Article

Self-Actualization Myths: What Did Maslow Really Say?

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Abstract
Maslow's theory of self-actualization is one of the most well-known theories both in psychology and to the public. It is also frequently misunderstood or misinterpreted. This article presents myths about self-actualization theory and myths about Maslow's thoughts on science. Maslow's own writings are used to refute the myths. The myths cover topics such as the following: empirical support for the theory, the composition of and movement through the needs hierarchy, the "self" in self-actualization, hidden elitism in the theory, and happiness in self-actualizing people. The relevance of Maslow's self-actualization theory for contemporary psychology is also discussed.

Keywords
self-actualization, well-being, optimal mental health, authenticity, positive psychology

Self-actualization is one of the most easily recognizable theories associated with psychology. It is among a small group of psychological terms that is often recognized by the general public. It is also one of the most frequently appearing constructs in psychology textbooks. Proctor and Williams (2006) did a content analysis of 33 introductory psychology textbooks to determine the most frequently cited concepts. Self-actualization was cited in 82% of the

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textbooks.[1] A survey of 1,725 members of the American Psychological Society asked them to rank the most important psychologists of the 20th century (Haggbloom et al., 2002). Abraham Maslow was ranked #10 on the list. One has to assume that Maslow's theory of self-actualization was responsible to a great extent for his position in the ranking. Although self-actualization is one of the most frequently recognized terms both within psychology and in the general public, it is often misunderstood.

The following article provides a list of some myths about self-actualization theory. However, the term "myth" is not used to describe a vehicle that helps express archetypal knowledge or universal themes of the human condition (e.g., Jung, 1964). Rather, the term is used here in the more conventional sense to denote a false belief. The list is the result of many discussions with students and colleagues, reading numerous research articles, and reviewing many psychology textbooks over the past 40 years. The danger in these myths is that if they are not corrected they may become codified into a standardized presentation of self-actualization.

A few of the difficulties in separating truth from fiction with self-actualization theory should be acknowledged. Maslow was a prodigious writer and his thoughts on the implications and applications of his theory could alter somewhat from one publication to the next. Added to this, are the comments he made at professional conferences, which could be spontaneous and less subject to reflection, and his personal journals, which were often casual musings or even spur of the moment emotional releases. Therefore, I have focused on his self-chosen published books and essays. I have tried to order the myths so that corrections to those that appear first in the list are necessary to corrections presented later. With these caveats, the list follows.

Myths About Self-actualization

There Is No Empirical Support for Self-Actualization Theory

The first question relevant to this myth is whether there is a substantial empirical research base of studies on self-actualization theory that meet the methodological criteria necessary for publication in peer-reviewed journals. A recent search of the literature using PsycINFO as the search engine with "self-actualization" as the keyword found 4,146 entries from 1954 to 2017. Of those, 1,329 were dissertations, 2,315 entries were articles in academic journals, and 1,112 of those articles were various types of experimental and quantitative studies (e.g., empirical study, experimental replication, meta-analysis). A second search using "self-actualization" as a term in the title found 1,027 articles that included 189 empirical studies in academic journals.

When numerous masters' theses are added to this list, there is clearly a significant research base on self-actualization. Summaries of research studies can be found in a number of sources including Jones and Crandall (1991); Knapp (1990); Roberts (1972); Wahba and Bridwell (1976); and Welch, Tate, and Medeiros (1987).

Next, the question of empirical support for self-actualization theory requires some clarification. Since self-actualization is a complex theory, there are a number of questions that can be proposed when testing hypotheses about self-actualization. Two core research questions seem to be central:

> **Research Question 1:** Do people move through the needs hierarchy as Maslow proposed?
> **Research Question 2:** Do Maslow's characteristics of highly self-actualizing people indicate higher levels of mental health and well-being?

Probably the most frequently cited study related to the first question was done by Wahba and Bridwell (1976), who published an extensive review of empirical research on self-actualization. They found only partial support for the progression through the needs hierarchy as proposed by Maslow. However, they did find support for one element of self-actualization theory. Maslow proposed that people who were motivated primarily by the lower needs in the hierarchy (i.e., physiological, safety, belongingness and love, self-esteem) were motivated by what he called D-needs or deficiency needs. These needs are gratified by rewards that "come from outside the person, not from within" (Maslow, 1999, p. 233). Highly self-actualizing people are motivated primarily by B-needs or Being needs, which rely on self-chosen internal goals and values for gratification. Wahba and Bridwell found that some people are motivated more by B-needs than by D-needs.

Other studies have found some empirical support for Maslow's hypotheses about progression through the needs hierarchy. For example, Wicker, Brown, Wiehe, Hagen, and Reed (1993) hypothesized that previous studies contained methodological flaws and had not adequately tested Maslow needs theory. Their data supported the hypothesis and they stated, "One conclusion does seem to emerge clearly: it is too soon to conclude that the [needs] proposition (or Maslow's theory in general) has been refuted by research" (p. 131; also see Wicker & Wiehe, 1999). More recent research has suggested that the progression through the needs hierarchy may be found more easily at the societal or cultural level (e.g., Hagerty, 1999). In general, this research has found that when basic needs are met for many people in a society then it is more likely for members of that society to be motivated by self-actualizing needs or B-needs. For example, Tay and Diener (2011) found that the search

for meaning and fulfillment indicative of the B-needs is more likely to be found in countries where the basic needs have been met for many in the population.

It might be argued that the most important elements of self-actualization theory are the personality characteristics Maslow assigned to highly self-actualizing people. Therefore, the next question is whether those characteristics are found in people who exhibit higher than average mental health and greater personal growth. Studies using the *Personal Orientation Inventory* (Shostrom, 1974), as a measure of self-actualization, have found a number of significant relationships in the expected directions with measures of Carl Rogers's theory of the fully functioning person, Frankl's constructs of meaning in life and self-transcendence, Kohlberg's theory of moral judgment, Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, Adler's theory of social interest, creativity, internal locus of control, the tendency to have peak experiences, higher sexual satisfaction along with lower prudishness, as well as less fear of death. All of these constructs are associated with people Maslow described as highly self-actualizing as well as being indices of greater mental health (for reviews and other examples, see Burwick & Knapp, 1991; Knapp, 1990).

Studies using the *short index of self-actualization* (Jones & Crandall, 1986) have also found a number of correlations in the expected directions with constructs such as greater assertiveness, higher self-esteem and optimism, and lower scores on trait anxiety, boredom proneness, perfectionism, and depression (Crandall & Jones, 1991; Richard & Jex, 1991). My own studies using the short index of self-actualization have found significant relationships with Ryff's Scales for Psychological Well-Being, openness to experience, a measure of Heath's construct of maturity, and hardiness (Compton, 2001; Compton, Smith, Cornish, & Qualls, 1996); Adler's construct of social interest, Rogers's theory of the fully functioning person, self-control, affect balance (Compton, 1998); authenticity, durable happiness but not fluctuating happiness, eudaimonia, and measures of meaning, transcendence, cognitive complexity, and intellectual openness (Compton, Cumming, Mayhew, & Gorbett, 2014). Again, many other examples could be cited. In summary, studies have found that scales used to measure self-actualization are significantly correlated in the expected directions with other measures of greater mental health and personal growth.

While there is an extensive database on self-actualization, there is one caution to be considered when evaluating the research. The caution concerns the ubiquitous college student who is the respondent in countless research studies. Early in his studies of self-actualization, Maslow screened 3,000

college students and found only one person who was "immediately useable" and "one or two dozen" who were potential subjects for the future. He said these younger people were "growing well." Ultimately, however, Maslow (1987) concluded " . . . self-actualization of the sort I had found in my older subjects perhaps was not possible in our society for young, developing people" (p. 126). It seems safe to say that the results of most studies using university students as respondents cannot be viewed as studies of people who are unambiguously self-actualizing. However, it may be acceptable to say that these studies reveal something about the potentials for self-actualization in young people who are "growing well."

Lower Needs Must Be Fully Met Before Moving to the Next Higher Need

This myth is found when someone says that the lower needs, such as the safety needs, must be fully met or fulfilled 100% before a person is motivated by the needs higher in the hierarchy. Maslow realized that this misunderstanding might be a problem in his earliest book on self-actualization (Maslow, 1954) and in the third edition of the book (Maslow, 1987) it says,

> So far, our theoretical discussion may have given the impression that these five sets of needs . . . are somehow in such terms as the following: If one need is satisfied, then another emerges. This statement might give the false impression that a need must be satisfied 100 percent before the next need emerges. In actual fact, most members of our society who are normal are partially satisfied in all their basic needs and partially unsatisfied in all their basic needs at the same time. A more realistic description of the hierarchy would be in terms of decreasing percentages of satisfaction as we go up the hierarchy of prepotency. For instance, to assign arbitrary figures for the sake of illustration, it is as if the average citizen is satisfied perhaps 85 percent of physiological needs, 70 percent of safety needs, 50 percent in love needs, 40 percent in self-esteem needs, and 10 percent in self-actualization needs. (pp. 27-28)

In addition, Maslow also discussed exceptions to his needs hierarchy. That is, some people seem to operate outside of the usual progression from physiological needs to self-actualization needs. Maslow (1987) said, "We have spoken so far as if the needs hierarchy were a fixed order, but actually it is not nearly so rigid as we may have implied" (p. 26). He went on to give examples such as highly creative people for whom creativity takes precedence over other needs and people who hold high ideals and values that may be so strong as to override other needs (for other examples, see pp. 26-27).

The Cognitive and Aesthetic Needs Should Be Included in the Basic Needs Pyramid

This myth is found when the two cognitive needs (i.e., to know; to understand) are placed between other needs in the needs hierarchy, often between the self-esteem needs and the need for self-actualization. Occasionally, the aesthetic needs are also inserted after the cognitive needs.

Maslow (1987) stated in many ways that the needs to know and to understand should not be part of the basic needs hierarchy. For instance, he said, the needs to know and to understand formed a "small hierarchy in which the desire to know is prepotent over the desire to understand" (p. 25). Maslow said of the basic needs hierarchy and the cognitive needs hierarchy, "they are synergistic rather than antagonistic" (p. 25). The reference to synergistic relationships implies two hierarchies interacting with each other rather than one hierarchy with separate levels of needs. As seen in the quote above, in his discussions of the cognitive needs he would occasionally refer to them as "desires" or "impulses" or "capacities" and not always "needs." Maslow also said, "If we remember that the cognitive capacities . . . are a set of adjustive tools, which have among other functions that of satisfaction of our basic needs" (p. 23). That is, Maslow viewed the cognitive capacities or needs as tools that helped a person meet the basic needs (for additional evidence, see Maslow, 1987).

A moment's reflection on how the needs operate in Maslow's theory also shows why this must be a myth. A person does not meet his or her needs to know and to understand and then move on to the self-actualization needs. In fact, the needs to know and understand (e.g., curiosity) must be present throughout development. Maslow did suggest, however, that the quality of the desires to know and to understand would change as a person moves through the basic needs hierarchy. He described D-cognition as more appropriate to the D-needs and B-cognition as being a function of the needs to know and to understand operating at the level of the B-needs.

Concerning the aesthetic need, Maslow (1987) said, "Attempts to study the [aesthetic need] with selected individuals have at least shown that in *some* individuals there is a truly aesthetic need" (p. 25). Therefore, the aesthetic needs should not be seen as a separate level in the basic needs pyramid.

Highly Self-Actualizing People Are Focused on Their Own Development and Achievements: They Are Focused on "The Self."

The rather obvious reference to the "self" in self-actualization has lead to an assumption by many that Maslow's theory describes a very self-focused

process of personal growth. However, Maslow attempted to counter this assumption when he said,

> [self-actualizing persons] are people who have developed or are developing to the full stature of which they are capable. These potentialities may be either idiosyncratic or species wide, so that the self in self-actualization *must not have too individualistic a flavor*. (Maslow, 1954, p. 201, Italics added)

In addition, when Maslow described the characteristics of highly self-actualizing people he frequently described attitudes and behaviors that were centered on others and on humanitarian concerns. In fact, Maslow was quite clear that he borrowed Adler's prosocial construct of social interest or social feeling (*gemeinschaftsgefühl*) and included it as one of the original 15 characteristics of highly self-actualizing people. Other personality qualities included in the original 15 characteristics included deeper and more profound interpersonal relations (albeit a small group of close friends and relations), tolerance for self and others, a democratic character structure, and a dedication to a vocation or calling that they saw a being a service to others (Maslow, 1987). Their service to others came from a "framework of values that [was] broad and not petty, universal and not local, and in terms of a century rather than the moment" (Maslow, 1954, p. 212). In addition, Maslow often mentioned the idea of the bodhisattva in reference to highly self-actualizing people (Maslow, 1971). The concept of the bodhisattva comes from Mahayana Buddhism and refers to a person who is sufficiently advanced spiritually that he or she could enter Nirvana but due to a deep sense of compassion, the person takes a vow to help all other beings enter Nirvana first (Compton, 2012). A glance at the people Maslow chose to include in his original sample of self-actualizing people will quickly show that those people were known to the public for their humanitarian efforts as well as their commitment to egalitarian communities and benevolent values.

Maslow's (1971) also said that highly self-actualizing people were "meta-motivated" or motivated by Being-values rather than desires for fame, wealth, influence, or self-esteem. He said they were not seeking the "basic need gratification" of the "average citizen" but they

> . . . were being themselves, developing, growing, maturing, not going anywhere (in the sense, e.g., of social climbing), not striving in the ordinary sense of straining and trying for a state of affairs other than that in which they were. (Maslow, 1970, p. 233)

He also said,

> Perhaps the ordinary concept of motivation should apply only to nonself-actualizers. Our subjects no longer strive in the ordinary sense, but rather develop. . . . For them motivation is just character growth, character expression, maturation, and development . . . (Maslow, 1970, p. 159)

Curiously, he also said " . . . gratification of the basic needs [i.e., D-needs] is not a sufficient condition for metamotivation, although it may be a necessary precondition. . . . Metamotivation now seems *not* to ensure automatically after basic-need gratification" (p. 290). Finally, Maslow never said that high achievement motivation was a necessary prerequisite to, or consequence of, being a highly self-actualizing person.

The Self-Actualization Needs Are the Top of the Needs Hierarchy

In Maslow's original formulation of the needs hierarchy, the need for self-actualization was at the top of the hierarchy. However, in a move that would prove prescient, his original list of 15 characteristics associated with highly self-actualizing people included "The Mystical Experience, The Oceanic Feeling" (Maslow, 1954, pp. 216-217). In his preface to the second edition of *Toward a Psychology of Being*, Maslow (1968) introduced transpersonal psychology and added another need to the pyramid, one above self-actualization:

> I should say that I consider Humanistic, Third Force Psychology, a preparation for a still "higher" Fourth Psychology, transpersonal, transhuman, centered in the cosmos rather than in human needs and interest, going beyond humanness, identity, self-actualization, and the like. . . . We need something "bigger than we are" to be awed by and to commit ourselves to . . . (p. iv)

Later in his life, Maslow (1971) developed Theory *Z* in which he would retrace his steps just a bit and said that not all highly self-actualizing people had transpersonal experiences. He suggested there were " . . . two kinds (or better, degrees) of self-actualizing people . . . " (p. 270). He described these two types as "peakers" and "nonpeakers" referring to their history of having or not having peak experiences. Among other qualities, peakers were more likely to "see the sacredness in all things," they were "more holistic," more drawn to "mystery and awe," and there was "more and easier transcendence of the ego, the Self, the identity" (pp. 273, 278). One curious impression mentioned by Maslow was that peakers were less happy than nonpeaking self-actualizers. He attributed this to a greater tendency of peakers to feel "cosmic-sadness or B-sadness" over the failures of humanity to progress

beyond the self-centered, mundane concerns and fears that rule most lives (Maslow, 1971, p. 279).

Maslow Rejected Scientific Psychology

This myth, as well as the myth concerning no empirical support, has been largely responsible for the marginalization of humanistic psychology and Maslow by many in the academic community. These myths are also partially responsible for a related myth that says positive psychology and humanistic psychology have little in common (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).[2]

In *The Psychology of Science: A Reconnaissance*, Maslow (1966) said his purpose was to "reject that traditional but unexamined conviction that orthodox science is *the* path to knowledge or even that it is the only reliable path" (p. 1). This quote may seem as if Maslow rejected traditional science. On the other hand, he also said his position was

> not a divisive effort to oppose one "wrong" view with another "right" view . . . I believe mechanistic science (which in psychology takes the form of behaviorism) to be not incorrect but rather too narrow and limited to serve as a *general* or comprehensive philosophy [of science]. (p. 5)

The truth is that Maslow was not against the scientific enterprise. But he was highly critical of certain ways of both doing science and being a scientist.

In his critiques, he referred to "official science" or "means centered science" as the method of doing science he was opposed to. By means centered science, he was referring to scientists that believe

> the essence of science lies in its instruments, techniques, procedures, apparatus, and its methods rather than the problems, questions, functions or goals. . . . Means centering at the highest intellectual levels usually takes the form of making synonyms of science and scientific method. (Maslow, 1970, p. 11)

That is, he objected to a style of science that valued methodology above a more complete understanding of the question being asked in the study. A second objection Maslow raised about traditional means centered science was a rigid interpretation of objectivity such that the scientist must be dispassionately removed from any emotional connection with the "subjects" of the experiment. Rather than this emotionally distant objectivity, Maslow urged scientists to adopt a human science approach in which psychological experiments were grounded in lived human experience (see Valle & Halling, 1989).

He often referred to both Martin Buber's concept of the "I–Thou relationship" and to "Taoist science." The reference to Buber's I–Thou relationship suggested that scientists should bring more intimate, even loving, attention to every aspect of the process. This included more receptivity, more willingness to suspend judgments, more patience, more empathy, and caring. The humanity of the people being studied should be recognized and respected in a deep, emotional way. Therefore, Maslow took a cue from many existentialists and suggested that most psychological experiments should begin with phenomenology and then move on to more objective experimental methods after the experience under study had been truly understood as a human experience.

For Maslow, Taoistic science referred to a nonjudgmental focused attention. He said, "Real receptivity of the Taoistic sort is a difficult achievement. To be able to listen—really, wholly, passively, self-effacingly listen—without presupposing, classifying, improving, controlling, evaluation, approving or disapproving . . . such listening is rare" (Maslow, 1966, p. 96). If Maslow were writing today, he would probably have advised scientists to bring more mindfulness to their work. The Buddhist practice of mindfulness involves bringing more awareness, more openness, and less reactivity to each moment of experience (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). Finally, for those who doubt that Maslow embraced science, I leave this discussion with the following quote: "Science at the highest level is ultimately the organization of, the systematic pursuit of, and the enjoyment of wonder, awe, and mystery" (Maslow, 1966, p. 151).

Self-Actualization Theory Is Elitist

Unlike most of the other myths, the allegation that self-actualization theory is elitist has been the subject of a number of journal articles (see Whitson & Olczak, 1991). One particular way, the term "elitist" may be applied comes from the assumption that a person needs at least a middle-class lifestyle with a certain amount of disposable income and leisure time to "focus on the self." Possibly this comes from observations of the human potential movement, which certainly attracted many upper middle-class people who had the leisure time and income needed for lengthy self-improvement workshops often held in exotic places around the world.[3] However, Maslow (1970) said his exemplars were " . . . strongly focused on problems outside themselves. In current terminology, they are problem centered rather than ego centered" (p. 159).

In other instances, the charge of elitism may be based on the assumption that self-actualization theory ignores sociocultural factors such as racism, sexism, homophobia, religious bigotry, and poverty. However, Maslow's original sample included the following women: Ruth Benedict, Eleanor

Roosevelt, and Jane Adams, as well as the following African Americans: George Washington Carver, Harriet Tubman, and Fredrick Douglas. Certainly, racism and sexism had not prevented these people from making Maslow's list of self-actualizing persons. That is, Maslow found evidence for self-actualization in women, people of color, people at all income levels, and from many cultures and religions. On the other hand, Maslow did not write very much about how a sociocultural context tainted by sexism, racism, homophobia, or poverty might impede a person's search for of self-actualization and well-being. Nevertheless, a review of his writings reveals that he recognized that challenges in the sociocultural environment designed to humiliate and denigrate a person make the path toward self-actualization more difficult (e.g., Maslow, 1996a).

Another facet of the elitism critique comes from an assumption that self-actualization theory inevitably leads to an artificial class distinction between those who are "better" people because they are self-actualized and those who are still struggling with "lower" needs, and therefore, are somehow "inferior." For example, Maslow would use phrases such as "less evolved persons" to describe those still struggling with D-needs and "more matured," "more fully human," or "full humanness" to describe highly self-actualizing people. At one point he said of highly self-actualizing people, "they are after all superior people whenever comparisons are made" (Maslow, 1971, p. 279). On the other hand, Maslow also wrote about "the dangers of autocracy, oligarchy, or even sage-ocracy" (Lowry, 1979, p. 217) as well as the dangers of both hubris and the denial of one's own faults. Throughout his professional publications, Maslow returned again and again to the idea that highly self-actualizing people were not to be seen as perfect and the superiority he spoke of was not due to any ontological superiority over other people, rather they were simply more skilled at realizing their potentials. Maslow (1987) said, "What this has taught me I think all of us had better learn. *There are no perfect human beings*!" (p. 146). Nonetheless, Maslow's overly enthusiastic admiration for highly self-actualizing people would often result in somewhat grandiose hypotheses about their abilities as leaders and potential role models for the entire society. However, his grandiosity would soon be balanced by statements about the humility and "ordinariness" of highly self-actualizing people. In addition, he warned of "the dangers of unrealistic perfectionism" and stated, "the history of Utopias shows many such unrealistic, unattainable, nonhuman fantasies" (Maslow, 1971, p. 208).

Critiques of self-actualization theory as elitist may also be due to defensive reactions. Maslow (1987) suggested, "The individual's own wish for perfection and guilt and shame about shortcomings are projected upon [self-actualizing people]" (p. 146). Maslow hinted that a similar defensive reaction

might underlie the Jonah Complex, where people fear their own highest potentials (Maslow, 1971). At times, the idea of a highly self-actualizing person provokes feelings of envy, jealousy, or resentment in someone when another person is viewed as "better than" they are. This seems a curious reaction since everyone must have people they admire; everyone needs heroes that serve as role models. It is puzzling that some people will feel quite free to admire the skills of professional sports figures or artists and yet react defensively to any notion that someone else may be more skilled at personality development than they are. If Maslow was correct about the processes that lead to self-actualization, then the development of these skills, like many others skills in life, can be learned.

A final facet of the elitist criticism points to cultural relativism and ethnocentrism in self-actualization theory. These critiques of self-actualization theory appear to have some merit. A number of researchers have addressed the assumptions in contemporary European American psychology concerning the centrality of individuality and an autonomous self (e.g., Arnett, 2008; Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Sampson, 1988). These critics rightly point out that Maslow, and most others in Western psychology, based their theories on assumptions about the nature of self, individuality, and autonomy that are core assumptions of European American, androcentric, self-directed individualism. Although Maslow drew inspiration from contemplative and mystical traditions and incorporated some of their ideas into his writings far more than any Western psychologist since Carl Jung, the presentation of his basic theory was clearly grounded in a Western perspective that views well-being in terms of a self-focused, inner directed, autonomous, individual.

Maslow Chose People He Admired for His Initial Sample. Therefore, Self-Actualization Theory Is not Value-Free and Is not Scientific

One of the cardinal rules of traditional science is that the scientific method should be value-free or at least value-neutral. That is, scientists should not bring their own value judgments or bias to their work. However, theories of well-being are based on fundamental assumptions, or value judgments, concerning the unique emotions, behaviors, and personality dynamics that define and contribute to well-being. These value judgments about how to define well-being and the best possible life are inevitably brought to the scientific endeavor by the researcher *prior to* the development of research questions and methodology and also influence the interpretation of results (of course, research respondents also bring their own assumptions and value judgments

about well-being to the questionnaires they complete). Because of this, a number of people have argued that it may be impossible for researchers to completely remove their own fundamental assumptions and values about the nature of well-being from their research (Kurtines, Alvarez, & Azmitia, 1990; Robbins, 2008; Slife & Richardson, 2008). Therefore, the traditional requirement of value-free science in psychological research may be better described as the values question. That is, rather than asking if a researcher eliminated all personal value judgments about well-being, it may be better to ask whether a researcher explicitly stated the values used to define well-being in the development of the theory, research methodology, and interpretation of results.

While Maslow's initial choices of people as exemplars of self-actualization could honestly been seen as reflecting Maslow's ideal of optimal mental health that may have been unavoidable. It is instructive to note that his choices were also people who were consistently admired in his own American society and also by many societies around the world. For example, many of the Being-values mentioned by Maslow are also reflected in statements of human rights adopted around the world, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948 (www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/). That is, there is some consensus among historians, theologians, philosophers, psychologists, politicians, and others that the values and behaviors expressed by Maslow's exemplars reflected something admirable about humanity and the human spirit; and furthermore, the values they embodied had a measure of global significance.

Highly Self-Actualizing Persons Are Happier Than Other People

Interestingly, when Maslow was writing about self-actualization he did not concern himself exceedingly with happiness. The indices of his major books contain only a few entries for "happiness." Maslow did not include greater happiness as one of the characteristics of highly self-actualizing people. Clearly, some people in his initial sample of self-actualizing people, such as Abraham Lincoln, William James, and Albert Schweitzer, grappled with emotional difficulties at points in their lives.

On the other hand, Maslow (1970) at times suggested that highly self-actualization people might be happier. When discussing the concept of "gratification health," or having more of one's basic needs met, he also referred to the concept as "happiness health" (p. 68). Later in the same book Maslow said the following: " . . . [a self-actualizing person] is happy, serene, self-accepting, unguilty, and at peace with himself only when he is fulfilling himself and becoming what he can be . . . " (p. 272). These quotes seem to imply that people who are highly self-actualizing should also be happier.

Nonetheless, it would seem the question of happiness in highly self-actualizing people rests on the particular definition of happiness being used. At one point, Maslow (1999, p. 34) rejects a definition of happiness based on the relatively simple hedonic assumption that when needs, wants, desires, or impulses are ameliorated, this brings happiness. If Maslow saw his exemplars of self-actualization as happy, then he was surely not using a simple hedonic definition of happiness and certainly not one based on a conventional understanding of happiness (see Maslow, 1996b).

It seems clear that Maslow's studies of highly self-actualizing people led him to focus on greater fulfillment, realization of potentials, authenticity, and an enhanced sense of meaning and purpose. For example, Maslow (1970) rejected the idea that researchers should seek to complete the following statement, "If you wish to be happy, then . . . " Instead, he suggested researchers should seek to complete the following, "If you wish to be a sound member of the human species, then . . . " (p. 272). That is, he suggested that becoming a better human being should come first and it was from this quest that well-being, fulfillment, and a sense of meaning and purpose would follow. In addition, Maslow (1971) said, " . . . the concept of 'gratification' itself is transcended at the level of metamotives or growth-motives [i.e., self-actualization]. . . . So also for the concept of happiness" (p. 324).

Conclusions and New Beginnings

The conclusion of the article will be oriented around a question that looks toward the future: Is self-actualization theory relevant to 21st-century psychology? There is no doubt that Maslow's thoughts on the personality characteristics of highly self-actualizing individuals are just as relevant today as they were when he first presented his work. In fact, anyone interested in well-being should read Maslow's work. Reading Maslow's work is necessary because he wanted to convey how his highly self-actualizing exemplars thought about the complexities and paradoxes of life, how they balanced and integrated the real human emotions they experienced, how they made choices that favored growth motives in spite of difficult circumstances, and how they coped with very real human dilemmas such as anxieties, disappointments, and doubts. Maslow wanted to give a sense of how they experienced life, a glimpse of what they were like *on the inside*. Researchers who can accept his often-spontaneous musings and his nonscientific writing style will be rewarded with insights into the inner psychological lives of people who fulfilled his particular ideal of optimal well-being. In addition, Maslow's suggestions about how to approach research on self-actualization and well-being are still relevant today. In fact, Maslow's thoughts on combining

phenomenological and other qualitative methods with traditional empirical methods may be gaining contemporary advocates. A recent special edition of *The Journal of Positive Psychology* (May 2017, Volume 12, Issue 3) focused on qualitative methods. Finally, his arguments for incorporating a clearer understanding of values in well-being research are certainly relevant today (e.g., Davison & Nedelisky, 2016; Fowers, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). While it is true that not everyone can compose music like Mozart, think like Einstein, express compassion like Mother Teresa, have the wisdom of Solomon, or be as highly self-actualizing as Ruth Benedict, the highly self-actualizing people among us can serve as role models and may teach us how to move in the direction of more enhanced, or even optimal, well-being. As Maslow (1971) stated,

> let us think of life as a process of choices. . . . There may be a movement toward defense, toward safety, toward being afraid; but over on the other side, there is the growth choice. To make the growth choice instead of the fear choice a dozen time a day is to move a dozen times a day toward self-actualization. Self-actualization is an ongoing process . . . [it is] little accessions accumulated one by one. (pp. 44, 49)

Notes

1. Curiously, of the 33 introductory psychology textbooks in the study, 6 (18%) did not mention self-actualization and 3 (9%) never mentioned humanistic psychology.
2. In their initial presentation of positive psychology, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) claimed that humanistic psychology failed to create a significant "cumulative empirical base" and made peculiar assertions about the negative impact of humanistic psychology on the culture. Humanistic psychologists were quick to respond to the misrepresentations (e.g., Taylor, 2001). Robbins (2008) provides

an interesting explanation of why respected researchers like Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi might have written such a misleading presentation of humanistic psychology.

3. The human potential movement emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and was focused on helping people who were psychologically well-adjusted to achieve more of their potentials. Proponents of the movement assumed that the achievement of greater potentials would result in deeper life satisfactions, less superficial forms of happiness, and a more profound sense of meaning and purpose. The movement was, and still is, focused on experiential learning.

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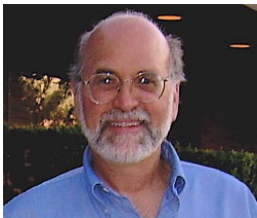
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