

Self-Transcendence: Maslow's Answer to Cultural Closeness

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Letter from Academia

In the editorial, *Revisiting Openness: A Must for Society* (Mention, Ferreira & Torkkeli, 2016), the authors address the issue that despite predominance of openness in contemporary organizations – porous boundaries, virtual and agile teams, as well as interconnectedness, - Western Societies and some of their elected leaders are currently advocating closeness. They raised the questions: How can we build an inclusive society while rejecting difference? How can we achieve innovation when turning our backs on variety and diversity? And could the Maslow Hierarchy of Needs help the mechanics of these trends? This paper shows how Abraham Maslow, before he died, identified a sixth tier of need – self-transcendence – and how a worldwide focus among academia, organizational leaders and political leaders of countries can prevent closeness and isolation among countries and cultures all over the world.

Keywords. Self-transcendence, globalization, culture.

1 Abraham Maslow and Self-transcendence

Abraham Maslow, widely considered the founder of humanistic psychology, is best known for his system of personal development, the hierarchy of needs. Traditionally it was believed that Maslow's hierarchy of needs only entailed a five-level hierarchical pyramid to explain a person's motives for development. He organized his different motivational levels in ascending order from lower basic human needs, such as physiological needs, at the bottom of the hierarchy, to higher progressing needs, such as the needs for safety, belongingness and love, esteem and self-actualization, at the top. He identified physiological (survival) needs as those where the person seeks to obtain the basic necessities of life; safety needs involve those where a person seeks security through order and law; belongingness and love needs entails seeking affiliation with a group; esteem needs are typified by those where a person seeks esteem through recognition or achievement; and lastly, self-actualizing, at the top of the hierarchy, is where a person seeks fulfillment of personal potential (1968; 1971; 1973). In recent years theorists postulated the notion that before Maslow died, he identified a sixth tier of need – self-transcendence (Koltko-Rivera, 2006).

Maslow described self-transcendence as a person's ability to obtain a unitive consciousness with other humans (1964; 1968). The transcended person is able to view the world and their purpose in the world in relation to other human beings on a more

global scale and is aware that they can have an impact, not just within their own geographical boundaries, but on the whole world. Maslow (1973) postulated that one main characteristic of self-transcended people is autonomy and independence from culture and environment. They do not need the approval of other people; their opinions are not formed in light of their own immediate circumstances. Maslow held that self-transcendence is reached when a person seeks to further a cause beyond the self and to experience a communion beyond the boundaries of the self (1968). These transcended individuals who reach the top of Maslow's revised hierarchy typically seek a benefit beyond the mere personal, identifying with something greater than the purely individual self, often engaging in selfless service to others (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Maslow came to the idea of self-transcendence because he felt that too many theorists defined the Self simply in terms of what other people think or their perception of a person, which he saw as an extreme cultural relativity in which a healthy individuality gets lost altogether. He reasoned that the healthy, fully developed person is characterized by their transcendence of other people's opinions. Maslow specifically used the term transcendence to differentiate this kind of person from the dichotomization of self and the environment, stating that it was a person freed from the "dichotomous way of thinking" (Maslow, 1968, p. 180).

2 Maslow's Self-Transcendence and Cultural Encapsulation

According to Maslow (1968; 1973), a healthy personality, while including success in appropriate coping behavior involving mastery, effectance and competence, must also include a point where the individual is freed from the influence of their environment, specifically from the way that environment effects their personal development. One of the main forces inhibiting personal growth he identified was culture. Although culture is important, he reasoned that one needed to reach transcendence of, independence of, or resistance to enculturation, or else such forces could distort the way one sees the world in that such a person only identifies him or herself as the culture prescribes and would eventually perceive the world and people from other cultures only through the prism allowed by their culture. To be clear, Maslow reasoned that a person that transcends their culture is not alienated from it – they are not separated from it, necessarily - but they are no longer grounded or anchored in their own culture alone; they are not exclusively defined by their immediate environment or have an over-identification with one group alone (Frick, 1989; Maslow, 1968). Without distortion of their own cultural identity or developing crippling insecurity, they can identify and side with other people, different groups, entities, causes and nationalities.

3 The Effect of Self-transcendence on Worldview

Another implication of Maslow's revised model - with the inclusion of the level of self-transcendence - is the affect it has on the worldview of individuals. Worldviews are sets of assumptions held by individuals and cultures about the physical and social universe (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). An aspect of worldview specifically affected by Maslow's self-transcendence is one's purpose or meaning of life. Self-transcendence

allows for a richer conceptualization of the meaning of life dimension of worldviews. Such a person develops a deeper sense of purpose, a sense of purpose not only focused on the needs of the self, but a sense of purpose anchored in the plight of the whole world. People with a transcended level of perception of the world are less determined by habitual abstraction and are not need-determined, but rather their cause is determined by perceptions of higher unity. They find meaning in life by connecting their life's journey and happiness to the condition of others; not only those from the same culture directly around them, but from others all over the world, regardless of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion or nationality. The person in a state of transcendence is freed from the practice of categorizing, pre-judging and stereotyping the world and other people in it. They are, therefore, able to view the world differently – not as dichotomous, different, separate, individual, but as a whole, as one interdependent unit (Frick, 1989; Maslow, 1968). Maslow argued that people at this level of motivation transcended their dichotomous nature and became autonomous, ruled by the laws of their own character rather than by the rules of society (1968). These people, he postulated, “should have less national character and that they should be more like each other across cultural lines than they are like the less-developed members of their own culture,” becoming members at large of the human species (Maslow, 1968, p. 181). At one stage he called people like this universal men, not guided by their own culture and external environment, but by the needs and the plight of the whole species – people guided from within, by their inner voices and looking within for the guiding values and rules to live by (Frick, 1989). At the level of self-transcendence, the individual's own needs are put aside, to a great extent, in favor of service to others and to some higher force or cause conceived as being outside the personal self (Koltko-Rivera (2006).

3 The Need for Self-Transcended World-Citizens and Leaders

Changes in the migration patterns all over the world as well as the interconnectedness of people across the globe, is driving a need for change. Actions are now driven by the lower tier needs of Maslow's Hierarchy - safety and belonging - leading to a drive towards policy of closeness and cultural encapsulation among some leaders in the Western societies. For years, the academic and organizational world failed to see that without Maslow's previously omitted sixth level of motivational development, self-transcendence, and exclusive focus on self-actualization, people will become infatuated with the self. In addition, when lower order needs are perceived to be threatened by some, such as migration of jobs and influx of immigrants, it will trigger regression and closeness with a focus on policies that will signal a return to fragmented, individualized, and isolated societies. We need an urgent focus among leaders in academia, organizations and governments on ways to foster self-transcendent thinking and action in cultures. Self-transcendent people are bound together with a common purpose, a global perspective, and joint responsibility for the fate of the planet. They belong to a global community that defines itself not so much by race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion or nationality, but by the definition of what it is to be human; they elevate themselves beyond the immanence to which they were previously resigned to by society. They are indeed emulating the level of self-transcendence Maslow

described - a position where one takes responsibility for oneself and the world, a transcended freedom that knows no boundaries. In a world where countries, regions, and different groups of people are increasingly connected and dependent upon each other, world problems and crises cannot be solved in isolation and closeness any longer. Narrow minded, distorted and region-bound people are now at more of a disadvantage than ever as they will not be able to understand or empathize with the plight of others in the world and are, therefore, blinded by their isolation and unable to solve their own problems or ensure growth for their people effectively and, in addition, are of little help with problems on a global scale. Without self-transcendence, leaders will remain stuck in dichotomous thinking, and due to their isolation, will trigger a need to force attributes of security, familiarity and sameness unto others, to create a sort of manageability to alleviate their growing insecurity, trying to find their solace in an artificially created, simplistic universe, in stereotypes and in a static, polarized world (Frick, 1989). This type of functioning becomes the foundation of the global world conflicts – people unable to perceive the world on a wider plane enter into disputes, conflicts, and war in order to convince or conquer other groups that do not perceive the world as they do (Venter & Venter, 2010).

4 Conclusion

Transcendence is the means by which to solve global conflicts – citizens all over the world connecting and banding together to make their voice known and support peace and combat social crises such as poverty. Globalization is the impetus that is propelling self-transcendence to spread across the globe and connecting like-minded transcended people seeking to solve problems on a global scale. We need self-transcended people – leaders and everyday citizens alike - all over the world advocating not only for their own needs, but for the needs of others – for other’s not only in their immediate nation and culture, - but for others in need all over the world. We need people expanding the idea of human rights and freedoms to take the plight of the environment and global health of the planet up as a cause and a personal responsibility. Maslow’s self-transcendence is the most accurate description of the type of person the world needs now: people taking responsibility not only for themselves, but for the world; people living in a transcended freedom that know no boundaries regardless of their continent, culture, or region; people who discover the power to shape the future of the world, an interconnected and open world, free of isolation.

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