

# The Beauty of the Transcending of the Humanity

## --Research on Maslow's Self-actualization Theory

Liu Hongyu<sup>1</sup> Han Lu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The School of Psychology and Cognitive Science of East China Normal University

<sup>2</sup>The School of Art and Design of Wuhan Textile University

### Abstract:

Abraham Harold Maslow is a world-renowned social psychologist, personality theorist and an expert at comparative psychology. Maslow has also made great achievements in philosophy and literature.

Maslow is a well-known scholars with his study of self-realization in the West. The concept of self-realization is complex and rich in connotation. He completed the research on the self-fulfilling the original intention of those who are very specific, such as, to identify human beings, to make outstanding contributions to society of people of common personality characteristics, to identify some of the positive human potential value of the goal.

Based on his posthumous masterpiece *The Topmost Degree of the Human Nature*, this article studies origins of the core theories in Maslow's humanistic psychology with consideration of his literature, philosophy and childhood experiences. Meanwhile, the article also tries to analyze self-actualization and peak experience from the prospective of humanity.

**Keywords:** humanistic psychology, humanity, self-actualization, peak experience

In the 1950s, humanistic psychology was created by a group of American psychologists led by Abraham Maslow. It was regarded as "the third force" after Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and B.F. Skinner's behaviorism by academics, and Maslow himself was called "father of humanistic psychology". "Self-actualization" is the theoretical symbol of Maslow's humanistic psychology and the core of his theories on ethics. What is more, it is not only at the top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs,

but also the highest value goal of the entire psychology and ethics. Maslow's psychology and ethics are built around one center, i.e., man or humanity. It is human-centered and based on humans' needs with full realization of human potential as its final goal. Maslow's theory can be expressed by a simple formula: human → need (motivation) → behavior → realization of value or humanity (self-actualization is the vertex). Maslow suggests that self-actualization is based on people's needs system rooted in genetic gene like instinct, namely the intrinsic requirement of the realization of five needs (physiology, safety, love/belonging, self-esteem, self-actualization) from the bottom to the top, and ultimately reaching "self-actualization". The driving force to reach self-actualization comes from the inherent human nature of meeting the needs driven by primitive impulse. Self-actualization is the basic need, the ultimate goal and a continual process of growth for human beings, and demonstrates itself in the form of peak experience in psychology.

### 1. Maslow's upbringing and the creation of the self-actualization theory

Maslow's theories like "hierarchy of needs", "self-actualization", "peak experience", "fulfillment of potentials" and "human centered" are well-acquainted by people, and some of his thoughts have even become part of human awareness in the current world. Renowned by his self-actualization theory, Maslow is naturally questioned by many: "Is Maslow himself a self-actualized person?", "How does he exploit his own potentials?". In order to explore the sources of Maslow's theory, it is necessary to focus on the psychology master's upbringing.

In 1908, Abraham Maslow was born in a Jewish family, which had moved to Manhattan in USA when they gave birth to Maslow. His early memory primarily was about his mother, with whom he had developed very unhappy relationship. Being excessively religious and cruel in nature, Maslow's mother would immediately shouted at the children for some tiny mistakes and said: "You'll be severely punished by God!" Although he can't forgive his mother even in his adulthood, the disadvantageous childhood experiences, though adverse in his growth, spurred him to overcome the difficulties, to spur himself forward and to compensate for those miserable experiences. It was the transformation from soul torture in childhood to scientific inquiry did young Maslow gradually develop a strong suspicion to religion and respect for atheism. To avoid the tensions at home, he immersed himself in books even when he was five, and could always find refuge in library and books, which nurtured his intense interest in study. When he was in lower grades learning American history, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln became his heroes. When he was 14, for the first time in his life, he was attracted by his cousin, Bertha Goodman, and thereafter spent their lives together. The first kiss with Betha had been the most important moment in Maslow's life, which enabled him to have a real "peak experience". Several years later, when starting the research of self-actualization theory, Maslow employed these people and experiences as the basic researching examples. He directly pointed out in *The Topmost Degree of the Human Nature*, "Self-actualization means to fully, lively, spontaneously experience life, totally absorbed, forgetting everything else."

In the 1930s, Maslow met Harry Harlow and Thorndike, the two most important mentors in his life in psychological research. With their help, Maslow grew quite fast in this research field. At the same time, deeply influenced and

positively directed by the mentors, he began to trace the roots of their excellent qualities and to explore the question, "Why are they so different?" And hence, he put his hands to a relatively profound research on "excellent figures" and gradually pushed it forward to the theory of "self-actualization". He started to make a deep analysis of outstanding people and gradually developed the "self-actualization" study until he completed his marvelous work *Motivation and Personality* in 1954, putting forward the exciting transformation from traditional psychological research to the combination of scientific and ethical research mode, which represented the pioneering, creative and positive features that are typical of American styles.

Maslow put forward the concept of "similar instinct" on the basis of his criticism of two irreconcilable theories of traditional instinct and behavioral environment that dominated the area of psychology before him. He pointed out, "the early theorist on instinct had made a severe mistake to overstress the continuity between human and the animal world, but not the profound differences between human and other species."<sup>[1]</sup> "and thus instinct is strong, firm, unchangeable, uncontrollable and irrepressible"<sup>[1]</sup>. The mistake lies in the comparison between animal and human. Maslow disagreed with early instinct theories on that they regarded all behaviors as the results of biological instinct drive, yet he believed that human needs and behavior were decided by biological organisms and environmental culture. Contrastive to the traditional instinct theorists, Maslow has tempted to distinguish the essential characteristics from that of the non-essential ones and he saw more of the complexity of human needs and the plasticity of human behaviors.

*The Topmost Degree of the Human Nature* elaborates on the exploration of humanity, theories of self-fulfillment, transcendence,

creativity and many others. By understanding and analyzing Maslow's upbringing, we can see that humanistic psychology advocates people-oriented psychology studies, and the research of ideological source of normal people with good health, dignity and self-actualization. It is closely associated with Maslow's struggle and unyielding strength in his terrible childhood environment, his efforts of seeking and cherishing better sides of life, the unremitting pursuit of scientific proof and faith in humanity. He stressed that everyone is a perfect person and each person should dominate themselves instead of by others. Just like numerous excellent people he has studied, his own upbringing is the very individual practical and theoretical proof of "self-actualization".

## **2. Maslow's Transcendence of Personality and the Birth of Ultra-individualism Psychology**

In 1954, Maslow put forward the famous hierarchy of needs theory in *Motivation and Personality*, and first proposed the concept of humanistic psychology, but they failed to gain attention because of the domination of behaviorism at that time. It was not until 1961 when Maslow founded the academic journal of "Humanistic Psychology" and formally established the "American Humanistic Psychological Association" in the following year did humanistic psychology begin to gain a foothold. On July 8, 1966, Maslow was elected chairman of the American Psychological Association, which brought him into the most prosperous life stage. In that fall, Maslow won the highest praise of his life, and was named "humanitarian" by the American Humanist Association that year.

With deeper research on those outstanding and "self-realized" people, Maslow was in constant improvement of his needs theory. He found out that if we wouldn't see motivation from the higher level of human development, then the peak of motivation pyramid would and

could only be left with individuals' self-actualization, and that was not adequate to explain the lofty spirit and actions for human sacrifice for seeking truth. In his later years Maslow had seen this conflict and he suggested that a highest layer of needs should be added above self-actualization, namely transcendence needs. In 1967, Maslow published "Self-Realization and its Transcendence" and "Transcendent Motivation: the Biological Foundations of Value and Life".

Maslow suggest that motivation of human behaviors originates from their needs<sup>[2]</sup>. As a complex organism, human beings express their needs in different ways and levels, which can be divided into five categories: physiological needs, safety needs, love/belonging needs, esteem needs and self-actualization needs. Self-actualization needs are the highest level that people can reach, which provide people the impulse to bring out their personalities, potentials or abilities and represent a tendency or state of "desiring to become of what he can be and then become of what he can be, yet keeping loyal to his own nature." These hierarchies or levels of needs are driven by different needs order and power of human motivations.

In Maslow's final months of life, he became more aware that any theory about humanity should confess our own imperfections, but we can never despair. Maslow realized that even the best people, including "self-realized people" he had kept studying for a long time with reverence, were imperfect. But these can not hide or deny people's value and the highest level they can reach.

## **3. Core of Maslow's psychology theories: the topmost degree of humanity**

Some scholars believe that psychologists can be divided into two kinds, one is career type, another is lifelong type. The former, just like most scholars, regard psychologic research as a career, yet seldom involve themselves as subjects in the study. Conversely, the latter get

their personal principles and life experiences involved in their research. Obviously, Maslow falls to the latter category. He endeavors to become a practitioner, to replace knowledge with intelligence, enthusiasm with prohibited ration, to use practice as his real life experience. He soothes half the trauma the morbid psychology has brought to us, and compensates for the other healthy half. Therefore, Maslow is, in some way, not only an academic master, but a pioneering psychologist.

Maslow shares his thoughts on the topmost degree of humanity like this: self-actualized people satisfy their needs at different levels, and then get the peak experience that leads to the topmost degree where humanity can reach. Thereafter, they can retrieve the real values that have been repelled by science and technology. This is the core of his psychological theory. Maslow stresses: "due to peak experience, individuals' cognitive abilities have been fundamentally transformed from tangible cognition to the understanding and realization of values of existence. In this state, people have shared their highest degree of identity ."

Peak Experiences are brief moments of self-actualization. Only when you often have peak experiences can you successfully achieve self-actualization. Maslow believes that self-actualizing people, who normally are at the top of the pyramid of human needs, are more likely to reach peak experiences. Because people who reach this stage desire to achieve personal development. Not like most of us, they are not afflicted by anxiety , misinterpretation of reality, which enables them to judge others and the environment in a more sensible way. With a quite high level of mental ability, these people will be able to stand out in many fields, such as science, art and even in social service sectors.

Maslow has made lots of descriptions of peak experiences. He believes that "peak experience" is the generalization of life experiences of ecstasy, enchantment, rapture and

bliss. It is the most beautiful and happiest moment of life, the highest level that human development can achieve. This experience is often fleeting that can not come by easily: experience of love (for other people or things), of being parents, of the vast, mysterious or natural feelings, of aesthetic appreciation, of moment of creativity, of epiphany in therapy or thinking, of sexual lust and so on. And all these happiest moments and highest level of achievements can be called peak experiences" [3] Peak experiences will consequently result in feelings of gratitude, which are similar with the gratitude the religious believers have to God, the ordinary people have to their kind parents or the lucky ones have to their fate. "This kind of gratitude often shows the love to everyone and everything, making people feel that the world is so beautiful that they are encouraged to do good things, to repay the world and shoulder responsibilities." [4] Peak experience is a moment and state for self- affirmation and self-assurance which has its own intrinsic value. Peak experiences are for the ultimate achievements and the very goal to be achieved ."

In his life time, Maslow not only devotes himself to the development of theories , but also proves them with his unique personality. He's successfully established a groundbreaking image which leads itself to peak moments. "The New York Times" once commented: "Maslow's psychology has laid a milestone for human beings to understand themselves." He is also commended : "it is because of Maslow that people deem it promising to be a human being. He sees the brightness and future out of the world that is full of chaos and turbulence, and he shares all these with us ."

#### References:

- [1] Maslow. *Human Potential and Value* [M]. Lin Fang (translator). Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House , 1987.
- [2] Maslow. *Motivation and Personality* [M]. Xu Jinsheng (translator). Beijing: Huaxia

Publishing House , 1987.

[3] Maslow. *The Topmost Degree of the Human Nature* [M]. Lin Fang (translator). Yunnan People's Publishing House , 1987.

[4] Maslow . *Self-realization of People* [M]. Xu Jinsheng , Liu Feng(translator). Beijing: Life . Reading . Joint Publishing Company , 1987.