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Maslow's Motivators

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If there was ever a truism in Psychology, it is that every student of Psychology has heard of three things:

- Pavlov's dog,
- Harry Harlow and his monkeys, and
- Abraham Harold Maslow and his hierarchy of human needs.

Back in the good old days

As Psychologists we can all think back, with those 'pleasant memories' smiles on our faces, to, our early days as Psychology students, when we were learning the foundations of our science. The good old days when we were free, vital and all the things that we were learning were new and exciting to us.

Upon reflection, however, perhaps we did tend to take in these 'facts' with a bit too much naive wonderment.

These 'foundations' of our science need regular appraisal, and that is the purpose of this paper--an appraisal of Maslow's hierarchy of human needs.

On reading the original writings by Maslow, one is struck by its persuasive simplicity.

It is easy to relate what he says to one's current daily life, and as a result the theory is readily accepted.

However, if one considers factors that are not regular daily life events for most of us, then one sees a few problems in the structure of the hierarchy.

Basis of human needs?

In particular, there appears to be a problem with the proposal that physiological needs are the basis of human needs i.e. the need for food and water being the basis of the hierarchy of needs.

There are a number of situations that question Maslow's proposal that physiological needs are either the most basic need, or that there are no equivalent basic needs.

For instance, one can look at the work of Dr. Bettelheim, the Psychiatrist who spent 1938 and 1939 in the two German concentration camps of Dachau and Buchenwald.

In these places, the Gestapo deliberately malnourished, tortured and defiled the prisoners. Bruno Bettelheim examined the results of such prolonged maltreatment.

One of the principal findings was that the desire for food and physical nourishments was at times less important than the desire or need for psychological health.

The need for a particular frame of mind was equal to, and at times, more important than the need for food and water.

He found that the great majority of prisoners rated remaining psychologically unchanged just as important as staying alive.

If prisoners did not manage to keep their psyches intact, then they would not survive, regardless of their degree of malnourishment.

This indicated that the physiological needs do not form the base level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Further evidence for this comes from *OMNI magazine*, which examined how people coped psychologically when lost at sea.

Other factors

Under such life-threatening stress, it is not primarily physical condition, age or stamina that determines if one lives or dies.

Instead, three other factors have been found to be important:

1. the will to live;
2. one's level of self-esteem;
3. how optimistic one is.

The psychology of the survivor takes precedence over the need for food and water in such instances. This again demonstrates a flaw in having the physiological needs at the base of the hierarchy.

The state of mind, or way of thinking, becomes the obsessive focal point rather than the hunger or thirst.

Finally, we find evidence from certain abnormal states, which further question the actual levels of the needs.

There are certain abnormal psychological states which demonstrate that the need for some degree of emotional adjustment is more basic than the physiological needs. The most obvious example of these are the conditions of Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimarexia.

In these instances of extreme malnourishment, the thinking and feeling does not obsessively focus on the desire and want for food as Maslow predicts.

Such individuals do not usually feel hungry--instead they tend to focus on a plethora of other things such as body shape, weight loss, resisting authority, loss of control and so on.

Anyone who has worked with psychotics, or the more severe personality disorders, will also know that often the need for food and water rates a poor second to the desire for some emotional stability or freedom from psychological pain.

This suggests that in order for someone to understand and be motivated by the physiological needs, they must first have satisfied the need for some level of psychological stability.

Because it is easy to relate to Malsow's theory, it is persuasive. As students of Psychology, particularly at the beginning of our academic years, most of us accepted the theory without much questioning.

However, if we look at unusual or abnormal life events, some problems appear with regard to the levels of the hierarchy. It seems that perhaps the physiological needs should not be at the base of the hierarchy. Can we stand such heresy?

References:

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