp. 261-266). In fact, there are many threads of research and theory in psychology that postulate, contrary to Maslow, that some frustration and deprivation is necessary for healthy psychological development. Among these are (a) Robert White's competence theory (1959), (b) Yerkes-Dodson's law (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908), (c) Hans Selye's eustress theory (1974), and (d) Alfred Adler's compensation theory (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1959).

In fact, these perspectives are far from esoteric; their essence can be found in any number of self-help books written for the general public (e.g., Bloomfield & Felder, 1985; Brown, 1983; Houston, 1981).

In spite of their differences, all of these perspectives agree on one or more of the following points: (a) that a moderate amount of deprivation stimulates our creative potential; (b) that this keeps us motivated and interested in life; and (c) that this leads to a sense of competence that helps us deal with the vicissitudes of living. Nietzsche said it in a particularly pithy (and extreme) fashion: "What does not kill me makes me stronger."

In addition, research indicates that some degree of deprivation, and thus challenge, are necessary to keep us from feeling bored. In particular, this research indicates a connection between low levels of deprivation and psychosomatic illness (Goldberg, 1978). Note that this finding also conflicts with the widely noted position of Holmes and Rahe (1967), who, along with Maslow, believe that the less deprivation and stress (in their theory, stress that arises from having to adjust to change) the better. George Bernard Shaw's memorable comment on the matter is certainly an overstatement, but it clearly states the alternative view to Maslow's: "The only
thing worse than not getting what you want is getting what you want.”

Finally, it might be said that conditions that allow for consistent gratification of needs are probably only possible in advanced affluent societies such as ours. In fact, Maslow’s theory could be considered elitist in this regard (Smith, 1973, p. 29). This also makes it difficult to image the evolutionary conditions that would give rise to a self-actualization potential which could be realized only in a society that didn’t come into being until recently.

So where did Maslow go wrong? His error, I think, lies in overstating his position. We can all agree that extreme need deprivation is ordinarily psychologically damaging. But this doesn’t mean that the opposite condition, extreme ease of need gratification, is psychologically healthy. As with many issues, a moderate position is the most defensible.

Of course, as we have seen, Maslow did vacillate on this issue. This is understandable when we realize, on the one hand, how important his absolutist stand is to his theory as a whole. After all, if some deprivation is psychologically healthy, then not only does his theory lose much of its distinctiveness, but its chain of reasoning loses one of its crucial links: if we are deprived at lower-need levels, how then, in Maslow’s way of thinking, are we able to move up the need hierarchy and become fully self-actualized? On the other hand, as we have also seen, Maslow experienced great difficulty maintaining his absolutist stand in the face of so much opposing theory and research.

Now we are ready to discuss the third component of Maslow’s theory.

3. The self-actualization needs differ qualitatively from the lower (or “deficiency”) needs in that they motivate us in the absence of a sense of deficiency—hence they are called “being” needs (Maslow, 1968, pp. 29-37). As Maslow said, being motivation involves a state of desirelessness, purposelessness, [and] lack of D-need (deficiency-need)” (1971, p. 128). If Maslow were referring to the psychological state that often persists for a period following the gratification of a need, this would be an obvious statement. However, it is clear that he was describing a more or less ongoing level of functioning. Now we can grant that, for example, compared with eating a meal, there is a different feeling associated with creating art, writing
literature, or getting involved in a favorite building project. Our involvement with these activities seems self-sustaining, persistent, and intrinsically rewarding, and this is certainly the quality that Maslow tried to capture in his theory. But we have seen that, when it comes to Maslow’s theory, initial impressions are often misleading. So let us take a closer look at this aspect of his theory.

Let us begin by examining the logic of Maslow’s assumption that we can be motivated in the absence of a sense of deficiency. Another way to state this is that we can be motivated to gain or achieve something even though we don’t lack it in the first place. Not very logical. As Salvatore Maddi says, “In order to define a motive, you must specify a goal state that is to be achieved. . . . And once you define a goal, you are of necessity assuring that the person having the motive is in a deprived state until he reaches the goal” (1968, p. 83). Think about your own experiences with higher-level needs. Don’t you find yourself setting goals, perhaps very long-range goals, but goals that consist of something you lack at present? If you achieve your goals, don’t you typically set new goals for yourself, and the cycle repeats itself? Certainly this has a different quality than eating a meal, but the difference doesn’t seem to have to do with deficiency, as Maslow maintained. Rather, the difference seems to involve such matters as experiencing greater freedom to choose higher-level motivations, or challenges—deprivations if you will—that are practically unlimited in their potential scope. These characteristics of higher-order motivations might arise because a wide variety of such motivations can meet a multitude of lower-level needs or because these motivations have truly become functionally autonomous or both. In any case, the basis of the distinctiveness of the self-actualization needs seems not to hinge on the absence of a sense of deprivation.

Maslow’s discontent with motivation based on deprivation stemmed from his rejection of the traditional behaviorist position, which postulated tension or drive reduction—that is, overcoming deprivation, especially with respect to basic needs—as the sole basis of motivation (Maslow, 1968, p. 38). Behaviorists traditionally ignored higher drives such as curiosity and exploration, which seem to involve pursuing challenges and thus heightened drive states (Berlyne, 1960). However, it now appears that these higher drives are capable of being satiated, at least in some species (Eisenberger, 1972). Because satiation implies a prior state of
deprivation, these findings call into question Maslow’s assumption that these higher motives operate in the absence of feelings of deprivation.

To sum up, what appears to be unique about higher-order needs is not the absence of feelings of deprivation, but rather a number of other characteristics, including the purposeful choosing of challenges, and thus deprivations, which can provide almost limitless motivation and satisfaction.

Now we come to the final component of Maslow’s theory of motivation.

4. The level of self-actualization, which is the end-point of the process outlined above, constitutes the highest level of human experience (Maslow, 1970, pp. 149-180; Maslow, 1971). Let us start with a quotation from Maslow: “Western civilization has generally believed that the animal in us was a bad animal” (1970, pp. 82-83). So, to some extent, does Eastern civilization, and most important, so, to some extent, did Maslow. Where Maslow differed from both Western and Eastern traditions is in the route he favored to overcome our animal nature, by which he meant our basic needs that we share with other animals—needs for food, sex, and so on. You will remember that Maslow’s prescription runs as follows: “The easiest technique for releasing the organism from the bondage of the lower . . . needs is to gratify them” (1970, p. 61). Of course, we have already seen that it is questionable whether this approach is effective, but how does it compare with more traditional approaches? Now, traditionally in both East and West, the most common way to overcome lower needs is to deny and to suppress them. Of course, Maslow’s approach probably fits our modern-day affluent society much better, which often seems to believe that the best way to overcome temptation is to give in to it. But Maslow’s value judgment is the same as the traditional one—that a part of our basic biological makeup is sufficiently unworthy that it should be eliminated as an important concern in our lives (Daniels, 1988, p. 23). You may agree or disagree with Maslow’s value judgment (it makes little sense to me), but, for a theorist such as Maslow, who claimed to be taking his lead from basic biological characteristics, it seems strangely nonbiological.

Why are these lower needs seen as unworthy (the term lower itself reinforces this assumption)? Maslow, in particular, consid-
ered them lower partly because he believed that they are basically selfish in nature (Maslow, 1968, p. 202). However, research in sociobiology has demonstrated that many lower drives, including the traditional archvillain, sex, are, biologically speaking, largely altruistic in nature. For example, animals will sometimes risk their own lives to conceive, or later to protect, their offspring (Wilson, 1980).

Moving on to the characteristics of people who have attained self-actualization, Maslow once more had difficulty being consistent. We already know that “The perfectly healthy [self-actualized] man has no sex needs or hunger needs, or needs for safety, or for love, or for prestige, or self-esteem” (Maslow, 1970, p. 57). But elsewhere Maslow maintained that self-actualized people “tend to be good animals, hearty in their appetites and enjoying themselves without regret or shame or apology” (1970, p. 156). Of course, it makes no sense to say that people with no hunger needs are hearty in their appetites. This is yet another instance of Maslow contradicting Maslow.

Maslow also granted that need satisfaction is not the only route to self-actualization: “There are apparently innately creative people in whom the drive to creativeness seems to be more important than any other counterdeterminant” (1970, p. 52). By this, Maslow meant that some people are chiefly motivated by higher-level needs even though they have failed to satisfy needs lower in the hierarchy. Examples would include artists or scientists who are so wrapped up in their work that they forgo eating, or sex, or meaningful relationships of any kind, for lengthy periods.

Finally, Maslow admitted that his formula—satisfying lower needs is the way to achieve self-actualization—does not always work: “I have individual subjects in whom apparent basic-need-gratification is compatible with ‘existential neurosis,’ meaninglessness, valuelessness, or the like” (1971, pp. 300-301). Maslow suggested that, to deal with this difficulty, he needed to modify his basic theory: “It is now more clear to me that gratification of the basic needs is not a sufficient condition for self-actualization” (1971, p. 300). And this is indeed a drastic modification. What, then, did Maslow propose as a sufficient condition for achieving self-actualization? Although he was far from clear on this point (Maslow, 1971, pp. 39, 301), he seems to have concluded that, because the potential for self-actualization is genetically based,
some people will inherit it and some people won’t (Frick, 1982, pp. 32-40). To expand on his reasoning, according to the principle of genetic variation, inherited needs are likely to be distributed more or less according to a normal curve, with some individuals demonstrating a high level of the need, others a low level, but most people a moderate level. This principle should apply as well to self-actualization needs, if they are indeed genetic in character. Thus some individuals would be expected to inherit a very low self-actualization potential. In the extreme case, for example, seeking to specify a process by which retarded individuals could function consistently at the level of higher motivations would probably be a futile endeavor. For such people to satisfy completely their lower needs might indeed be a misguided effort, because other motivations may not be available to sustain them. Thus Maslow recognized that a low genetic potential for self-actualization might account for the feelings of “meaninglessness” he said he observed in some people who were gratified in their basic needs. The problem is that this view clashes with other statements of his regarding self-actualization—for example, “What a man can be, he must be. He must be true to his own nature. This need we may call self-actualization” (1970, p. 46). This statement, of course, conveys quite a different conception of self-actualization; according to it, we would conclude that anyone can potentially become self-actualized. But, as we have just seen, Maslow elsewhere realized that his genetic theory in fact limits self-actualization to a favored proportion of the population. But, of course, Maslow cannot have it both ways. One of these positions must be wrong.

Let us conclude this section on self-actualization with a look at the people Maslow cited as self-actualized. Remember, they include such well-known personalities as Abraham Lincoln and Eleanor Roosevelt. Now, according to Maslow, to be self-actualized, individuals should “have been satisfied in their basic needs throughout their lives, particularly in their earlier years” (Maslow, 1970, p. 53). Thus, achieving a high level of need satisfaction late in life won’t do; this situation fits the alternative “deprivation followed by fulfillment” model of human well-being, rather than Maslow’s “constant-fulfillment” model. Now, if you are familiar with the early lives of Abraham Lincoln and Eleanor Roosevelt, you know that they both had extraordinary challenges and deprivations to overcome. In other words, they fail to qualify as exemplars of
Maslow's theory. Why did Maslow include such individuals in his attempts to support his theory? The answer seems to be that Maslow chose his sample of self-actualizers on the basis of their adult traits, not their past life experiences (Maslow, 1970, pp. 149-180). Thus, unfortunately, instead of serving as a test of his theory (Does a consistently high level of need gratification produce self-actualized individuals?), his sample chiefly shows that if you look for people who meet any particular criteria of psychological health, you can probably find people who meet those criteria. For this reason, his demonstration of the traits of self-actualizers is "circular" and has little bearing on his theory.

On the other hand, Maslow's sample does demonstrate that some adults seem able to function much of the time at higher-need levels. However, most of the possible mechanisms for achieving self-actualization—we have discussed these in previous sections—are not encompassed by Maslow's theory. In any particular instance, of course, it is difficult to know which of these mechanisms might be involved: for example, (a) gratification of lower needs in later life, (b) repression of lower needs, (c) a particularly strong genetic self-actualization potential, (d) a linkage between the two levels by which the pursuit of higher needs helps to meet lower needs, or (e) the achievement of functional autonomy of higher needs. Most likely, different combinations of these mechanisms operate in different people at different times.

With respect to the traits of self-actualizers, you will remember that such people are said to be exceptionally creative, spontaneous, and nonjudgmental. However, in spite of the value Maslow seemed to attach to being nonjudgmental, Maslow's theory is very judgmental—about what produces and what constitutes a self-actualized individual. In this, he is allied with other nativist theorists such as Carl Rogers. That is, because they postulate a more or less predetermined and unchanging human nature, they have a framework for judging whether or not people are pursuing the "correct path" to self-actualization. In contrast, behaviorists, for example, traditionally make no judgments about what an ideal human is like, because our human potential, in their view, is not fixed, but rather is infinitely malleable. Of course, either of these extreme positions is difficult to support.

A final characteristic of self-actualizers deserves comment, and that is their ability to experience heights of emotion—what Maslow
called peak experience, or what is more commonly referred to as mystical experience. Remember that, according to Maslow, people become self-actualized, and thus more likely to have peak experiences, when their lower needs have been met. However, as we have already said, both Eastern and Western traditions favor deprivation and suppression as a means of curtailing the lower needs, and this same approach, carried to an extreme, constitutes perhaps the most common path to mystical experience (Neher, 1990, pp. 107-121). At one point, and contrary to his theory, Maslow admitted that “higher needs may occasionally emerge, not after gratification, but rather after forced or voluntary deprivation, renunciation, or suppression of lower basic needs [as is] reported to be common in Eastern cultures” (1970, pp. 59-60). Probably all of us have experienced the ecstasy that can follow fulfillment after a long period of deprivation—for example, reunion with a loved one after a lengthy separation. But how do we make sense of deprivation practices of mystics, East and West, whose fulfillment, when it comes, seems to be in the form of transcendental feelings or visions of achieving oneness with a higher essence? St. Teresa’s accounts of ecstatic union with spiritual beings is probably the best-known example. Perhaps, as with much of experience, fulfillment is more a matter of expectation and perception than of external reality (Neher, 1990, pp. 122-130).

Short of such extremes, most of us can remember when we have purposefully deprived ourselves of basic needs; going camping is a good example. Having to concern ourselves with providing shelter, keeping warm, and catching and preparing fish to eat may only prove what Cicero said: “Hunger is the best seasoning for meat.” But such experiences also seem to provide a connection with our primal roots (i.e., our basic needs) that can be very meaningful and invigorating.

All these examples of purposeful need deprivation in the service of achieving apparently higher states of being tend, of course, to undermine further Maslow’s belief that satiating lower needs constitutes the most reasonable path to self-actualization and peak experience.

To summarize, the problem here is not that the level of self-actualization is not worth attaining. The problems are that, first, there is a serious question whether its attainment is a consequence of the process Maslow advocated. In particular, the requirement
that lower-level motivations must first be eliminated, through satiating them, is highly questionable on a number of grounds. And, second, there is good reason to believe that lower motivations are not always burdensome. In fact, they can make their own unique and significant contribution to our lives.

CONCLUSION

With respect to the main outlines of his theory, Maslow certainly deserves credit for his general thesis: Undoubtedly, we do have a difficult time reaching the heights of experience if we are preoccupied with attaining the base essentials of life. However, many of the details of his theory need modification. In particular, the four components of the theory need some reworking.

1. We do inherit needs, but among these are needs that Maslow failed to acknowledge as necessary for developing as fully functioning humans. These needs involve the necessity for a great deal of cultural input, more than just what is necessary to gratify our lower needs. In particular, many higher needs undoubtedly require encouragement from the environment for their development.

2. There probably is some sort of need hierarchy, in that our basic needs are ordinarily more urgent in their demands than are higher-level needs. However, it is not clear that, in the long run, satisfying our lower needs diminishes their urgency, which Maslow felt was necessary for higher needs to emerge. In fact, for many reasons, a moderate level of need gratification seems to be more growth enhancing than the high levels of need gratification that Maslow favored. In addition, there is probably more linkage between various need levels than Maslow proposed. In particular, the higher needs may not be as autonomous as Maslow's theory suggests. For example, if we could, we might often trace them to their origin, either in evolutionary or individual experience, in helping us meet lower needs.

3. Higher-level needs seem not to operate apart from a sense of deficiency, as Maslow proposed. However, higher needs certainly are distinctive in that, unlike lower needs, we are able to choose our higher motivations (or challenges, and thus deprivations) because they are farthest removed from essential survival needs.
4. The level of self-actualization, as Maslow described it, is unique to humans and is worthy of attainment. However, his widely cited sample of self-actualized individuals does not support his theory that a history of high-levels of satiation of basic needs, which is intended to eliminate them as motivations, is required for the attainment of self-actualization. In fact, there are many reasons to believe that “lower” motivations, far from always being a burden, can provide important fulfillments and satisfactions of their own. Nevertheless, there are a number of possible mechanisms, most of which Maslow’s theory fails to encompass, that may be involved in the achievement of self-actualization.

In the face of these many problems, humanistic psychologists have a choice. They can ignore the difficulties, preserve Maslow’s teachings intact, and consequently run the risk of ideological atrophy as has happened, to some extent, in psychoanalysis. Or they can view Maslow’s theory as a serious scientific contribution that therefore deserves scrutiny and modification in the light of new insights and new information.

The particulars of his theory aside, Maslow certainly deserves credit for a number of accomplishments. He attacked behaviorism, as well as psychoanalysis, at some of their most vulnerable points, and encouraged us to think about alternative ways of viewing motivation. And he encouraged us to devote more attention to the example of psychologically healthy individuals and what they can teach us about the positive aspects of living. There is little question that these are worthy accomplishments.

REFERENCES


Yerkes, R., & Dodson, J. D. (1908). The relation of strength of stimulus to rapidity of habit formation. *Journal of Comparative Neurology and Psychology, 18*, 459-482.

Reprint requests: Andrew Neher, Psychology Department, Cabrillo College, Aptos, CA 95003.