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**Self-Actualizing Creativity**

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Introduction

A distinct form of creativity called “creativeness” is one of the important traits that personality psychologist Abraham Maslow identified. He considered “creativeness” to be a core feature of self-actualizing people—those who had, according to Maslow's theory, satisfied the more basic foundations of his “hierarchy of needs” and so were able to spontaneously express a peak form of human flourishing.

Key Information

Maslow distinguished the “creativeness” he observed in self-actualizing people from the creativity for which productive and culturally influential artists of various kinds are known. Maslow considered artistic creativity to be potentially uncorrelated with psychological health, given the reputation of many famous artists for intense psychological distress and disruption (Toward a Psychology of Being, p. 127). He wrote that self-actualizing creativeness:

sprang much more directly from the personality, and… showed itself widely in the ordinary affairs of life, for instance, in a certain kind of humor. It looked like a tendency to do anything creatively: e.g., housekeeping, teaching, etc. (p. 129)

An essential feature of this creativeness for Maslow was its open, childlike quality. He identified self-actualizing creativeness with “openness to experience,” an “ability to express ideas and impulses without strangulation and without fear of ridicule” and “uninhibited spontaneity and expressiveness” (p. 129). He considered self-actualizers to enjoy a kind of “second naivete” insofar as “their innocence of perception and expressiveness was combined with sophisticated minds” (p. 130).

Crucial to this creativeness for Maslow was a lack of fear of the unknown, and even a strong attraction to it without prematurely assigning it to one side of a binary pair of categories (like good and evil, etc.). He noted that self-actualizers did not need to reach certainty prematurely and were comfortable with some degree of chaos, presumably because needs for order and security are already taken care of among those inclined to self-actualization.

Another aspect of self-actualizing creativeness is an ability to reconcile apparent contradictions, like:

kindness-ruthlessness, concreteness-abstractness, acceptance-rebellion, self-society, adjustment-maladjustment, detachment from others-identification with others, serious-humorous, Dionysian-Apollonian, introverted-extraverted, intense-casual, serious-frivolous, conventional-unconventional, mystic-realistic, active-passive, masculine-feminine, lust-love, and Eros-Agape. (Maslow [*1954*](#CR2)/1970, p. 179)

Maslow noted that great artists and theorists accomplish precisely this kind of unified reconciliation of clashing elements or apparent contradictions (Maslow [*1962*](#CR3), pp. 131–132).

Relation to Freudian Theory of Primary and Secondary Processes

Maslow saw a kind of integrated or whole person-based self-acceptance as being key to self-actualizing creativeness. That self-acceptance allowed self-actualizers to freely express all of their emotions and, in Freudian terms, their “primary thought processes” instead of controlling and repressing them (Maslow [*1962*](#CR3), pp. 132–135). Maslow also saw the self-actualizers’ “peak experiences” as reflecting this essential receptivity to their primary processes.

He distinguished the “primary creativity” arising from this receptivity to be distinct from the “secondary creativity” that involves reliance on what Freud called “secondary thought processes,” the ones directed to concretely manifesting the desires of the primary thought processes in the world. Secondary creativity is thus the kind that “includes a large proportion of production-in-the-world, the bridges, the houses, the new automobiles, even many scientific experiments and much literary work. All of these are essentially the consolidation and development of other people’s ideas” (Maslow [*1962*](#CR3), p. 135).

When both receptive primary and productive secondary creativity were present, Maslow called this “integrated creativeness,” the kind associated with great achievements in art, philosophy, and science. He did not consider self-actualization necessary or sufficient for these achievements, however, and associated self-actualization first with primary creativity.

Political Leanings of Self-Actualized Creativeness

To the extent Maslow saw “openness to experience” as central to self-actualizing creativity, this suggests that self-actualization itself may be easily confused with liberalism, as liberalism is known to correlate with trait-level openness to experience (Jost et al. [*2003*](#CR1)). In general, the political leanings of those Maslow perceived as self-actualizers – a list that included Albert Einstein, Adlai Stevenson, Walt Whitman, and Thomas Jefferson (Maslow [*1954*](#CR2)/1970) – were relatively liberal. Being “liberal” in this case is distinct both from being “conservative” (conventional, authoritarian) and from advocating something more collectivistically radical or left-wing. This liberalism is consistent with the centrality of autonomy and independence from acculturation to the self-actualization concept.

It is true that Malsow’s list of historical self-actualizers included more radical figures like the socialist presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs and slavery resister Frederick Douglas, and that one of the living subjects of his study was a former union organizer who had “given up in disgust and hopelessness” (Maslow [*1954*](#CR2)/1970, p. 172). However, Maslow noted that generally his self-actualizers were only potentially rather than actually radical. They showed a “calm, long-time concern with culture improvement [and] … an acceptance of slowness of change along with the unquestioned desirability and necessity of such change” (p. 172), qualities more characteristic of liberals.

Conclusion

Maslow's characterization of those with identifiably liberal-seeming “creativeness” traits as the self-actualizers enjoying the highest possible expression of human potential is one potentially biased by Maslow's own affection for those traits. His characterization remains influential anyway and generally uncontroversial in psychology, at least in Anglo-American psychology. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that openness to experience, a delight in reconciling opposites, and spontaneous, expressive comfort with chaos characterizes some communities and cultures more than others. These traits may also be unevenly distributed among the various cultural elites who enjoy the greatest satisfaction of other human needs in Maslow’s hierarchy. It is quite possible, then, that Maslow's characterization of “creativeness” as an essential aspect of peak level human flourishing may not be culturally generalizable beyond the specific individualistic culture and historical period of social upheaval in which Maslow worked. The broad possibilities of cultural variation in what constitutes human flourishing remain largely unexplored.

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