

SOCIOLOGY

# The Art of Actualization

Michael Guynn<sup>1a</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Psychology, Dixie State University

Keywords: latent inhibition, self-actualization, taoism, Plato

<https://doi.org/10.36898/001c.28094>

---

## Curiosity: Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Innovation

---

Two personality psychologists, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, used the concept of self-actualization in their theories of personal growth (Schultz & Schultz, 2019). Rogers believed all people have an actualization tendency, a desire to seek higher forms of cognitive complexity (Kim, 2018). Similar viewpoints may be found in the ancient philosophy of Taoism as well as the writings of Plato (Lin, 2011; Bloom, 1968). Also in line with Roger's theory are the findings that the brain naturally seeks perceptual unity (Griffith & Davidson, 1966; Hunt & Schooler, 2019). Brain areas like the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and the default mode network are tied to levels of self-actualization (Forrest, 2001; Yangmei et al., 2017). Maslow believed self-actualized people have peak experiences such as moments of deep connection with the universe (Yaden et al., 2017). Lowering one's latent inhibition may be a way to increase the frequency of peak experiences (Carson, Higgens, & Peterson, 2003).

### Introduction

From the murk of psychoanalysis came the humanistic movement, lambent with renewed faith in humanity. Central to this movement are two household names: Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. The personality theories of these men, although different in important ways, share a similar therapeutic goal: the state of self-actualization. Self-actualization, put simply, is realization of and integration with one's fullest human potential (Shultz & Schultz, 2019).

To Maslow self-actualization formed the apex of his hierarchy of needs. According to the hierarchy of needs, a person's lower *instinctoid* needs, like shelter, food, and affection, must be attended to before higher needs like self-actualization can be met. When one's lower needs are fulfilled, the individual may begin the process of self-actualizing by letting go of the lower needs, escaping societal constraints, and developing an honest view of themselves and the world. Maslow found self-actualized people to be spontaneous, purposeful, and creative (Shultz & Schultz, 2019).

Roger's approach to self-actualization was similar to Maslow's although it replaces a needs-hierarchy with levels of congruence. All human beings strive for consistency and integration of their self-concept; the highest form

---

<sup>a</sup> Michael Guynn is a psychology major at Dixie State University.

of which is self-actualization. Choking an individual's progress towards actualization are incongruences in one's self-concept. These incongruences are basically distortions of reality, like defence mechanisms, that create schisms between one's current behavior and potential self. Self actualization is reached when a person systematically removes all incongruences from their behavior and thoughts. Rogers found self actualized people to be flexible, dynamic, and self assured (Shultz & Schultz, 2019).

In this paper we will discuss aspects of Maslow and Rogers' theories in terms of their relevance in modern society, synchronicity with philosophical theories, and neuroscientific evidence.

### Relevance in the Modern World

Maslow and Rogers' theories of self-actualization are not only models of inspiration but are valuable for psychological researchers and society in the 21st century. One study demonstrated the universality of self-actualization via its striking similarities to diverse cultural traditions and psychological theories including the Hindu stages of life, ancient Jewish ideas about human progression, Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, and Freud's model of the psyche (D'Souza & Gurin, 2016). It is possible that the idea of self-actualization may be used to unite disparate cultures and ideas in an understanding of human fulfillment.

Maslow and Rogers' models of self-actualization have been extensively researched. Studies have found significant positive associations between Maslow's model of self-actualization and positive psychological traits including including mental health, problem-focused coping, tolerance of other people, and acceptance of self (Ford & Procidano, 1990; Hosseini Dowlatabad et al., 2014; Parham & Helms, 1985). A paper by Robbins (2021) argues that humanistic models such as self-actualization are important for societies during the Covid-19 pandemic since people's basic social and emotional needs are being challenged. One study successfully combined a self-actualization framework with cognitive behavioral therapy to provide prison inmates with healthy coping skills, growth-oriented goals, and practices of interpersonal effectiveness (Frana, 2013). Thus, self-actualization is not only relevant in today's psychological atmosphere but may be directly applied alongside current therapeutic practices.

### Inner Forces

According to Rogers, self actualization isn't just a human concept but a manifestation of natural forces he called the *formative tendency*. The formative tendency is the predisposition of all matter to naturally integrate into higher orders of complexity. An example would be strands of DNA forming from mere elements in the primordial soup. Sentient beings follow the basic formative tendency but on a higher level of complexity. Instead of matter seeking crystal lattices and molecular structures, our brains seek conceptual unity and expansion of consciousness. This human need for dynamic, conscious unity is what Roger coined the *actualization tendency*.

Someone who follows their innate actualization tendency experiences consistency between their thoughts and actions, leading to maximum growth (Kim, 2018).

Although Rogers was a western thinker, various eastern philosophies like Taoism echo his concepts. The *Tao*, an antimatter-like energy that underlies all material processes, may be conceptualized as similar to the force behind Roger's formative tendency. Like silt in river water swirls in synchrony with invisible currents, so does all matter flow in synchrony with the Tao. According to Taoism, enlightenment is the result of complete synchronization with the movements of one's inner Tao. The result of living in accordance with the Tao is a constant state of flow in which a person's actions and desires are seamlessly unified (Lin, 2011). This is similar to Roger's idea of self-actualization in which a person removes all incongruences and is in tune with themselves.

The philosophy of Plato's Republic also defines a path for self-actualization. Much like the Tao is what Plato referred simply as *The Good*. The Good is the source of all truth and knowledge that lies within each human. Similar to the actualization tendency described by Rogers, each human desires to unite with The Good and understand the universe. To do this, humans must shed their societal biases and pledge themselves to the pursuit of knowledge. These hypothetical students learn philosophy, astronomy, geometry, geology, and other sciences to provide as many different frameworks for understanding reality as possible. Although Plato argues that no school of human thought can fully describe The Good, he believes that by creating a diverse intellectual understanding of the world a person may see The Good in the highest possible accuracy. Like a self-actualized person, a student of The Good perceives themselves and reality accurately and honestly (Bloom, 1968).

### **The Actualization Tendency and Neuroscience**

Because Rogers believed conscious unity to be the goal of self-actualization, he would likely show interest in modern studies of brain connectivity. One mystery of modern neuroscience is the so-called binding problem which seeks to find the mechanism by which the brain combines information from its 86 billion neurons and many hundreds of modules into one unified experience of consciousness (Goldstein, 2010; Herculano-Houzel, 2009). Even patients of invasive brain surgeries such as hemispherectomies (removing one hemisphere) retain unified, functional levels of consciousness with only half a cortex (Griffith & Davidson, 1966). It appears the brain seeks perceptual unification at all costs.

One theory describes consciousness as the emergent experience of many brain areas resonating together at the same frequency. EEG studies have confirmed that human consciousness accompanies neural resonance at mostly gamma frequencies (Hunt & Schooler, 2019). Furthermore, some theories place emotion as the substance of consciousness. Brain areas like the anterior cingulate cortex and insular cortex are responsible for integration of

interpersonal and sensory experiences into conscious awareness. Additionally, these brain areas are responsible for emotional interpretations of stimuli. Thus, emotional reactions to incoming stimuli might prompt conscious awareness of oneself as an agent acting in an external world (Parham & Helms, 1985).

Whatever method our brain uses to bind information together is likely facilitated primarily by the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex is the seat of auto-noetic consciousness: one's sense of self-coherence over time. One area in particular, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), is incredibly important for conscious awareness. The DLPFC, with its role in short term memory, retains past sensory percepts for use in present goal-directed behaviors. Dysfunction of the DLPFC is implicated in many psychological disorders such as schizophrenia, insomnia and depression. DLPFC hypoactivation is thought to underlie some of the hallucinations and delusions in schizophrenia because individuals with this disorder are unable to distinguish internal brain activity from external stimuli (Forrest, 2001). Healthy behaviors such as exercises, good sleep, and meditation can increase DLPFC activation (Albinet et al., 2014; Britton et al., 2014; Stahl, 2013). Thus, Rogers would likely agree that a functional DLPFC is necessary for self actualization because of its self-unifying abilities.

Another neural substrate of self actualization is the default mode network (DMN) consisting of the medial prefrontal cortex, the inferior parietal lobule, and the posterior cingulate cortex. The DMN is responsible for introspection, thinking about the future, and self-referential cognition. One study found a connection between DMN activation and *eudaimonia*, a concept of happiness from ancient Greece that mirrors many aspects of Maslow's model of self-actualization including self realization, fulfillment, and flourishing in life. Researchers found that higher connectivity between the medial prefrontal cortex and inferior parietal lobule areas of the DMN was positively associated with higher levels of eudaimonic well being (Luo et al., 2017). Because *eudaimonia* is conceptually similar to self-actualization, the DMN may theoretically be hyper-connected in the brains of actualized people. One study by Beaty et al. (2018) used fMRI imaging to show that people high in trait openness to experience had greater connectivity between their default-mode network and executive/ attentional brain areas. According to Lefrançois et al. (1997), openness to experience is a fundamental predictor of self-actualization tendencies.

From the studies we have looked at it is obvious that a Rogerian sense of unity must arise from the connectivity of various brain regions. According to Maslow and Rogers, self actualized people accept every part of themselves including positive and negative aspects. From a neuroscience perspective this might entail connectivity between different disparate brain circuits responsible for positive and negative perceptions of oneself.

## Peak Experiences

Central to Maslow's theory of self actualization is the tendency for actualized people to have *peak experiences*: moments of intense ecstasy, connection with the universe, and self transcendence. Many similar states of mind are described across cultures including mystical experiences, the experience of awe, and even entheogenic (psychedelic induced) experiences. All of these self-transcendent experiences share a common sense of wonder, unity, and profound connection with the world (Yaden et al., 2017).

One novel way to increase the frequency of peak experiences may be lowering one's latent inhibition. Latent inhibition is a cognitive inhibitory mechanism that screens out unnecessary information. Early in life a child may show intense interest and preoccupation with common objects like trees or animals. However, as that child continues to see trees and animals its latent inhibition will slowly screen out interest in these things and save the brain's precious executive resources for new stimuli. One study found that the ability to lower one's latent inhibition is strongly correlated to creativity (Carson et al., 2003). Both Maslow and Rogers described self-actualized people as having a freshness of perception and interest in many things. Thus, self actualized people may have lower than average levels of latent inhibition which may give them the ability to interact fully with even routine aspects of their environment to possibly increase the frequency of peak experiences. One study by, Peterson & Carson (2000) found that lower latent inhibition was significantly positively correlated with higher levels of openness to experience.

## Conclusion

There are various routes to the state of self-actualization as described by Rogers and Maslow. Living in synchrony with nature like a Taoist or connecting to one's highest intellectual self like students of The Good are two unique ways that may enhance one's sense of unity and perception of the world. Psychological feelings of unity are necessary for mental health as reflected by the mechanisms by which our brain seeks unity within itself. Areas like the anterior cingulate cortex, prefrontal cortex, and the default mode network provide various experiences of consciousness by integrating information. Self-actualization from a neurological basis may be reflected in heightened connectivity among brain areas responsible for consciousness, thus providing heightened awareness of oneself and reality. Additionally, self-actualized people tend to have peak experiences involving feelings of ecstasy and self transcendence. Lowering one's latent inhibition might increase peak experiences because one's perception of the world is unbiased and open to many sources of stimuli. In conclusion, self actualization is not only a concept of humanistic psychology but is a valuable aspect of neuroscience, philosophy, and wellbeing.

Submitted: June 01, 2021 MDT, Accepted: September 01, 2021 MDT



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-SA-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0> and legal code at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

## References

- Albinet, C. T., Mandrick, K., Bernard, P. L., Perrey, S., & Blain, H. (2014). Improved cerebral oxygenation response and executive performance as a function of cardiorespiratory fitness in older women: A fNIRS study. *Frontiers in Aging Neuroscience*, *6*, 272. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnagi.2014.00272>
- Beatty, R. E. (2018). Brain networks of the imaginative mind. Dynamic functional connectivity of default and cognitive control networks relates to openness to experience. *Human Brain Mapping*, *39*(2), 811–821.
- Bloom, A. (1968). *The Republic of Plato*. Basic Books Publishing.
- Britton, W. B., Lindahl, J. R., Cahn, B. R., Davis, J. H., & Goldman, R. E. (2014). Awakening is not a metaphor: The effects of buddhist meditation practices on basic wakefulness. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, *1307*(1), 64–81. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.12279>
- Carson, S. H., Peterson, J. B., & Higgins, D. M. (2003). Decreased Latent Inhibition Is Associated With Increased Creative Achievement in High-Functioning Individuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *85*(3), 499–506. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.3.499>
- D'Souza, J., & Gurin, G. (2016). The universal significance of Maslow's concept of self-actualization. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, *44*(2). <https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000027>
- Ford, G. G., & Procidano, M. E. (1990). THE RELATIONSHIP OF SELF-ACTUALIZATION TO SOCIAL SUPPORT, LIFE STRESS, AND ADJUSTMENT. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, *18*(1), 41–51. <https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.1990.18.1.41>
- Forrest, K. A. (2001). Toward an etiology of dissociative identity disorder: A neurodevelopmental approach. *Consciousness and Cognition*, *10*(3), 259–293. <https://doi.org/10.1006/ccog.2001.0493>
- Frana, J. (2013). Humanistic correctional programming: A test of self-actualization in a correctional cognitive behavioral program in the United States. *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences*, *8*(1). [www.sascv.org](http://www.sascv.org)
- Goldstein, B. (2010). *Sensation and perception* (8th ed.). Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
- Griffith, H., & Davidson, M. (1966). Long-term changes in intellect and behaviour after hemispherectomy. *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery & Psychiatry*, *29*(6), 571–576. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jnnp.29.6.571>
- Herculano-Houzel, S. (2009). The human brain in numbers: A linearly scaled-up primate brain. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, *3*(31). <https://doi.org/10.3389/neuro.09.031.2009>
- Hosseini Dowlatabad, F., Sadeghi, A., Saadat, S., & Khodayari, H. (2014). Relationship between self-efficacy and self-actualization with coping strategies among students. *Res. Med. Educat*, *6*, 10–17.
- Hunt, T., & Schooler, J. W. (2019). The easy part of the hard problem: A resonance theory of consciousness. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, *13*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2019.00378>
- Kim, J. (2018). Consideration of the applicability of person-centered therapy to culturally varying clients, focusing on the actualizing tendency and self-actualization – from East Asian perspective. *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies*, *17*(3), 201–223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2018.1506817>
- Lefrançois, R., Leclerc, G., Dubé, M., Hébert, R., & Gaulin, P. (1997). The Development and validation of a self-report measure of self-actualization. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, *25*(4), 353–365. <https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.1997.25.4.353>
- Lin, D. (2011). *Tao te Ching*. SkyLight Paths Publishing.

- Luo, Y., Qi, S., Chen, X., You, X., Huang, X., & Yang, Z. (2017). Pleasure attainment or self-realization: The balance between two forms of well-beings are encoded in default mode network. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, *12*(10), 1678–1686. <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsx078>
- Parham, T. A., & Helms, J. E. (1985). Relation of racial identity attitudes to self-actualization and affective states of Black students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *32*(3), 431–440. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.32.3.431>
- Peterson, J. B., & Carson, S. (2000). Latent inhibition and openness to experience in a high-achieving student population. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *28*(2), 323–332. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0191-8869\(99\)00101-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0191-8869(99)00101-4)
- Robbins, B. D. (2021). The Joyful Life: An Existential-Humanistic Approach to Positive Psychology in the Time of a Pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.648600>
- Shultz, D., & Schultz, S. (2019). *Theories of Personality*. Cengage Learning.
- Stahl, S. M. (2013). *Stahl's Essential Psychopharmacology*. Cambridge University Press.
- Yaden, D. B., Haidt, J., Hood, R. W. Jr., Vago, D. R., & Newberg, A. B. (2017). The varieties of self-transcendent experience. *Review of General Psychology*, *21*(2), 143–160. <https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000102>