

**An Application of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to  
Counselling Practice**

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## **Introduction**

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) defines counselling as follows: 'Counselling and psychotherapy are umbrella terms that cover a range of talking therapies. They are delivered by trained practitioners who work with people over a short or long term to help them bring about effective change or enhance their wellbeing.' Today there are many recognised forms of counselling, however most tend to fall within one of four main schools: psychoanalytical, existential, humanist and cognitive. Another school, behaviourism, influenced Maslow during the first half of the last century.

Abraham Maslow was born in April 1908, the first of seven children to a Russian Jewish father in a slum district of New York. He excelled in Latin and Science at school and published his first article at the age of 15 years on the future of atomic energy. He attended Wisconsin University where he developed an interest in psychology. He studied existentialism and the work of J B Watson, who in turn had been influenced by the work of Ivan Pavlov. Maslow rejected existentialism at the time and became a follower of Watson's behaviourist philosophy. By 1930, Maslow was studying psychology along with biology and philosophy. He graduated in 1934 at the age of 26, aligning himself with the behaviourist school of thinking. After studying medicine for a year he moved to Brooklyn College where he remained for 14 years. During this period, Maslow studied the work of Wertheimer, Freud and Goldstein. He was influenced by Karen Horney and Erich Fromm who were Freudian in their outlook but also concerned with the problem of personal development and freedom. Maslow was a regular visitor to Alfred Adler's Friday evening groups in New York. Indeed Adler could be considered to be one of the major influences on Maslow.

Adler had introduced the concept of need (Adler 1930) which became the key component of Maslow's hierarchy. His work led Maslow to a rejection of the behaviourist theory and its assumptions. He believed that 'Creative human behaviour is a function of the higher nervous system, and cannot be explained in terms of laboratory rats or Pavlov dogs'. (Wilson 2001).

Maslow had already made a reputation for himself with his 'Principles of Abnormal Psychology' (1941) written in collaboration with Bela Mittlemann as a college textbook. But it was his paper 'A Theory of Human Motivation' (1943) where he formulated his theory of the hierarchy of needs. The publication of Maslow's hierarchy was considered radical in its day as it rejected the two established schools, namely Freudian psychoanalytical theory and Watson's behaviourism. Abraham Maslow died in 1970 aged 62, having spent many of his final years working at the Esalen Institute in California.

This paper discusses Maslow's hierarchy of needs and applies it to counselling practice.

### **The Hierarchy of Needs and its Application**

In his book 'Towards a Psychology of Being' (1968), Maslow states 'Man demonstrates in his own nature a pressure towards a fuller and fuller being, more and more perfect actualization of his humanness in exactly the same naturalistic, scientific sense that an acorn may be said to be "pressing towards" being an oak tree.'

Maslow presented his hierarchy as a pyramid-like structure covering five levels of needs: psychological, safety, love and belonging, esteem and – at the pinnacle – self-actualisation. The two lower levels Maslow called the physical deficiency needs and the three higher levels, emotional growth needs. Maslow considered life a journey of ascent from the lower to higher levels.

Maslow's pyramid can be visualised as a five storey structure requiring solid foundations at the base in order to support the higher levels. The ascent can be likened to a game of snakes and ladders on each level. The ladders represented 'peak moments' of understanding which would enable one, (or the client within the client/counsellor relationship) to ascend to the higher level. Conversely the snakes would provide a rapid descent in times of stress and uncertainty to the security offered by the lower levels. Maslow's work was not a total rejection of Freud, Watson or existentialism, but rather an attempt to assess what was useful, meaningful and applicable to mankind in all psychologies.

Maslow said 'So many people consist of being either pro-Freudian or anti-Freudian, pro-scientific-psychology or anti-scientific-psychology, etc. In my opinion all such loyalty-positions are silly. Our job is to integrate these various truths into the whole truth, which should be our only loyalty.' (Maslow 1968).

Maslow perceived the human as driven, motivated and propelled by potent forces and he called these forces human needs. 'Human needs arrange themselves in hierarchies of pre-potency. That is to say, the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need. Man is a perpetually wanting animal.'

No need or drive can be treated as if it was isolated or discreet; every drive is related to the state of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the other drives. (Maslow 1943) The needs at the base of the pyramid he called psychological needs. He described these needs as somatic (relating to the body not the mind) and as such are not strictly motivated actions/needs. Maslow defined the somatic drives as: air, food, water, sex and secretion. The counsellor needs to understand that these somatic drives have to be satisfied, at least in part, before the motivated drives can follow and the client ascends the pyramid.

Maslow's ideas were formulated during the Great Depression and the subsequent recession at the end of the 1930's. Parallels can be drawn with Europe and much of the western world today, a time of high unemployment along with political and economic uncertainty. The London riots this summer have been blamed upon poor housing conditions, low income and economic instability. It is in such times of uncertainty that man descends the snake (using the snakes and ladders analogy) to rely upon the safety and security offered at the base levels.

In private practice counselling (as opposed to the NHS system) it is usually assumed that the client has been fed and watered, has a safe and secure home and has the financial resources to pay for the counselling. As such the counsellor's attention is often, sometimes mistakenly, drawn to the higher needs of love/belonging, esteem and self-actualisation. Awareness that at the foundation levels of Maslow's pyramid, basic psychological needs are often used as substitutes to satisfy the higher needs of love, and esteem is needed. Food is often seen as a comfort and love provider, hence the chronic obesity in the Western world and the substitution of caffeine and alcohol for water. By having this awareness of Maslow's hierarchy the counsellor can develop a deeper understanding of the client.

Maslow was also keen to point out that the love and intimacy required in the third level should not be confused with the somatic drive of sex at the base level. He was aware of the 'baggage' inherited by individuals/clients through social conditioning and acknowledged Jung's work on the collective and personal unconscious. He also believed that man was capable of change through understanding and awareness. In his opinion, bringing awareness to clients through an understanding of his hierarchy, the client was capable of unravelling their confusion and solving their own problems.

Maslow's work was also influenced by Carl Rogers. Both Rogers and Maslow saw love and acceptance as a pivotal point in both learning and in the path to self-discovery. In particular he liked Roger's definition of love as 'that of being deeply understood and deeply accepted'. (Goble 1970) Maslow found that psychology had very little to say about love. Roger's premise of 'unconditional, positive regard' could be seen as love redefined. More recent studies have even suggested that 'love is the key healing principle in the therapist/client relationship.' (Sleeth 2010)

Maslow saw the so called 'psychopathic personality' as a classic example of a permanent loss of the love need. 'These are people who have been starved of love in the earliest months of their life and have simply lost forever the desire and ability to give and receive affection'. (Goble 1970)

Maslow believed the satisfaction of love needs enabled the client to ascend (climb the ladder) to the esteem needs of self-confidence, self-worth, strength, capability and adequacy. He believed that thwarting these needs produces feelings of inferiority, weakness and helplessness. His view was that one needed an appreciation of the necessity of basic self-confidence and an understanding of how helpless people are without it.

Indeed he believed that, and importantly in the context of the counselling process, much of neurosis was founded in lack of self-worth.

Maslow called the final level of his hierarchy self-actualisation. He believed that even if all the lower needs were met, discontent and restlessness will occur unless the individual is doing what he was fitted to do. Maslow believed 'a musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man can be, he must be' (Goble 1970). Maslow called this need self-actualisation. Self-actualisation was first coined by the German Psychiatrist Kirk Goldstein and it referred to the desire for self-fulfilment, namely, the tendency for man to strive for his full potential. (Goldstein & Sacks 1995) Goldstein was highly influential in the development of Gestalt therapy and is another example of Maslow's willingness to consider all schools of counselling.

Maslow recognised the effect of social conditioning and the Jungian concept of personal unconscious on the client. He saw unconscious rather than conscious needs dominating existence for much of Western society. The counsellor is perfectly placed to bring the unconscious into the present.

Maslow asserted that when a need had been satisfied over an extended period, it became undervalued. An example of this would be someone who has never experienced chronic hunger and sees the higher needs as the more important.

Maslow recognised the need to reach one's potential differed from person to person. In one person it may be just the desire to be a good parent whereas in another it may be the desire to climb Mount Everest, wear the latest fashion or indeed drive a Mercedes Benz

Maslow saw a society where people focussed on their esteem needs (as in sports cars and material possessions) and in particular esteem from others as their ultimate goal. The blame for the current economic problems in the western world has universally been laid at the feet of greed and excess. Or in other words the misguided pursuit of esteem through money and possessions rather than self-awareness and respect. Maslow saw a society reaching for esteem, believing falsely this would bring fulfilment. An understanding and awareness of this point provides the counsellor with a framework for understanding and assisting the client.

Towards the end of his life Maslow refined his hierarchy along philosophical rather scientific lines. He studied the consequences of his belief that man possesses high needs and that they are as instinctual as the lower needs. Here he disagreed with Freud's views that there was a basic antagonism between man and society. He also disagreed with Watson's view that freedom is an imaginary quantity as it had no place in scientific psychology and he could not accept the Freud-Sartre view that is based on the assumption that man has no higher aim than survival. (Goble 1970) He did however respect the existentialist philosophy of Kierkegaard who said 'Life must be understood backwards but lived forwards' (King 2009) This philosophy sits at the heart of Maslow's pyramid looking down yet living upwards.

Maslow's final assertion was that when man's needs are satisfied, he entered the realm of 'meta-needs' where qualities such as decency and kindness were not disguised forms of self-defence or self-interest. These higher needs he called being-cognition or b values. He believed these values came out of moments of peak experience and were both holistic and accepting of life. As such his hierarchy was expanded to include the cognitive needs of community and meaning along with the aesthetic needs of beauty and the search for balance and form. (King 2009)

By the end of his life it was clear that Maslow had considered all schools of counselling practice each contributing to his hierarchy. In the House of Lords, Lord Denning famously said 'We admit all relevant evidence. The goodness or badness of it goes only to weight and not to admissibility'. (Garton v Hunter.1969) This could just as easily be applied to the field of psychotherapy where a counsellor, in listening openly and without judgment to all that his client says, can help bring greater awareness to the whole process.

## **Conclusion**

While there is no 'Maslowian' school of therapy and limited acknowledgement of his contribution to counselling, the influence of Maslow's work would appear widespread. Alcohol and other drug abuse programmes are but two examples. (Goble 1970)

Following the publication of his 'Theory of Human Motivation' (1943), his work became known as third force psychology which is now commonly known as humanistic psychology, another example of Maslow's influence in counselling today.

Maslow himself writing the forward to Frank Goble's 'The Psychology of Abraham Maslow', said 'There is rapidly developing a new image of society and of all its institutions so, also, is there a new philosophy of science, of education, of religion, of psychotherapy, of politics, of economics ... . Taken together these developments can be called single aspects of a comprehensive philosophy of everything'. (Goble 1970).

In 1961, Maslow, along with Anthony Sutich, was founder of the Journal of Humanistic Psychology, a forum for contributions, conversations and debate relating to humanistic psychology. This continues today to make a valid contribution to counselling practice underpinned by Maslow's ideology.

His theories remain robust and suited to an ever changing world where counselling fully embraces mind, body and spirit.

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