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Critical analysis of Maslow's Hierarchy of Need

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Abstract
This paper intends to provide a critique of Maslow's Hierarchy of Need, a psychological model that often goes unquestioned within the education sector. Examples will be given of the authors own professional practice and experience in relation to the Hierarchy of Need (HON) and discussed in terms of the critique. The paper concludes that whilst some elements of the HON may be useful in education it does have some serious flaws that also need to be considered when applying this to practice. This paper hopes to demonstrate that, quite often, the theoretical underpinning and research basis for theories that are widely used in education are neglected, highlighting that each planned action or perspective that may be used within education needs exploring in terms of context, evidence base and relevance.

Introduction
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (HON) is a developmental psychology theory proposed by Maslow (1943). This theory puts forward the idea that individuals move through a fundamental number of hierarchical motivations, in a unique order, based upon both physiological and psychological needs. These 'needs' to which Maslow referred, in order of importance, are: physiological, safety, belongingness, love, self-esteem, self-actualization and self-transcendence (1954, 1943). It is useful to note, at this point, that the Hierarchy of need is often represented in literature as a pyramid, yet within his writing, Maslow did not use this representation.

The first state in the HON, and according to Maslow the most fundamental, accounts for basic human physiological needs such as food, water, homeostasis, sex and breathing. Moving on, when these needs are met, the second stage refers to both psychological and physical safety, such as security of body, family, property and morality. The next stage in the HON refers to love and belongingness and incorporates intimacy and friendships (Maslow 1943, 1954). Maslow refers to these three stages as deficiency needs, asserting that if these three areas are not met then the individual will experience negative physiological and psychological consequences. The HON suggests that if these fundamental needs are met then an individual can focus upon higher needs such as self-esteem and respect, eventually reaching a 'metamotivated' state (Maslow, 1943). In this state the individual achieves self-actualization and can focus upon the development of the self by way of creativity, morality, acceptance and the loss of prejudicial perspectives (Maslow, 1954). The stages in the HON are not mutually exclusive and may overlap based upon which need dominates and motivates the individual at any one time dependent upon individual psychological and physical circumstances.

Implications for Education
The HON, despite being a psychological theory, has been widely adapted within educational learning theory (Mittleman, 1991). The relevance to education appears to stem from one of the overarching aims of education which is to facilitate learning and make this process meaningful to an individual, impacting upon and becoming useful to their lives. For the retention of information to take place

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and for learning to be achieved, according to the HON, an individual should feel motivated to meet their expected goals. Using the HON as a perspective to learning, if the basic human physiological needs are not met then this may inhibit the learning process because the individual will be focused upon these needs as they are a necessity for survival. Consequently learning and self-development will become a secondary priority (Mittleman, 1991). An example in practice would be if the room temperature in a learning environment was low then individuals in there would be focused upon rectifying this rather than learning opportunities.

Criticisms to this approach

Whilst I have found awareness of the HON useful in my teaching there are criticisms to this approach that need consideration. Wahba and Bridwell (1976) carried out an in-depth review of the HON which concluded that the evidence for the hierarchical order of the needs proposed by Maslow is sparse. Whilst acknowledging that human beings do have needs to be met, the existence of a rigid order of needs for every individual is questioned. Hofstede (1984) built upon this premise, asserting that the hierarchy was steeped in ethnocentricity and based upon a Western ideology. Hofstede (1984) goes on to state that the HON alone does not account for differences in the cultural needs of societies and their unique social and intellectual needs. Hofstede (1984) uses the example of collectivist and individualistic societies to illustrate his assertion, stating that the needs of individualistic societies reflect the needs for self-actualisation and self-fulfilment, whereas a collectivist society is focussed upon the community and acceptance and belonging within this structure. The position of sex within the HON has also come under criticism as it is categorised alongside breathing and food. Hofstede (1984) asserts that bracketing sex in this category forms an individualistic perspective that does not acknowledge the emotional and psychological impacts that this has upon an individual.

Cianci and Gambrel (2003) have criticised the HON as too simplistic and suggest that it does not account for societal needs at a particular time, such as recession and war. Also studies such as those by Tay and Diener (2011) have demonstrated that the ranking of needs varies with age and does not appear to be the same across all age groups. Other criticisms of the HON discuss the methodology as unrepresentative as Maslow used the top 1% achievers of college populations and referred to well known academics and high achievers, such as Einstein in his research, making it impossible to generalise his findings to the wider population (Mittleman, 1991).

Hierarchy of Need in practice

Within my teaching experience knowledge of the HON has allowed for a wider perspective on the learning process, allowing me to adapt my teaching based upon student needs. Knowledge of the criticisms of the HON has also allowed me to recognise the individual nature of human needs and that the HON is not a 'one size fits all approach'. Yet, rather than a focus upon the learning outcomes, the HON has allowed me to consider individual learning pathways, resulting in a student centred approach giving consideration to environments-both physiological and psychological-forming part of the planning for the pathways to meeting learning objectives.

I have taught in many settings, ranging from pregnant teenagers who have been excluded from school, to under-graduate university lectures and online, distance, post graduate programmes. I have also taught Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) in secondary schools across the West Midlands. Having knowledge of the HON has supported these sessions in many guises; when teaching pregnant students, awareness of dietary and comfort needs, the first stage in the HON has supported the learning process. Awareness of self-esteem, belonging, sex and friendships has allowed me to plan sensitive yet effective SRE sessions, accounting for how this subject may affect an individual's feelings based upon the social taboos that surround the subject of sex and the fragility of adolescent feelings of belongingness and self-esteem. Whilst I have found this useful in

my teaching, especially that of SRE, the position of sex as a basic need appears to need more consideration in relation to feelings and emotions. As these are higher in the hierarchy I would reflect criticisms by Kenrick Griskevicius Neuberg and Schaller (2010) that there is a complexity to sex which Maslow does not appear to account for, that stems from both physiological and psychological needs across the hierarchical spectrum.

One area where the HON has had a particular effect, surprisingly, is in the post-graduate online Masters in Education course for which I am a tutor. As this is a distance course the students rarely meet each other and whilst basic physiological needs may be met, such as food and warmth, other basic needs such as self-esteem, belongingness and friendships may be more difficult to attain. Alongside this it is useful to consider that distance courses allow for a more diverse cohort which in turn may bring with it additional considerations such as; time differences, family commitments and internet access. Being aware of the HON has allowed me to consider these elements as important within the learning process, for example; facilitating online discussion forums to support a sense of belongingness, giving scenarios to debate and discuss online. I also offer Skype tutorials early mornings, evenings and weekends to support students with family responsibilities, or those who are in different time zones. These approaches stem from an awareness of the safety, self-esteem and the need for validation elements of the HON (Maslow 1943, 1954).

Conclusion

In conclusion the HON offers an educator a set of hierarchical needs to consider when designing sessions and learning outcomes. By taking these into consideration this allows for the educator to direct their thinking and programme design into that of a student centred approach, with an overarching aim for students to be motivated to learn and for that learning to translate into the individuals lives, giving the learning meaning and purpose. Whilst accounting for the HON in teaching approaches it is also useful to consider the criticisms of this approach when designing learning. Accounting for individual and ethnocentric differences and needs when planning sessions should support the learning process, promoting inclusion through differentiation of approaches from student to student.

Points for reflection

Have you been taught the Hierarchy of Need in relation to your teaching? How was this taught? What elements of critical analysis are present in the information you read about the Hierarchy of Need? Why do you think this is?

Are there any other theories and approaches that are used within your teaching practice that may lack a suitable critique? Are they still relevant in the teaching of today? Are there any flaws? What are the benefits? What is the underpinning research that the theories are based upon?

What informs your teaching approach? Why? What is the evidence?

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