

Humanism and individualism: Maslow and his critics.

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Abstract: Using broad-based literature, this study explores Abraham Maslow's humanistic psychology within the contexts of ideological criticism, 20th century U.S. adult education philosophies, and the theoretical issue of philosophical categories.

Humanistic psychology at mid-century in the U.S. had a significant influence in subsequent decades on education at all levels, humanistic education being an extension of earlier progressive education, particularly of the learner-centeredness emphasis. In a study of research citations in adult education from 1968 to 1977 (Boshier & Pickard, 1979), Maslow is one of the most cited authors--his work on motivation and self-actualization having an impact on theoretical assumptions. And in their current edition, Elias and Merriam (1995) see the enormous impact of andragogy and self-directed learning as rooted in the humanistic philosophy of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow.

Although such impact continues, criticism of humanistic psychology and humanistic education has mounted in scholarly discourse in recent last decades, mirroring current movements such as critical theory and postmodernism. Marxist critics target Maslow in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, education scholars like Bowers (1987) capture Rogers as an uncomplicated romantic, while critics of mainstream adult education (e.g., Muller, 1992; Pratt, 1993) take apart Knowles assumptions about individual autonomy and their roots in humanistic psychology.

The goals of this paper are: 1) to analyze the points of contention concerning the individual/society relationship as they are revealed in Maslow's key assumptions and those of his critics; and 2) to probe a comparison with old and new movements, key authors, and philosophical frameworks in 20th century U.S. adult education.

This study--which follows our earlier work contrasting Maslow with Rogers and Knowles (Podeschi & Pearson, 1987)--involves a theoretical framework that combines philosophical analysis with historical and cultural dimensions. For example, Maslow's writings are interpreted within the historical context of the time, with humanistic psychology and humanistic adult education viewed within the context of U.S. mainstream culture and its dominant values. The selected literature falls into two primary categories: 1) the published works of Maslow (e.g., 1962) and his private writings published posthumously--see Pearson (1994); and 2) pertinent

literature used to measure Maslow's philosophy of the individual with other authors spanning the century.

Other literature serves as background in analyzing our own theoretical framework, which receives focus in the concluding section. Besides clarifying Maslow's assumptions through measuring him with critics and influential authors and movements, the significance of this study is in calling attention to the vulnerability of overgeneralizing categories of philosophy of adult education---whether *Liberal, Progressive, Behaviorist, Humanist, or Radical*. Whereas the categorizing of Elias and Merriam (1980, 1995) provide an introductory grasp of assumptions, there is potential danger of fencing off schools of philosophy without adequate recognition of the contrast inside, and the fluidity between, the fences.

Maslow and Marxist Critics

Maslow's psychology is characterized by core elements which have remained at the heart of humanism in spite of historical permutations. These assumptions of human-centeredness, a sense of personal autonomy, the idea of human dignity, the principle of virtuous action, and a sense of personal responsibility lie at the heart of Maslow's work. Said another way, four intertwining concepts form the set of assumptions underlying his humanistic psychology: the idea of a *self*, capable of *growth*, *responsible* for what one becomes, and capable of influencing social *progress*.

As humanistic psychology and education grew in prominence, criticism rooted in Marxist social and economic analysis took shape, much of it directed at Maslow. The overall point of contention for these critics is their charge that the excessive individualism of humanistic psychology and education is essentially elitist. There are weaker and stronger versions of this criticism. Some critics argue that Maslow is unconsciously naive about elitist elements in his theories. As one critic poses: ". . . *what* real individuals, living in *what* real societies, working at *what* real jobs, and earning *what* real income have any chance at all of becoming self-actualizers?" (Lethbridge, 1986, p. 90). Meanwhile, other critics assign Maslow a much more malevolent role, seeing Maslow's psychology as a "new and seductive Social Darwinism," capitalist thought taken to its logical extreme (Shaw & Colimore, 1988, p. 56).

Whether of the weaker or stronger variety, these critics base their arguments on a set of assumptions opposed to the dominant humanistic view of the nature of *the individual*. They particularly reject any notion of an autonomous self, emphasizing the determination of macro socioeconomic forces on the shaping of any individual. In this set of assumptions, human nature is human *only* by virtue of the society. Such a position, based on the belief that the individual has no identity of self apart from society, also includes a belief in the perfectibility of humans, through a sweeping revolution in political, economic, and social arrangements, a toppling of inequitable macro structures of power and oppression. Marxist critics blast Maslow's commitment to incremental progress and find the notion of personal responsibility to be only a tool of capitalistic oppressors.

Certainly, these critics oppose Maslow and humanistic adult education on the basic assumptions of self, growth, responsibility, and progress. For them, the issue is clear: human nature is social in origin, historically developed, and not in any sense inherent in any particular individual. Their purpose of adult education would be to achieve equality through re-shaping human nature that has been historically determined by those in power.

In response to his Marxist critics on the core assumptions, Maslow (1971) rejects the critics either-or characterizations. He does not argue against the idea that human nature (the self) is a social process of becoming; he does argue that that is only one part of the story: "Culture is only a necessary cause of human nature, not a sufficient cause. But so also is our biology only a necessary . . . and not a sufficient cause . . ." (p. 156). Maslow locates responsibility in both the individual and in social conditions. In reacting to the Marxian stance against incremental progress, he sees human nature far too complex and varied to allow for perfection. For Maslow, both progress *and* regress are possible, the Marxists erring in holding out for perfection: "Giving up hope for progress almost certainly means regression and worsening," he writes, "So in [my] hope and theory, progress is itself a dynamic determinant" (Lowry, 1979, pp. 383-384).

Postmodern Criticism of Humanism

Postmodern criticisms, varied enough to be called *postmodernisms*, are devoted to dissolving the foundational assumptions underlying all 20th century thought and center most specifically on the central assumption of an essential inner human nature. This analysis will spring from the perspectives of Michel Foucault, but not imply that he speaks for all of postmodern thought. Whereas the humanistic individual is at least potentially capable of making him- or herself a better person, of fulfilling the highest possibilities of an intrinsic inner nature, of choosing the highest human values, a postmodernist like Foucault denies any foundational, universal or normative assumptions about our nature and rejects any notion of a self or of self-actualization.

Opposing what he calls the "California cult of the self," Foucault views the humanistic individual as only a consequence of practices of power--not Maslow's autonomous individual with an intrinsic nature. Every individual is at once both an object and a subject of power in all relationships (Rabinow & Dreyfus, 1983).

For postmodernists, beliefs in an intrinsic human nature only reflect how individuals have been enculturated into thinking of themselves as certain kinds of persons. So, beliefs about "masculinity" or "femininity"--supposedly embedded in a holistic concept of an intrinsic self which needs to be discovered--reflect power relationships in reality. Processes such as psychoanalysis, meditation, and confession through which such discovery is to take place, are only the practices of power that hide from us the arbitrary nature of these constructed selves.

Foucault describes how, in our current "regime of truth," people have gradually come to be defined--and to define themselves--by certain classes of behavior. These subjectivizing processes reflect a form of "power [that] applies itself to immediate everyday life, which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own [intrinsic] identity, [and]

imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him" (Rabinow & Dreyfus, 1983, p. 212). We are each tied to our own identity by a conscience and by self-knowledge--all constructed for us by practices of power. Such practices come together, for example, in educational institutions through the concept of The Normal. Categorized hierarchically, differentiated around a norm, we are punished by sanction or exclusion when we deviate from the norm (Foucault, 1979).

In the postmodernisms, then, the notion of Maslow's *self* is flatly rejected. Change occurs, but notions of *growth* and *progress* are rendered meaningless. *Responsibility* in its humanistic sense drops from the vocabulary, being one of the practices of power that creates individuals and humanistic truth--dangerous illusions. For Maslow, such a totalizing analysis around power relationships would be an excessively limited view of human reality, especially in its denial of any individual freedom to effect meaningful change.

Comparative Discussion

There are two dimensions to our discussion: 1) how our framework of philosophical analysis of adult education differs from more typical approaches; and 2) how we see Maslow in comparative context with authors and movements in 20th century philosophy of adult education.

No author in adult education (including us) can escape the underlying role of their assumptions in any theory building, criticism, or analysis. Our theoretical framework emphasizes the cultural fluidity between movements; for example, the effect of modern mainstream individualism on both *Behavioristic* and *Humanistic* and adult education (see Podeschi, 1986). And we assume that particular historical contexts influence authors, for example, in differences between Lindeman and Knowles (see Fisher & Podeschi, 1989).

Also, we draw from Nozick (1981), who suggests that a philosophical framework *can* include mutually incompatible views if one ranks them from the standpoint of one's own assumptions. "The first ranked view is not completely adequate by itself," Nozick explains, "what it omits or distorts or puts out of focus cannot be added compatibly, but must be brought out and highlighted by another incompatible view, itself (even more) inadequate alone" (p. 22). Such an approach focuses on incompatibilities inside categories of philosophy of adult education, as well as philosophical fluidity among categories.

This direction may sound like the eclectic position that Knowles takes, for example, in straddling both humanistic and behavioristic philosophies. But Knowles' integration is one of methodology rather than any ranking of views rooted in assumptions. Although Maslow probes philosophical premises more than Knowles, he never uncovers fully his own first ranked premise: *science*. Believing that social science can catch its own philosophical tail and find those values best for humankind, Maslow's deepest faith is in a synthesis between philosophy and science--one without inadequacy (Podeschi, 1983).

Also neglected by Maslow--as well as by most authors in U.S. adult education--are micro cultural contexts of power. As Fiske (1993) explains, power is fluid and works through alliances of social interests concerning specific issues in particular conditions--in spite of philosophical incompatibilities. Any social theory that is grounded in just categorical difference will miss or marginalize these fluid micro realities--whereas a purely postmodern theory may miss or marginalize the struggles within this fluidity. For example, Marxists may see class conflict from such a macro, top-down view so as to miss the fluidity of micro, bottom-up power, whereas postmodernists may marginalize the class conflict within this fluidity. While Maslow tends to glide over both of these dimensions of power, Rogers and Knowles have neither in their sights.

Although Maslow gives less attention to the powerful influences of macro culture than Dewey and Lindeman, he shares with both progressives a mediated faith in individual freedom. But whereas Dewey attempted to integrate two strands of progressivism--*Developmentalists* and *Social Reconstructionists* (Muller, 1992), Maslow fits close to the first strand. Knowles also fits close to the *Developmentalists*, but in addition he reflects the *Social Efficiency* strand of progressivism.

This difference, inherent in their aims of adult education, is one reason why Maslow would lean away from Knowles and his avid followers in the debate about andragogy (Pratt, 1993). Also, although Maslow's focus is on the individual, he does not have the same degree of faith in individual freedom as Knowles. Ironically, as Muller (1992) delineates, Knowles' priority of social efficiency--as well as his ignoring of societal structures--foster a mainstream conformity rooted in autonomous *individualism*. Maslow, on the other hand, carries a genuine priority for *individuality* (uniqueness)--even though he neglects some of the cultural layers within which it needs to play out.

Our position is that the similarities as well as the differences between Maslow, his critics, and other humanists can be sorted out more clearly if the neglected distinction between *individualism* and *individuality* is put into focus (Grant, 1986; Pearson, 1994). If such a distinction is made, the prime target of the critics of Maslow may be seen as individualism, while a prime developmental goal for Maslow is individuality--although he mixed it with ingredients of individualism. Whereas some critics tend to put the psychological concept of the individual out of focus in stressing cultural forces, Maslow focuses his own spectacles on individual efforts to resist cultural pressures. Although his lens are limited, his journals make clear that he became increasingly preoccupied in the 1960s with social and political forces, concerned with shortcomings in his own theoretical framework and putting increasing emphasis on social psychology. In these journal writings--not long before his sudden death in 1970--Maslow's language sounds a lot like his critics' descriptions of individualism, using terms such as rivalry, competition, personal chauvinism, money, power status, domination, manipulation, and Social Darwinism (Lowry, 1979). In contrast, such forces in the 1960s appear to have had little influence on Knowles, while having consequential effect on leaders of the Center for the Study of Liberal Education--see Podeschi (1991, 1994).

At the same time, Maslow kept intact a sense of moral agency, not falling into nihilism. Although he confuses the languages of individualism and individuality, his insistence on some intrinsic human attributes and a need for growth argue against the contention that all is power

relationships. Whereas ideas of an essential self and of human growth can be used as a mechanism of control, they need to be deconstructed in a way that heeds Alcoff's (1988) warning that deconstructing everything leaves us nothing but negatives. If Maslow would have lived longer, he may have continued his growth in seeing the dangers of individualism while providing space for individuality and for responsibility to (not for) others.

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