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Huitt, W. (2017). Hierarchy of needs. In F. Moghaddam (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of political behavior* (pp. 356-357). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. doi: 10.4135/9781483391144.n166

Identifying human needs for the purpose of understanding human motivation has been a topic of research for many decades. The most popular approach is that of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, but it is not without its critics. Other approaches appear to have more empirical support and are worthy of consideration.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs

Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) attempted to synthesize a large body of research related to human motivation. Prior to Maslow's work, researchers generally focused separately on such factors as biology, achievement, or power to explain what energizes, directs, and sustains human behavior. Maslow posited a hierarchy of human needs based on two groupings: deficiency needs and growth needs. Within the deficiency needs, each lower need must be met before moving to the next higher level. Once each of these needs has been satisfied, if at some future time a deficiency is detected, the individual will act to remove the deficiency. The first four levels are

1. Physiological: hunger, thirst, bodily comforts
2. Safety/security: out of danger
3. Belongingness and love: affiliate with others, be accepted
4. Esteem: to achieve, be competent, gain approval and recognition

According to Maslow, an individual is ready to act upon the growth needs if and only if the deficiency needs are met. Maslow's initial conceptualization included only one growth need—self-actualization. Self-actualized people are characterized as problem focused with a concern for personal growth. This is accomplished through the ability to engage in peak experiences and incorporating an ongoing freshness of appreciation of life.

Maslow and Richard Lowry later differentiated the growth need of self-actualization, specifically identifying two of the first growth needs as part of the more general level of self-actualization, and Maslow identified one beyond the general level that focused on growth beyond orientation toward self. They are

5. Self-actualization: to find self-fulfillment and realize one's potential
 - a. cognitive: to know, to understand, and explore
 - b. aesthetic: symmetry, order, and beauty
6. Self-transcendence: to connect to something beyond the ego or to help others find self-fulfillment and realize their potential

Maslow's basic position stated that as one becomes more self-actualized and self-transcendent, one develops wisdom and automatically knows what to do in a wide variety of situations. His conclusion that the highest levels of self-actualization are transcendent in nature may be one of his most important contributions to the study of human behavior and motivation.

Using the Theory

George Norwood proposed that Maslow's hierarchy can be used to describe the kinds of information individuals seek at different levels of development. For example, at the lowest level, individuals seek coping information to meet their basic needs. Information that is not

directly connected to helping a person meet his or her needs within a very short time is simply left unattended. Individuals at the safety level need helping information. They seek to be assisted in seeing how they can be safe and secure. Enlightening information is sought by individuals seeking to meet their belongingness needs. Quite often, this can be found in books or other materials on relationship development. Empowering information is sought by people at the esteem level. They are looking for information on how their sense of self can be developed. Finally, people in the growth levels of cognitive, aesthetic, and self-actualization seek edifying information. Although Norwood does not specifically address the level of transcendence, it is reasonable to suppose that individuals at this stage would seek information on how to connect to something beyond themselves or to how others could be edified.

Critiques of Maslow's Theory and Alternatives

Maslow published a first conceptualization of his theory more than 50 years ago, and it has since become one of the most popular and often-cited theories of human motivation. Mahmoud Wahba and Lawrence Bridgewell, as well as Barlow Soper, Gary Milford, and Gary Rosenthal, reported a lack of empirical evidence to support Maslow's hierarchy. Nevertheless, it enjoys wide acceptance.

The few major studies that have been completed on the hierarchy seem to support the proposals of William James, Clayton Alderfer, and Eugene Mathes that there are three levels of human needs rather than the five or six proposed by Maslow. James hypothesized the levels of material (physiological, safety), social (belongingness, esteem), and spiritual. Alderfer developed a comparable hierarchy with his ERG (existence, relatedness, and growth) theory. Mathes proposed that the three levels were physiological, belongingness, and self-actualization; he considered security and self-esteem as unwarranted.

Currently there is little agreement about the identification of basic human needs and how they are ordered. For example, Richard Ryan and Edward Deci also suggested three needs, although they are not necessarily arranged hierarchically: the need for autonomy, the need for competence, and the need for relatedness. Michael Thompson, Cathie O'Neill-Grace, and Lawrence Cohen stated that the most important needs for children are connection, recognition, and power. Paul Lawrence and Nitin Nohra provided evidence from a sociobiology theory of motivation that humans have four basic needs:

1. Acquiring objects and experiences.
2. Bonding with others in long-term relationships of mutual care and commitment.
3. Learning and making sense of the world and of ourselves.
4. Defending ourselves and our loved ones, beliefs, and resources from harm.

Conclusion

There is much work still to be done in this area before practitioners can rely on a theory to be more informative than simply collecting and analyzing specific data for an individual or group. However, this body of research can be highly important to parents, educators, administrators, and others concerned with developing and using human potential. It shows that if human beings are to achieve the levels of character and competencies necessary to be successful in the information/conceptual age, Maslow's hierarchy of needs and its alternatives offer an outline of some important issues that must be addressed.

See *also* [Attitudes](#); [Motivated Reasoning](#)

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483391144.n166>

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Further Readings

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