

EDITORIAL

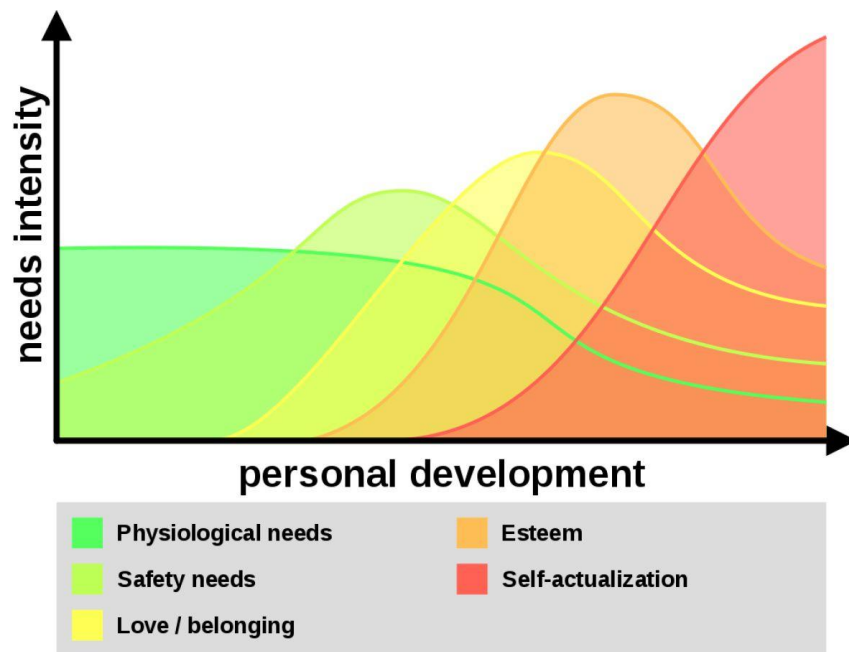
Culture and Community: Decolonizing Social Science

I am currently teaching an Introduction to Sociology course designed to help Indigenous students access standard university education which feels so foreign to them. After discussing concepts of community in class one day, one student asked me if I was familiar with Siksika Nation beliefs about community. I readily admitted I was not, but promised her I would explore them.

Anyone who has studied any psychology is familiar with the classic hierarchy of human needs theorized by Abraham Maslow (1943; 1954). It identifies and elaborates five tiers of relatively prepotent needs. Beginning at the bottom, physiological needs must first be satisfied for sheer survival, safety needs are then mollified for physical, emotional, and financial security, love and belonging needs are then appeased through interpersonal relationships, esteem needs are then fulfilled through positive regard by both others and self, and culminating at the top, self-actualization needs ultimately spur the individual to their full potential. The first four levels are driven by their respective deficiencies, whereas the fifth is driven by desired growth toward self-fulfillment. Maslow postulated that very few people achieve self-actualization consistently, though all can have moments of peak experiences. Years later, these five human needs became depicted visually as static strata in the form of a pyramid, and even later also in the form of dynamic overlapping and successively higher waves, though Maslow himself did neither.



[Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Blackfoot \(Siksika\) Nation Beliefs - Rethinking Learning](#)

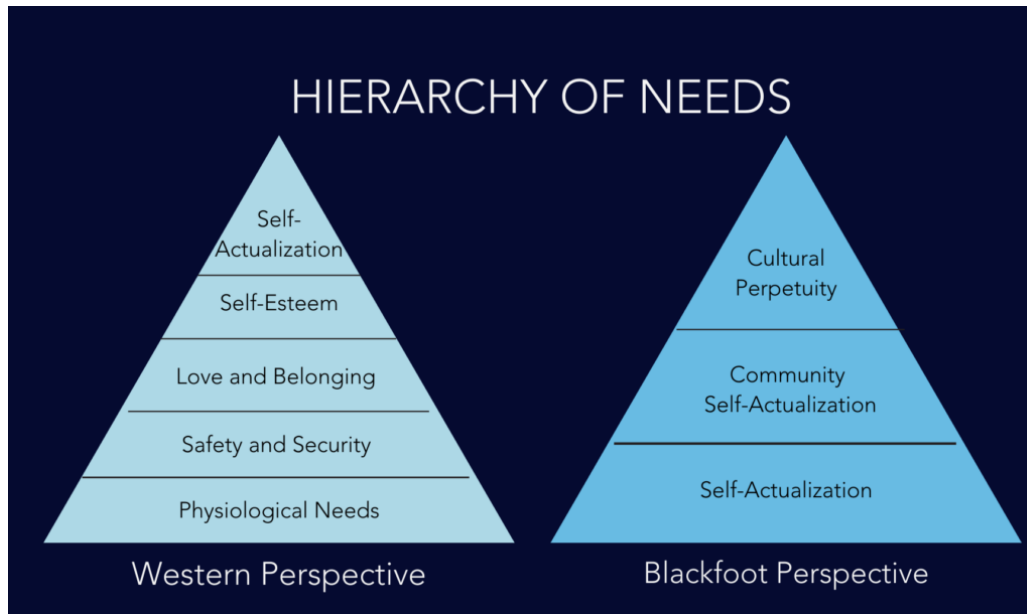


[\(PDF\) Education Theory Made Practical: Volume 4](#)

What is less well-known is that before publishing his theory, 30-year-old Maslow conducted anthropological field research by living with the Blackfoot people (Siksika Nation) in southern Alberta Canada for six weeks during the summer of 1938. What he discovered there was “astounding levels of cooperation, minimal inequality, restorative justice, full bellies, and high levels of life satisfaction. He estimated that 80–90% of the Blackfoot tribe had a quality of self-esteem that was only found in 5–10% of his own population... [it was] a place where what he would later call self-actualization was the norm” (Ravilochan 2021).

Instead of viewing self-actualization as the pinnacle of human needs, Blackfoot beliefs begin with the assumption that all humans are inherently self-actualized. So endowed, they then pursue community actualization before their needs culminate in community perpetuity. So, while Maslow deemed self-actualization to be the ultimate accomplishment, the Blackfoot deemed it to be an initial given, an innate quality with which everyone is born, and the foundation from which everyone devotes their life to maximizing and manifesting community actualization and perpetuity. Echoing Christian perspectives of the person, in Blackfoot culture “self-actualization is not achieved; it is drawn out of an inherently sacred being who is imbued with a spark of divinity” (Ravilochan 2021). Meeting needs is then a community responsibility, not an individual one, a mode of living enshrined in culture and passed on from generation to generation. “First Nations often consider their actions in terms of the impacts of the ‘seven generations.’ This means that one’s actions are informed by the experience of the past seven

generations and by considering the consequences for the seven generations to follow” (Blackstock 2019).



Clinical Corner: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Indigenous Health - Tribal Health

Both Blackfoot elders and scholars argue that Maslow did not really comprehend Blackfoot philosophy. "It is not that Maslow got the hierarchy wrong or upside down, it is rather that he did not understand the circular nature in which all beings in Siksika society are interconnected and integrated. They surround each other, and needs are met through these connections" (Oom Kapisi 2022). Furthermore, their human needs are not linear and independent, but rather circular and interdependent. Indeed, people all around the world throughout history have been willing to die for their culture and community in times of war.

Though Maslow clearly held Blackfoot beliefs and practices in the highest regard, he did not incorporate their prioritization of the community over the individual into his hierarchy of human needs. While it could be argued that the third level of love and belonging and the fourth level of esteem are at least social needs, Western academia routinely studies them from an individual-psychological perspective, that is, from the inside out, not from a community-sociological perspective, from the outside in. The needs of the individual and all that occurs within the individual are prioritized as the singular focus of attention, not the needs of the community and all that occurs among and between individuals. This is evidenced by the supposedly hybrid academic discipline of social psychology usually having a deeply different orientation and focus when taught in a department of psychology than when taught in a department of sociology. Much like Tertullian's query of "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" most scholars question what sociology has to do with psychology.

As some have speculated, Maslow's whitewashing of the Blackfoot ordering of human needs was not necessarily due to simple ethnocentric bias or crass colonial thinking, but rather to his fear of being dismissed by his Euro-American academic audience—colonization on a grander scale. Nevertheless, “the legacy behind Maslow's renowned model [is] a story of systemic racism, Western epistemology, and the forced invisibility of Indigenous knowledge” (Safir 2020). Clearly, his theory of human needs is valid only within the rugged individualism of white America, not the communitarianism of Indigenous Turtle Island. It is just one measure of how extensively psychologized both Euro-American culture in general and academia in particular are; another measure is that the American Psychological Association (APA) currently has 157,000 members, while the American Sociological Association (ASA) has 9,000.

At its core, the difference between Maslow's culture and Blackfoot culture was a radical divergence in not just the value of community, but in the power of community to define and shape individuals. Whereas Western or Euro-American cultures have only been grappling with their own understanding and valuing of what they term communitarianism for the past hundred years or so, Indigenous cultures have been living it for millennia. “Whether a single family or an entire country, the philosophy of communitarianism views the community as a group of people living in a single location, or in different locations, who share interests, traditions, and moral values developed through a common history” (Longley 2020). As an ideology opposed to philosophical liberalism as advocated by Immanuel Kant and John Rawls, communitarianism values the needs or “common good” of society over the needs and rights of individuals. Leading advocates include Ferdinand Tönnies, author of “*Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*,” Amitai Etzioni, founder of the “responsive communitarian” movement in the early 1990s, and Dorothy Day, Christian social activist with the Catholic Worker Movement. Through them and others, Euro-American communitarianism has at least edged toward Blackfoot culture.

Of course, profound cultural differences have existed globally throughout human history, as cultural anthropology documents so well, perhaps most famously by the guilt-shame-fear spectrum popularized by Ruth Benedict (1946). What that diverse cultural reality in turn requires is that cultural sociology be forefronted in the field of sociology. As much as sociology strives to be universally cross-cultural in its theories, methods, and findings, the variable of culture qualifies and nuances almost every claim of social science, and may well be the first and foremost explanatory factor in whatever aspect of personal and social life is being examined. Euro-American psychology, sociology, and other social sciences best explain Euro-American culture, not other cultures, which is what Maslow failed to see and incorporate into his hierarchy of human needs. The Indigenous communitarianism he encountered among the Blackfoot could not be helpfully elucidated by his Western individualism, much less their broader cultural differences, such as the following:

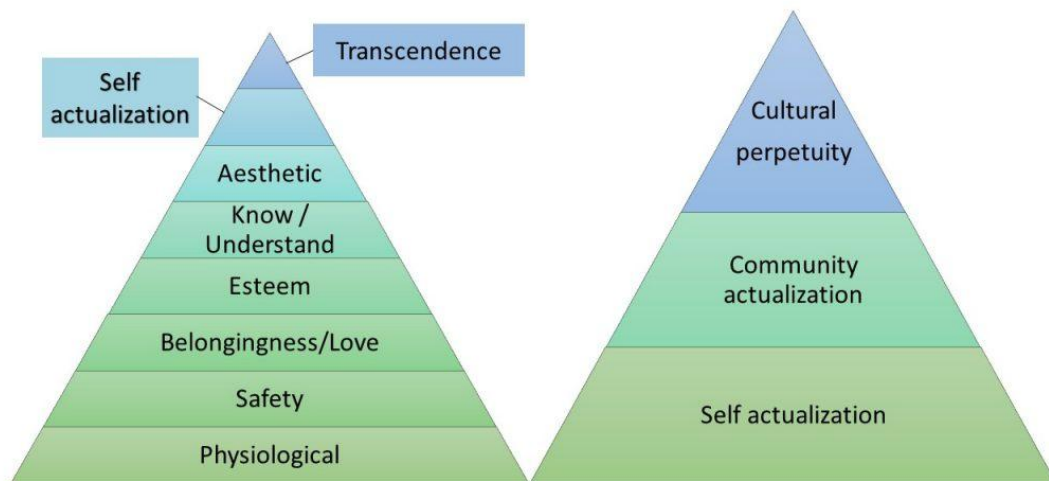
Western Individualistic Values

Be independent
 Pursue short-term self-interest
 Acquire and save
 Compete and excel
 Be assertive and vocal
 Engage others directly
 Be time conscious
 Prepare for the future
 Work is a virtue
 Preserve youth
 Be tied to the nuclear family
 Analyze and control nature
 Value reason and science
 Read the written
 Life is linear and sequential
 Life is doing

Indigenous Communitarian Values

Be interdependent
 Pursue long-term collective-interest
 Share and honor
 Cooperate and help
 Be passive and quiet
 Engage others indirectly
 Be time-free
 Enjoy today
 Work when necessary
 Respect elders
 Be tied to the extended family
 Live in harmony with nature
 Value spirituality
 Listen to the oral
 Life is holistic and cyclical
 Life is being

Granted, Maslow's original five-stage model of human needs was expanded in the 1960s to include cognitive and aesthetic needs, and expanded further in the 1970s to include transcendence needs.

**Western Perspective****First Nations' Perspective**

[Psychology Midterm Flashcards | Quizlet](#)

Despite being one of the founders of humanistic psychology, Maslow became dissatisfied and disaffected with it, and in the late 1960s founded transpersonal psychology, the “fourth force” of psychology (after psychoanalytic, behavioristic, and humanistic psychology), which not only

validates self-transcendence, altruism, and spirituality, but pursues it. In an unpublished 1966 essay, 23 years after he first articulated his theory of the hierarchy of human needs, Maslow acknowledged that

self-actualization is not enough. Personal salvation and what is good for the person alone cannot be really understood in isolation. The good of other people must be invoked as well as the good for oneself. It is quite clear that purely inter-psychic individualist psychology without reference to other people and social conditions is not adequate. (Ravilochan 2021)

Notably, Maslow's contemporary scholar, the Austrian psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, had already earlier emphatically disputed Maslow's theory of human needs, albeit without referencing him.

The true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche, as though it were a closed system. I have termed this constitutive characteristic "the self-transcendence of human existence." It denotes the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence. (Frankl 2006:110-11).

For Frankl and his fellow prisoners in Auschwitz, "it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us" (2006:77).

The net effect of imposing a culture-specific understanding of humans onto other cultures to which it does not apply, such as imposing individualistic self-actualization onto communitarian self-transcendence, is blatant, unadorned colonization. And when even social science does so, it is complicit with that historic problematic practice and egregious offence in so desperate need of movements such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Born at the apex of Western imperialism, Euro-centered epistemology and sociology concealed its own "geo-historical and bio-graphical locations" and succeeded in creating the debatable idea of "universal knowledge" (Mignolo 2010:160) in the process.

Decolonization is therefore "not merely a strategic move of shifting research focus from the West to the Rest. More importantly, it is a reflexive exercise prompting sociologists and theologians to return to the colonial roots of knowledge production and the modern world" (Kwok 2024:154). To decolonize, therefore, is "to deconstruct, decenter, and disarticulate the colonial cultural imaginary, and to reconstruct and re-articulate new imaginations and discover a more democratic future" (Chen 2010:112). It is also to

redress the problem of the unequal division of labor in the production of knowledge. The Global North and the West remain the primary site of theory production, whereas the Global South and the Rest shares the labor of data collection, analysis, and theory application. To decolonize sociology is to reconnect the gap between the metropole and periphery. (Kwok 2024:155)

Or as Julian Go concluded,

What postcolonial thought offers, in sum, is a recognition that our social theories, our concepts, our frameworks might also have been shaped by imperial domination and its correlates. And the invitation of postcolonial thought follows: to try to imagine alternative post-colonial knowledges, to push our modalities of knowing further and cultivate critical understandings that transcend or circumvent the conventions of the imperial episteme; this not in a vain effort to overcome guilt, but, quite simply, in an effort to create new and better social knowledge. (2016:188)

Moreover, it is not only social science that needs decolonization. Graham Ward (2017) identified three challenges that Christian theology itself must face in the process of decolonization. The first is to acknowledge and confront the historical role Christianity has played in the trauma-inducing drama of colonization. The second is to acknowledge and incorporate the multiple decolonized Christian traditions—“located answers to located questions in located situations”—already extant across cultures. The third is to re-imagine how decolonized practical theology should be preached in the sanctuary, and even how decolonized academic sociology should be taught in the classroom. For in these spaces,

both Christian theologians and sociologists face similar challenges, especially those located in universities in which the culture of performativity and the neoliberal trend is colonizing every aspect of academic lives. To get the message of decolonial hope beyond the ivory tower is a mammoth obstacle. Meanwhile, lay audiences ... are yearning for “good news”—social justice, hope, and redemption—in short, the Kingdom of God. (Kwok 2024:162)

In the long run, if Christianity is to remain the promise of good news for the postcolonial world, the Kingdom of God must be re-imagined. And frankly, Blackfoot communitarian self-transcendence characterizes that Kingdom more faithfully than Western individualistic self-actualization.

References

Benedict, Ruth. 1946. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

- Blackstock, Cindy. 2019. "Revisiting the Breath of Life Theory." *British Journal of Social Work* 49:854–849.
- Chen, Kuan-Hsing. 2010. *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Frankl, Viktor E. 1959/2006. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Go, Julian. 2016. *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kwok, Henry. 2024. "Decolonization, Sociology, and Christianity." Pp. 153-164 in *The Routledge International Handbook of Sociology and Christianity*, edited by Dennis Hiebert. New York: Routledge.
- Longley, Robert. 2020. "What is Communitarianism? Definition and Main Theorists." [What Is Communitarianism? Definition and Main Theorists](#)
- Maslow, Abraham H. 1943. "A Theory of Human Motivation." *Psychological Review* 50(4):370-396.
- Maslow, Abraham H. 1954. *Motivation and Personality*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Mignolo, Walter D. 2010. "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom." *Theory, Culture & Society* 26(7/8):159-181.
- Oom Kapisi, Elder Roy Bear Chief, Peter W. Choate, Gabrielle Lindstrom, and Tsa'pinaki. 2022. "Reconsidering Maslow and the Hierarchy of Needs from a First Nations' Perspective." *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work* 34(2):30–41.
- Safir, Shane. 2020. "Before Maslow's Hierarchy: The Whitewashing of Indigenous Knowledge." [Before Maslow's Hierarchy: The Whitewashing of Indigenous Knowledge – Shane Safir](#)
- Ward, Graham. 2017. "Decolonizing Theology." *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 3(2):561–84.

Dennis Hiebert, PhD
 JSC Editor
 Professor of Sociology
 University of Manitoba
 CANADA
 Email: dennishiebert28@gmail.com