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In The Brandeis University Psychology Department, 1962-65: Recalling A Great American Social Theorist

Kenneth Feigenbaum

Abraham H. Maslow is one of the best known psychologists of the 20th century. His theory of motivation, most cogently expressed in his hierarchy of needs, is based upon biological assumptions mainly devoid of cultural influences, and it is not sensitive to the role of civilizations effecting intellectual development and ideology. Critiques of these possible shortcomings in his theory are abundant (Trigs, 2004).

Maslow and the Author

This paper, however, contextualizes the man in his living space, and it also looks at Humanistic Psychology, of which he was an early intellectual leader, through my personal experience from 1962 to 1965. It focuses on my memory of the Department of Psychology at Brandeis, which was then widely viewed as an exemplar of a department promoting the ideology of Humanistic Psychology.

This paper reflects my memory of the time period I spent as an Assistant Professor from September 1962 to June 1965 in the Department of Psychology at Brandeis University. Its value may be as an eyewitness to the happenings of the department, perhaps most importantly in the fleeting memories I have of Professor Abraham Maslow as we worked together. It questions the assumption that the department was, in fact, at the forefront of Humanistic Psychology as a discipline.

There are very few persons alive who still retain memories of Maslow. I am one of the few. Whether my memories add anything to the understanding of the man and his work may be debated. An excellent biography of Maslow (Hoffman, 1988) already exists. Also, I am aware of the pitfalls of eye-witnesses (Loftus, 1996) and that memories are not isomorphic to historical truth (Spence, 1982).

My view of the Psychology Department and of Maslow also may be clouded because of the fact that they did not initially renew my contract at Brandeis. Only after lobbying by the graduate students did they offer me a one year extension of my contract, which I declined. Thus, my views are the perspectives of a sometimes insider, sometimes outsider in the department who developed no lasting friendships with the faculty members but who was a faculty member close to many of the graduate students.

It might be of interest to note that as a neutral outsider – that is, as neither a strictly Humanist nor an Experimental advocate – I served as Chairman of Graduate Admissions to the department.

Thus, I was also a neutral referee between the so-called humanistic part of the department and those who tended to be more experimental, cognitive, or psychodynamic.

How did I get the position teaching at Brandeis? I was interviewed at the American Psychological Association Annual Conference in Philadelphia by Alan Hein and Richard Held. It was in the Spring of 1962. The position for a full time Assistant Professor was contingent upon the fact that the department assumed that Jim Klee would be away for the year on a Fulbright grant. As it turned out, he did not get the grant and so, for the first year of my tenure there, I was given a half-time position at the Framingham Mental Health Center. It so developed that my clinical work there was as rewarding as my teaching at Brandeis and it provided me with a supportive environment.

The person they were seeking to hire, and the position I assumed, was supposed to be the mainstay for the undergraduate curriculum, teaching Child and Social Psychology and several other courses, including Political Psychology.

Why did I choose to teach at Brandeis University? In 1962 I had just completed three years of teaching and had been one of the founders of Monteith College at Wayne State University. There I taught in the Science of Society Division. The courses and the faculty were interdisciplinary. The intellectual firepower came from a staff of brilliant people drawn mostly from the University of Chicago and from the Departments of Anthropology, Sociology and History.

At Chicago, psychology had a secondary role in the curriculum. The Social Psychology on offer was that of the symbolic interactionism school of George Herbert Mead and his disciples. My Ph.D. was from the interdisciplinary Committee on Human Development, now known as the Committee on Comparative Human Development, of the University of Chicago.

Although today I relish my interdisciplinary education, back then I felt I was not a “real psychologist” because I did not graduate or teach in a specifically designated “Psychology” Department. My wife Carolyn was a 1955 graduate of Brandeis; the Department of Psychology at Brandeis was well respected and, of course, with a slightly haughty stance I thought that Boston had a lot more to offer than Detroit. I therefore looked forward to the opportunity of teaching at Brandeis.

As indicated above, I had been given the opportunity to go to Brandeis in order to be interviewed for a position by Richard Held and Alan Hein. At that same time, I was also offered a position at the City College of New York and at Queens College, which was my undergraduate school. Both Held and Hein left Brandeis shortly after, in the Fall of 1962, to take positions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Prof. Held's relationship to the department at Brandeis deserves further comment in that he represented the "hard experimentalists" in the department that Maslow fought with over who should be hired by the department and what the department should be and become.

This reflected the fact that a wide intellectual gap yawned between what psychology should be and what the department should foster; the antagonists were the experimentalists and the humanistic members of the department's faculty. This gap is expressed in the following quotation about Maslow and the department by Held, taken from an autobiographical essay later published on the site for the Society for Neuroscience. "From the top down the faculty of Psychology were a mixed group of theorists. They were a likable bunch, but as scientific colleagues I didn't find them challenging. That ultimately was the reason for my departure from Brandeis."

The day finally came for my interview. I was met at the airport and driven from the airport to the campus. I was immediately ushered into the office of "the great man," Abraham Maslow. I was greeted warmly by him. He was engaging, and charming. Most definitively, he was also frank. He expounded on the state of psychology. His words as I clearly remember them were: "let's call shit, shit."

Maslow As A Technocrat Administrator and High-Flying Global Scholar

So, in 1962, I joined the Brandeis faculty, and there were eight or nine of us on the faculty of the Department of Psychology. The chair, of course, was Prof. Maslow, a congenial man who, as others have said, led with a light touch. Having himself chosen the faculty, he was quite supportive of all of us as well as generously laudatory. At the time he was propounding his theory of self-actualization — a sort of pep talk, exhorting people to develop their assets wherever these might lead. His ideas must have been in accord with the Zeitgeist because they caught on among various strata of people, ranging from rebellious young men like Abby Hoffman, who at the time was a student at Brandeis, to Business School professors seeking to energize their students.

Maslow became an icon for diverse people eager for new ideas. I must confess that as much as I liked him, in agreement with Richard Held, I couldn't take his ideas seriously. Then there was Jim Klee, a huge man from the Midwest who, as Held recalled, had gained his degree in one of the departments of psychology whose faculty we, in the more enlightened departments, called "dustbowl empiricists." He had rebelled against that sort of ideology, as had Maslow, and Klee was developing a new theory of behavior.

So, Klee and Maslow represented the core of the Humanistic Psychology members of the Brandeis Psychology Department. I remember Klee as a giant of man, sitting in a butterfly chair, always welcoming students to talk.

For students, he was one of those professors who had their doors almost always open. Klee left Brandeis in about 1964 to create a Humanistic Psychology program at West Georgia. This diminished the power of the humanistic ideology in the department.

Maslow wanted the department to be autonomous and not be restricted by American Psychological Association standards. He, therefore, opposed applying for an A.P.A.-approved clinical program. Unfortunately, this prevented our graduate students from receiving stipends for their internships at such places as the Judge Baker Clinic. In his words, he wanted the department to be “the West Point of Psychology” with high standards developed from within and not from the outside by those who possessed what he labelled “inferior minds.”

I remember only two occasions that I spent any serious time talking to Prof. Maslow in his office. On one occasion we talked about a study that I began but never finished on the psychology of police officers. Abe encouraged me to continue and he provided some motivational encouragement for me to continue, which I did not because of difficulties in collecting data and as a result of some fears about the possible political repercussions regarding the university and the Police Department of the town of Waltham, Massachusetts.

An issue that was raised during my tenure as Chairperson of the Graduate Admissions Committee was that of admitting women with families to the program. At least some members of the Department felt that they were taking a risk in admitting women to the Ph.D. program. While I do not remember Abe’s stance, I believe that it was not an adamant one in favor of equality of admission standards. He did mentor at least one woman for her Ph.D.

Abe’s political views had changed over time. As a youth he was a socialist, a great admirer of Norman Thomas. He was also a founder of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues.

However, during the time that I knew him at Brandeis he was not a political activist. For example, the valedictorian one year was forbidden by the then university president, Abram Sacher, from giving his speech because it might have offended one of the most prominent donors to the university. In another case two faculty members in the Department of Anthropology were asked to resign because of their support for Fidel Castro. Abe was not in the forefront of protesting either decision.

Nonetheless, it has been noted that by 1968, his class lectures on Politics actually featured the return of some of his positive views about rationality and a realistic view of liberalism infused with power (Maslow, 1970).

Abe complained a lot. His complaints about the graduate students were that they as a group were lazy and overly dependent; these charges were legion (Hoffman, 1988). Moreover, he was almost hypochondrial, fearing an early death. Yet, I thought that some of his complaints were justified, particularly those about low salary and support for the Department of Psychology. An example of this was the institution's refusal to give me \$250 for costs associated with an article that I was publishing. The attitude of the university was that it was a privilege to teach there and in the Boston area.

During my time at Brandeis, I was personally close to many of the graduate students. They, in contrast to the way Abe described them, were hard-working students, not the lazy, passive, unmotivated students that Abe described. In spite of the intellectual harassment they faced, few students dropped out. They were well funded and even without Abe there were other faculty members that they could turn to for mentoring if they wished.

During my last year at Brandeis I associated with the graduate students rather than with the faculty, who were driven by their own research agendas. "Bud" Wright, who was one of my colleagues at Monteith in Michigan, came to Brandeis to finish his doctoral work. I was to spend many hours "in withdrawal" with him in my office. Bud had been an acolyte of Robert K. Thomas, who was my colleague at Monteith. Bob himself was an inspired teacher and mentor of the working class students at Monteith; after teaching at Monteith, he taught at the University of Arizona where he became a leader, an activist and a scholar for Native Americans. I think of him now with great fondness.

Psychology at Brandeis Under Maslow's Watchful Gaze

At Brandeis I remember several departmental meetings during which there was great concern about the progress of the dissertations of the graduate students. Abe generally was in the forefront of the complainers. But did this make sense? The fact was that there were only a small number of students in the graduate school but there were many times that number of students who were psychology majors or who took psychology classes at the undergraduate level. Nevertheless, not once in two and a half years was there any discussion of the undergraduate curriculum: what should be taught and why should it be taught. It was assumed that the expertise of the various faculty members in the department meant that they could teach their courses without any overlap — in an independent manner and without cooperative agreement as to what were the criteria and goals for the undergraduates.

Why was this? Founded in 1948 as an undergraduate institution, during the 1950's Brandeis had moved its status from being solely that of an undergraduate school to what it perceived to be a "true university" with its development of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. This expansion into graduate education naturally had changed the focus of the Department of Psychology.

Moreover, as was true in many universities that offered the Ph.D. degree, undergraduate teaching was not the best vehicle for scholarly publications and for national recognition as a psychologist.

So, the founding of the graduate school turned the fulcrum of where the intellectual concerns of the faculty should be invested. Of course, that did not stop a few excellent teachers from devoting time to teaching their undergraduate classes. However, the criteria for promotion in the department were revealed starkly during my time at Brandeis when the two professors who were promoted by the consensus of the graduate students were the two least gifted teachers in the department.

From 1962 to 1965, the years that I was Chairperson of Graduate Admissions for the Psychology Department, the majority of the applicants who applied to Brandeis were attracted by the name and reputation of Professor Maslow. However, those who were admitted for the Ph.D. soon found out that the department was not the thriving center for Humanistic Psychology that they had anticipated; nor was it easy for them to work with Maslow, both because of his attitudes toward the graduate students and as a result of his frequent trips away from campus to lecture.

In a brief flashback I can remember being at a departmental party (one of the few I was invited to or attended) when Bertha Maslow approached me with a phrase something like: "Oh, you are the person who was hired to be the 'messiah' for the undergraduates."

The topography of the place was significant, in my view. The Psychology Department occupied the first floor of the Brown building. It consisted of my office, a departmental office, and the offices of Richard Jones, Ulric Neisser, Norbet Mintz, Jerome Wodinsky, Marianne Simmel, and Ricardo Morant.

However, two faculty members were not in the building: Eugenia Hanfmann had her office in the Counseling Center, and Fran Perkins was in charge of the early childhood center in an office elsewhere -- not in Brown.

The second floor of Brown was the home of the Departments of Anthropology and Sociology. There was little interdisciplinary work between the Department of Psychology and the occupants of the second floor of the Brown building. This was surprising to me, since Abe, while at Brooklyn College and at Columbia University, had been a major player with Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Abraham Kardiner and others.

In particular, he had engaged in field work under Benedict's supervision, studying security and insecurity among the Northern Blackfoot. (Feigenbaum, Smith 2019). Maslow's notes on Blackfoot socialization were validated by the work of others, such as the anthropologists

Oscar Lewis, best known for his work on the “Culture of Poverty,” and Esther Goldfrank. Maslow was an acute observer and an excellent field worker.

A few of the graduate students did have contact with the scholars on the second floor. This included, especially, Joel Aronoff, whose thesis to some extent validated aspects of Maslow’s world-famous “hierarchy of needs.”

As a result of the department’s faculty and its physical location, and because I had taught previously in an interdisciplinary program at Monteith College where I became acquainted with major American anthropological and sociological thought, I was quite disappointed by the lack of any close intellectual contact between the faculty in the Psychology Department and the denizens of the second floor of Brown.

Nonetheless, Maslow personally never disparaged psychodynamic approaches to understanding human behavior. One of his closest friends was Harry Rand, an analyst from the Boston area. He also hired Richard Jones, who introduced the students and the faculty to the work of Lawrence Kubie, who was merging psychoanalysis with education. Abe did attend at least one conference with Kubie. Richard Jones eventually left the department, however, in order to become part of the more liberally oriented program at Evergreen State College, in Washington State.

Thus, the department was not a thriving Humanistic Psychology intellectual hub nor a national center that many of the graduate students who came to Brandeis had anticipated that it would be. During much of his tenure at Brandeis, in fact, Maslow exhibited a preference for having students broadly educated in main domains of psychology, not just Humanistic Psychology; he pushed students to learn about such other areas of psychology as Perception; Cognitive Development; Abnormal Psychology; Research Design and Statistics.

By 1965 the stalwart of the humanistic approach, Jim Klee, had left to found a Humanistic Psychology Department at West Georgia State; moreover, Abe, because of his travels and his inability to forge a more humanistic stamp on the department, became more and more alienated from the department and its faculty. In addition, Abe feared that he would die at an early age. He became less and less engaged at Brandeis — in 1964, particularly, with the undergrads; many of them, shockingly, were beginning to see him as a reactionary authoritarian.

This was in sharp contrast to his international reputation, to the overwhelming response ascertained by an unscientific survey I administered, and to the opinion I had gathered in talks with the students to whom I spoke in my wife’s class of Brandeis graduates of 1955. He was considered by all to be a magnificent teacher and mentor.

Since the time when he had arrived at Brandeis in 1951, Abe abstained from pushing the department to be a department made in his mold. So, his first hire for the department which he founded was Ricardo Morant, whose expertise was in Perception. Other early hires included Eugenia Hanfmann, who was the head of the Counseling Center; David Ricks, a Clinical Psychologist; and Dick Neisser, who has the reputation of being the founder of Cognitive Psychology. For many years Maslow's criteria for a faculty member were solely based on competence and not on ideology. Nonetheless, by the time I was in the department, the hire's ideology had become more important.

During the spring of 1965 I received a letter indicating that the department was not going to renew my contract. There was no explanation offered for not renewing me and I did not pursue the reason as to why. In actuality, I was frankly unhappy with a life without either intellectual or social support; Brandeis was the polar opposite of what I had experienced at Monteith College of Wayne State University. Perhaps it was the case that, as a somewhat insecure person, my persona did not reflect to them a clearly-focused research agenda that would attract graduate students and publicize the department throughout the world of elite academic departments of Psychology.

To my credit, I think, was that I had published relatively vigorously, producing a number of professional articles while I was there, often with the graduate students being either senior or junior authors; my teaching, if not brilliant, was clearly far above average; and I developed while at Brandeis a psychometric instrument for handicapped children, a variant of the Children's Apperception Test.

Later in the spring of 1965 I was offered a one year's extension of my contract, probably because of the insistent lobbying of the graduate students with whom I had become close. I have always wondered what Abe's position was on my renewal. I am tempted to believe that, while not on any personal basis, he saw my leaving as another opportunity to appoint a person with humanistic and "transpersonal" interests.

Soon after my non-renewal letter I began to search for other jobs. Two possibilities quickly came: a position at Ohio State University and a position at Antioch College in Ohio. I eventually accepted the latter.

I was interviewed at Ohio State for a joint appointment in the Social and Developmental programs in the university's Department of Psychology and was offered a position with a promise of tenure. Additionally, I was asked to lead the Infant Development Laboratory. Apparently, Abe had invited the distinguished Ohio State psychologist George Kelly to Brandeis in the same time frame.

I have a particularly strong memory of the interview luncheon held for me at Ohio State. Professor Kelly was not particularly interested in football and I could easily converse with them about Woody Hayes, the university's head football coach; "three yards in a cloud of dust," a then innovative strategy of gaining ground in the game by grinding out inevitable if small advances; and related topics. But it is hard to believe that they thought they were getting the better of the exchange, Feigenbaum for such a great psychologist as Kelly!

Kelly was invited to Brandeis by Maslow and accepted the endowed chair, Riklis Professor of Behavioral Sciences. Although Kelly did not consider himself a Humanistic psychologist, avoiding being penned into any one category, he was at least a fellow traveler with Humanistic psychology. Unfortunately, he died of a heart attack two years after his appointment. He was replaced by Prof. Brendan Maher, a leader in the field of Experimental Psychopathology.

In spite of his complaining about the dependency of most of the graduate students, Prof. Maslow did mentor several outstanding students. Among them was Arthur Warmoth, who took a leading role before his death in 2018 in the Humanistic movement in the discipline. Another student who remained close to Maslow was Richard Lowry, who edited Maslow's diary and who also edited a book containing many of Maslow's papers. The book was titled *Dominance, Self-Esteem, Self-Actualization: Germinal Papers of A.H. Maslow*. Another graduate student of Maslow's whom I knew was Bob Greenway. He continued to work with Humanistic psychologists in California.

Today, the Brandeis University Department of Psychology is an experimental one. The majority of the faculty are involved in visual perception research. Humanistic Psychology is no longer a major focus.

In an article which appeared in the *Brandeis News* on May 14th, 2013, Leah Burrows wrote that:

You can find Dr. Abraham Maslow in the pages of every introduction to psychology textbook. You can find Maslow on every list of influential psychologists, among the ranks of Sigmund Freud and B.F. Skinner. You can find his papers and correspondence on exhibit at The Center for the History of Psychology at the University of Akron in Ohio.

But walk into his former office in the Brown Center for Social Sciences and you'll find nothing of Abraham Maslow. There is no plaque, no picture.

The article goes on to quote the then Chairperson, Margie Lachman: "I think there were a lot of people in the department who didn't appreciate his views."

The article stated that many psychologists at that time, including several at Brandeis, dismissed Maslow's theory on the hierarchy of needs and peak experiences for lack of empirical evidence. In the article I am quoted as saying that "there is still enough interest (and value in his work) in Maslow to generate a chair." I believe this very strongly and there have been some recent efforts to do that.

Perhaps it is the case that when I was a faculty member at Brandeis, the scope of Maslow's work was not fully recognized by me. In the years since I taught there I have developed a deeper appreciation of his work on dominance, self-esteem, security and insecurity; his prescient article on the authoritarian personality is relevant today as we seek to understand certain trends in American and international leadership. In addition, Maslow's anthropology research on the Blackfoot was outstanding and it generated many of his later ideas, as expressed in his theory of motivation (Smith, Feigenbaum 2019).

Creative people often have personality shortcomings. This is a truism that applies to Abe. My reflections, based both upon my memories of my time at Brandeis and my readings about his life (specifically materials by Lowry and Hoffman), lead me to the following conclusions about this seminal thinker in American psychology:

- Abraham Maslow had strongly elitist feelings and he looked down upon others who did not support his point of view.
- He promulgated a viewpoint that gave little causative effect to the environment and he tended to promote himself as a "self-made man."
- In spite of his many kudos and gigantic reputation, he felt unappreciated.
- His greatness as a foundational American psychologist has outlived both the shortcomings in his theories and Maslow, as a person.

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