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**Self-Actualization Needs**

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Introduction

Self-actualization needs, as identified by psychologist Abraham Maslow, are the needs related to achieving peak human flourishing.

Key Information

Abraham Maslow conceived of self-actualization as an ideal psychological end state that a human being might reach after largely satisfying other, more fundamental needs. Maslow’s theory was that humans have a “hierarchy of needs” that existential urgency drives them to address in a particular order. At the bottom of the hierarchy are physiological needs, such as need for air, water, food, and a functional body temperature (Maslow [*1954*](#CR6)/1970, pp. 35–38). Next are safety needs, like security, protection from physical and psychological harm, and a sense of law and order having the edge over chaos (pp. 39–43). Next are belongingness and love needs, such as with a romantic partner, with friends and family, and with broader circles like social groups, religions, and nations (pp. 43–45).

Next are esteem needs, consisting of first the need for the kind of competence and mastery that assures autonomy, and second the need for esteem from others that assures prestige, status, fame, or dominance (pp. 45–47). At the top of the hierarchy is self-actualization, and Maslow anticipated that satisfying this ultimate need would lead to a melting away of all need-driven motivated striving, letting subsequent action be more purely expressive and spontaneous (p. 33).

According to Maslow, the urge to satisfy a higher need is less likely to occur if a lower need is not sufficiently satisfied. Maslow did not understand his own hierarchy rigidly, however, and noted a number of possible exceptions to it, like martyrs who “will give up everything for the sake of a particular ideal, or value” (Maslow [*1954*](#CR6)/1970, p. 53). The basic reasoning behind his hierarchical need system was simply that, “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 an always impending catastrophe, or if everyone hated us” (p. 24).

Consistent with this theoretical approach, Maslow saw the need for self-actualization arising only when these other more basic needs had been sufficiently addressed:

A new discontent and restlessness will soon develop, unless the individual is doing what he, individually, is fitted for. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. (Maslow [*1954*](#CR6)/1970, p. 46)

Maslow also noted that “studies of psychologically healthy people indicate that they are, as a defining characteristic, attracted to the mysterious, to the unknown, to the chaotic, unorganized and unexplained” (p. 49). He saw this attraction as reflecting a “cognitive” need that was both continuous with and distinct from the needs that he called “conative, i.e., having a striving character” (p. 51).

The Relationship of Self-Actualization to Meeting Other Human Needs

Superficially, Maslow’s hierarchy appears to contradict Erikson’s ([*1959*](#CR4)/1994) stage theory of psychosocial development. For instance, while Erikson imagined that it was necessary to arrive at a stable and accurate sense of self (i.e. resolve one’s adolescent “identity crisis”) before successfully establishing relational intimacy, Maslow’s hierarchy potentially suggests a reverse ordering: that an actualized expression of the true self is achievable only after belongingness needs (including intimacy) have been satisfied. Yet, in practice, Maslow supported the common therapeutic approach of helping a client find their “Real Self” (Maslow [*1954*](#CR6)/1970, p. 95) as a means of individually seeking things they lacked, like achieving security, belongingness, and esteem needs.

Part of the apparent contradiction may be resolved by the expected rarity of self-actualization achievement relative to achieving a more practical sense of self, one sufficient for sustainable relational intimacy. Maslow sometimes appeared to suggest that self-actualization was something of which only a few advanced humans were capable anyway, as if they were a special subgroup of the human species:

Could these self-actualizing people be more human, more revealing of the original nature of the species, closer to the species type in the taxonomical sense? Ought a biological species to be judged by its crippled, warped, only partially developed specimens, or by examples that have been overdomesticated, caged and trained? (Maslow [*1954*](#CR6)/1970, p. 159)

Yet Maslow also implied that the obstacle to more widespread self-actualization was that the structure of even advanced wealthy Western rights-respecting societies did not go sufficiently far to meeting most people’s more basic needs:

Higher needs require better outside conditions to make them possible. Better environmental conditions (familial, economic, political, educational, etc.) are all more necessary to allow people to love each other than to keep them from killing each other. Very good conditions are required to make self-actualizing possible. (Maslow [*1954*](#CR6)/1970, p. 99)

Maslow recommended therapy, presumably of the humanistic kind in particular, as a means of guiding people towards self-actualization individual-by-individual. He also recommended therapy as a means of resistance to the kind of society that hobbled people by denying them their needs, whether basic or advanced:

Psychotherapy socially amounts to running counter to the basic stresses and tendencies in a sick society…therapy amounts to fighting against the sickness-producing forces in society on an individual scale. It tries, so to speak, to turn the tide, to bore from within, to be revolutionary or radical in an ultimate etymological sense. (Maslow [*1954*](#CR6)/1970, p. 256)

It was primarily Maslow’s “individual scale” therapeutic ambitions, not his broader socially revolutionary ones, that were influential in psychology as a profession and in American and Western culture more generally. This fact may have contributed to what Maslow considered misinterpretations of his theory (Maslow [*1966*](#CR7), p. 109).

It may also have contributed to as well as to critiques charging that Maslow’s idealization of self-actualization encouraged a kind of thoughtless and impulsive asocial selfishness in ordinary people. Even in the absence of actually reaching self-actualization, people influenced by Maslow’s ideas may have been seeking to pose credibly as self-actualized in order to have self-actualized status.

BBC documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis, for instance, argued that the popularization of individualistic self-expressive ambitions (including the ambition to self-actualization) ultimately just intensified the pervasiveness of consumer culture, as people tended to express themselves by purchasing products and services that matched their perceived identity (Curtis [*2002*](#CR3)). According to Curtis, this increased demand served the interests of economic and political elites who could profit from supplying market satisfaction of those multiple and ever-shifting demands.

Empirical Research on Self-Actualization Needs with the Stanford Research Institute

Curtis also notes Maslow’s assistance to market research on self-actualization seekers in his work for the Stanford Research Institute (SRI). In the 1970s, SRI was investigating how people’s values and lifestyles (VALs) impacted their consumer and political preferences. With Maslow’s help, SRI identified three broad categories of VALs consumers corresponding roughly to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: the Need Drivens, the Outer Directeds, and the Inner Directeds (Context Institute [*1983*](#CR2)/1996). Curtis ( *[2002](#CR3)*) linked the rise of self-actualization-seeking Inner Directeds to the landslide elections of welfare state-eroding political candidates Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Reagan was particularly popular with Inner Directeds, who had become a significant portion of the U.S. population –about 20%–by the end of the 1970s (Context Institute [*1983*](#CR2)/1996).

It is notable that SRI classed Inner Directeds only as people “concerned with inner growth” (Context Institute [*1983*](#CR2)/1996), not necessarily as achievers of it. Those whom SRI labeled as “integrateds” – the subset of the sample combining both Outer-Directed and Inner-Directed values – were the only group portrayed as actually achieving self-actualization:

At the pinnacle of the VALS typology is a small group we call the Integrateds (2% of population). These rare people have put it all together. They meld the power of Outer-Direction with the sensitivity of Inner-Direction. They are fully mature in a psychological sense…. They tend to be self-assured, *self-actualizing* [italics mine], self-expressive, keenly aware of issues and sentiments, and often possessed of a world perspective. These highly unusual people are the Lincolns and Jeffersons and Einsteins and Schweitzers and Huxleys and Hammarskjolds of society. (Context Institute [*1983*](#CR2), p. 12)

This summary of “integrateds” shows Maslow’s influence at SRI, as Maslow himself had identified Lincoln, Jefferson, Einstein, Schweitzer, and Huxley as exemplars of self-actualization as part of his own non-systematic empirical study of self-actualizers (Maslow [*1954*](#CR6)/1970, p. 152). Yet SRI’s “Inner Directeds” may be closer to what Maslow often described as self-actualization-inclined individuals, as Maslow emphasized the receptive, not productive, capacities of such individuals. Also, in other writings he treated being “integrated” as a special case of self-actualizing creativity rather than its norm (e.g. Maslow [*1962*](#CR8), p. 135).

Political Implications and Consequences of Perceived Self-Actualization Needs

As his focus was primarily on individual growth toward psychological health, Maslow did not make clear to what extent self-actualization was necessary for transforming society to make it more effective at broadly meeting more basic needs. Nor did he indicate what leadership role in any society-changing project was appropriate for non-actualized individuals, the vast majority of humanity by Maslow’s estimation. Curtis ( *[2002](#CR3)*) suggests that in the wake of the 1970 Kent State shootings and other political frustrations, many previously on the politically active left opted to work on individual transformation first, with the hope that successfully achieving something like self-actualization individual-by-individual would bring revolutionary social transformation later. Maslow’s theory does not directly imply this ordering of priorities, however.

What Maslow did imply was that some “regression” or childlike receptivity to one’s primary processes could be a good thing for psychological health (Maslow [*1962*](#CR8), p. 184, p. 193). Ironically, perhaps, regression also appears to play a role–a counter-therapeutic one–in both consumer culture and in forms of coercion whose goal is to advance or defend the ideology underlying consumer culture. According to social critic Naomi Klein ( *[2007](#CR5)*), the mass induction of regression, voluntarily or non-voluntarily, has been psychologically essential to expanding the reach of a privatizing, deregulating, welfare state-eroding, public sector-shrinking political-economic vision associated with the Chicago School of economics. Political leaders like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, whom the self-actualization-seeking Inner Directeds supported (Curtis [*2002*](#CR3)), were largely aligned with the Chicago School vision.

Social critic Benjamin Barber ([*2008*](#CR1)) also notes that the consumer culture associated with this vision “infantilizes” the populations subjected to it. The Chicago School vision came to dominate the United States and much of the globe for decades in the wake of the Human Potential Movement, though to what extent the movement generally or Maslow’s ideas specifically enabled or resisted that vision is difficult to determine.

Conclusion

Whether or not self-actualization is a need, it has become an increasingly articulated desire that fits well with individualist cultures and political economies. Maslow’s original intentions in identifying self-actualization needs appeared to include societal reforms that would enable other fundamental needs to be widely met. With these lower-tier needs met, more people could achieve the rare self-actualization state and so could be “fully human” in the way that Maslow envisioned. In practice, however, it appears that the cultural valuation of self-actualization needs has sometimes bolstered policies and structures that have undermined the kind of social reforms that Maslow would have supported to make genuine self-actualization a more common human experience.

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