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Citation

Mawere, M., Mubaya, T. R., Reisen, M. E. H. van, & Stam, G. van. (2016). Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation and its Deep Roots in Individualism: Interrogating Maslow's Applicability in Africa. In N. A. Mawere M. (Ed.), *Theory, Knowledge, Development and Politics: What Role for the Academy in the Sustainability of Africa?*. Bamenda: Langaa RPCIG. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/47844>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation and its Deep Roots in Individualism: Interrogating Maslow's Applicability in Africa

Munyaradzi Mawere¹, Tapuwa R. Mubaya², Mirjam van Reisen³, Gertjan van Stam⁴

Abstract

Since the postulation of Abraham Maslow's theory of human motivation, the theory has been celebrated as the determining factor to account for and explain human wants and needs. While the theory has its genealogy from an individualistic society, the United States of America, where it was crafted and propelled to take a stand as a universal theory determining human wants and needs across the world, little has been done to critically examine its seemingly perceived universality and applicability in societies such as those of Africa, where collectivism and conviviality bear centrality.

The theory has enjoyed more acclamations than critical appraisals. This paper is a critical appraisal of Maslow's theory of human motivation. It examines the applicability and universality of the theory outside the context in which it was created, tested, and applied, such as Africa, before it received what seems to be a world-wide endorsement. Author's observations in Southern Africa recognised behaviour motivated by pursuit of relationships, strengthening of community, acknowledgement of authority, sharing, and avoidance of shame.

The paper concludes that the theory of Maslow is not applicable to many settings in Africa, in the past or even today. The claim for universality of the model proposed by Maslow is therefore questioned and its universal application is discredited. This conclusion calls for further interaction with the subject of human motivation outside of Maslow's framing, by contextualising such theory(ies) in space and time.

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Introduction

In Social Studies the theory of Abraham Maslow on human motivation is considered a seminal work. Frequently, Maslow's theory of human motivation is cited as a general description of the priorities of what humans need and want. There is no doubt that Maslow's reasoning, particularly his theory of hierarchies of needs and motivation has proven helpful within the contexts of perspectives on growth and even equality, as Maslow emphasised the potential of every human being. In Maslow's thinking, the 'individual' is seen as the most important actor, and his/her individual agency supersedes other motivations of action ([Maslow 1943](#)). As a humanistic psychologist, Maslow believed that every person has a strong desire to realise his or her full potential, to reach a level of 'self-actualisation'. He was the founder of the new movement of humanistic psychology that reached its peak in the 1960s, and whose main point was to emphasise the positive potential of human beings (Schacter et al. 2012). His thinking has deeply influenced the paradigm of the development agenda, both in theory and in practice, and set the foundation for moral thinking on individual entitlements.

Maslow's theory was perhaps more a programme than a theory and practitioners have lamented that the theory is not aligned with realities. As Graham and Messner (1998: 196) summarised, there are generally three major criticisms directed to Maslow's Theory of Motivation:

- (a) there is scant empirical data to support the theoretical model
- (b) the studies assume human beings are similar and that the theory universally applies, and
- (c) applications or validation of the theory do not concern themselves with a theory of motivation but rather with theories of job satisfaction.

This criticism is supported by many other scholars (e.g. [Nadler et al. 1979](#)) in the field. The author and former philosophy professor, Sommers, and practising psychiatrist, Satel, asserted that, due to lack of empirical support, Maslow's ideas have fallen out of fashion and are no longer taken seriously in the world of academic psychology (Sommers and Satel 2005). Despite such fundamental criticism, the work remains standard literature in management studies and other fields and is part of standard curricula and textbooks for

secondary education students. This paper adds to the existing criticism of the theory, but from an African perspective.

This paper problematises a lack of empirical evidence, especially from other contexts, such as those of Africa, and hence questions the claim of ‘universality’ of the theory of Human Motivation. [House and Aditya \(1997\)](#) demonstrated in their study of leadership from over 3,000 studies that 98% of the empirical evidence for theoretical development is rather distinctly American in character. Although Maslow’s theory is taught as an explanatory universal model, Maslow’s theory is not validated in contexts or environments other than those where the theory was created. This validation outside of a western framework is important, given that Maslow’s theory emerged from an American cultural setting, characterised by individualism. In this cultural context, the individual is the point of reference and the realisation of the ‘individual’ is the highest goal.

The question of whether Maslow’s theory of human motivation is universally applicable is important, as much of the world that Galtung refers to as “the Periphery” does not resonate with putting the ‘individual’ as the focus of human motivation ([Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 2011](#)). In many parts of the world, it is *the group*, or *the community*, and ‘the attributes the group reflects upon its members’ that are central, and considered worthy to be pursued. In Southern Africa, for example, the philosophy of Ubuntu is at the centre of all human sphere, whether economic, religious, political or cultural. In Ubuntu, it is the group and not individuals that motivates daily endeavours, design, and behaviour (Khoza 2005; [Mawere and Mubaya 2014](#); [Mbiqi 1994](#); [Nyamnjoh 2015](#); [Ramose 2009](#), [van Stam 2014](#)).

This paper is an attempt to provide some suggestions of motivational realities in Southern Africa, as a caution for positioning and applying Maslow’s theory as a universal theory. In many indigenous cultures in Southern Africa, the group and the moderating role of cultural factors influence human motivation, as opposed to Maslow’s individual as the determining force.

Maslow’s Theory of Motivation

The starting point for Maslow’s theory is the question: ‘What motivates behaviour?’

According to Maslow, our actions as human beings are motivated in order to achieve certain needs. Maslow first introduced his concept of a hierarchy of needs and motivation in his 1943 paper "*A Theory of Human Motivation*" and his subsequent book in 1954, "*Motivation and Personality*."

Maslow introduced a new area of attention in the field of psychology. While psychological theories and schools of thought were dominated by psycho-analysis and behaviourism, psychology focused heavily on problematic behaviours. Maslow on the other hand was more interested in learning and understanding what motivates people. He was also much interested in comprehending what people do, in order to achieve what makes them happy. As a humanist psychologist, Maslow believed that people have an innate desire to be self-actualised: that is, the desire to be all they can fully be. Yet for Maslow, in order to achieve these ultimate goals of what people really want to be, a number of more basic needs must be met, such as the need for food, safety, love, and self-esteem, among others.

While this theory is generally known as the hierarchy of needs, he never displayed his theory as a pyramid (Eaton 2012). Depicted in terms of a pyramid, however, the lowest levels are made up of the most 'basic needs', while the more 'complex needs' are located at the top of the pyramid. The needs at the bottom of the pyramid are basic physical requirements including the need for food, water, shelter, and warmth. But for people to move on to the next level of needs, which are mainly for safety and security, the lower-level needs have to be met first. This is one reason why, Maslow explains, as people 'progress', their needs become increasingly psychological and social to the extent that the need for love, friendship, and intimacy become more important than any other needs. Yet as we go even further from this level of the pyramid, the need for personal esteem and feelings of accomplishment become more important than those at the lower-levels.

Maslow's five levels of the hierarchy of needs

Maslow (1943) distinguishes five different levels of needs, to which he assigns different levels of relevance: "if I may assign arbitrary figures for the sake of illustration, it is as if the average citizen is satisfied perhaps 85% in his physiological needs, 70% in his safety needs, 50% in his love needs, 40% in his self-esteem needs and 10% in his self-actualization needs" (Maslow 1943: 388-389). If we were to draw a diagram (a pyramid for that matter) to

represent the hierarchy of needs as explained by Maslow, the physiological needs would need to represent a much bigger piece of the pyramid. The five different levels in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy are as follow:

Physiological Needs

Physiological needs include the most basic needs that are vital to survival, such as the need for water, air, food, and shelter. As Maslow believed, these needs are the most basic and instinctive needs in the hierarchy because all needs become secondary until these physiological needs are met. Maslow added that most of these lower level needs are probably fairly apparent. This is because everyone, as long as s/he is human, needs food and water to survive. We also need to breathe and maintain a stable body temperature. Besides eating, drinking, and having adequate shelter and clothing, Maslow also suggested that the other important physiological basic need was sexual: reproduction.

Security Needs

Security needs include the desires for safety and security. Security needs are important for survival, but they are not as demanding as the physiological needs. Examples of security needs include a desire for steady employment, health care, safe neighbourhoods, and shelter from the environment. These needs become a bit more complex at this point in the hierarchy as they are considered 'higher' than physiological needs. And when the more basic survival needs have been fulfilled, people begin to feel that they need more control and order to their lives. People begin to concern themselves with safety in terms of where they live, financial security, physical safety, and staying healthy.

Social Needs

Social needs include needs for belonging, love, and affection. Maslow described these needs as less basic than physiological and security needs. Relationships such as friendships, romantic attachments, and families help fulfil this need for companionship and acceptance, also involvement in social, community, or religious groups.

Esteem Needs

When the first three needs have been satisfied, esteem needs become increasingly important. Esteem needs include the need for things that reflect on self-esteem, personal worth, social recognition, and accomplishment. At this point, it becomes important to gain the respect

and appreciation of others. People have a need to accomplish things and then have their efforts recognized. People often engage in activities such as going to school, playing a sport, enjoying a hobby, or participating in professional activities in order to fulfil this need. Satisfying this need and gaining acceptance and esteem helps people become more confident. Failing to gain recognition for accomplishments, however, can lead to feelings of failure or inferiority.

Self-actualising Needs

Self-actualising needs assume the highest level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Self-actualising people are self-aware, concerned with personal growth, less concerned with the opinions of others, and interested in fulfilling their potential.

Criticism against Maslow's theory over the years

From the fame that Maslow's theory has gathered over the years, it is clear that Maslow's contribution to psychology was momentous. Yet, while some research shows some support for Maslow's theories, most research has not been able to substantiate the idea of a needs hierarchy. [Wahba and Bridwell \(1976\)](#), for example, reported that there was little evidence for Maslow's ranking of these needs and even less evidence that these needs are in a hierarchical order.

As Nadler and Lawler (1979), Denning (2010), and Rutledge (2011) point out, other criticisms of Maslow's theory note that his definition of self-actualisation is difficult to test scientifically. Maslow's research on self-actualisation was also based on a very limited sample of individuals, including people he knew, as well as biographies of famous individuals that Maslow believed to be self-actualised, such as Albert Einstein and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Based on psychological research of human coping mechanism, [Graves \(1970\)](#) provided an alternative theoretical perspective on human behaviour. He described an open system of theory on values. His theory was worked out in "Spiral Dynamics" by Beck and Cowan (2005). The theory was used in South Africa, validating the theory during turbulent times and beyond. Graves recognised units of cultural information, so called 'memes,' spreading from person to person. Beck colour-coded the memes in a spiraling hierarchy of motivations for behaviour:

1. tribal, safety driven (beige)
2. exploitive, power-driven (red)
3. authority, order-driven (blue)
4. strategy, success-driven (orange)
5. social, people-driven (green)
6. systems, process-driven (yellow)
7. holistic (turquoise)

The lack of a perspective that human beings function in groups has been addressed by Pinto (2000), a Dutch scholar studying Intercultural Communications. He calls for a revision of Maslow's pyramid to address the motivation of people in group-settings. He points to the emergence of group-focus arising due to economic circumstances, religious influences, peer-groupings, or individual choices. He proposes a different motivational hierarchy relevant for such settings: (i) primary needs; (ii) group pleasing, (iii) good name, (iv) honour.

These criticisms reveal the absence of congruence and agreement in the sequencing of human needs, like the progression as proposed by Maslow: there is strong indication of variations in labelling and sequencing of needs fulfilment in different contexts.

Alternative propositions approach Human Motivation from different (academic) perspectives. However, positing the heuristic nature of (a simplification of) Maslow's Theory of Motivation continuous to be taught. This is problematic, especially in communal societies like those in Africa. Therefore, there is need for a dialogue informed by inputs from alternative paradigm and epistemological positions.

Dialoguing with Maslow: From an African perspective

In South Africa, while studying the facets of local entrepreneurship, Hart, Jacobs, Mangqalaza (2012) and their team at the Human Sciences Research Council found that rural communities mention a different set of motivations for economic action. Respondents deem 'quality of life' and 'group harmony' as their prime motivations for behaviour. This aligns with Sheneberger and van Stam's (2011) exposition of the consistence of motivation for

particular economic (inter)action in rural Zambia, the so-called ‘relatio-economy’. [Weijland \(2014\)](#) described the mechanics of this motivation through the mathematics of an ‘economy of giving’, after witnessing such behaviour in rural Africa.

There is much evidence of strenuous and discordant situations due to motivational variances. This subjects and exposes Maslow’s theory to the spotlight. One is left with no option but to question and test whether the theory works in alternate contexts. Such studies are remarkably low in number. As an example, in their multi-national study, Tay and Diener (2011) showed there is a weak alignment with Maslow’s thinking, but strong indication that societal conditions influence the sequencing of fulfilment of basic, security and psychosocial needs.

However, it seems Maslow’s concepts and theories have enjoyed more comfort than they deserve, not only in the contexts in which they were produced. We agree with Graham et al. (2015) that the underlying asymmetrical relations in the politics of knowledge production and dissemination is accelerated by a lopsided geography of information.

Bigirimana (2001) and Gibson (2011) have independently shown the distinct differences in motivation of people in post-independence leadership positions in Africa versus the motivation of the indigenous population. In previous works, van Stam (2013; 2014) showed the variance in African contexts (and motivation) within the academic realm and the importance and substantiality of orality. Further, in the field of activism, there is a whole range of literature depicting the colonisation effect of Western framing of realities (derived upon schema provided by Maslow, among others). For instance, from their Canadian setting, Alfred and Corntassel (2005) link human motivation with land, language, freedom, diet, and indigenous resurgence.

More than 10 years of Action Research in Southern Africa, in ever-evolving cycles of planning, action, observation and contemplation, provides the input for this paper to substantiate the incompatibility of Maslow’s thought within the indigenous African context. Observations took place during many different circumstances of the authors. These roles were mostly in parallel and sometimes consecutive:

- national and international academics, researchers, educators and professors
- technical director in a foreign-funded medical research institute

- advisors to leading individuals in professional institutes in Africa and further afield
- leaders and volunteers in a professional bodies
- social entrepreneurs and executive director of rural co-operative

We have endeavoured to unearth indigenous, practical motivations. Work focused on rural areas in Southern Africa (with a focus on Zambia) and less in the urban areas. With most of the African population living in the rural areas, views espoused in rural areas were regarded as the most significant and culturally grounded.

Sensitivity towards the enshrined forms of information and knowledge transfer (e.g. van Stam 2013), the collaborativity in communities (Matthee et al. 2007), and the interaction with local stakeholders (Krocze et al. 2013) constituted the research grounding within various social contexts (institutes), co-operative activities (practices) and human qualities (virtues). Each of these entities applies ethics models and acts upon moral judgments, informed by ethics based upon respective world-views. Ubuntu is an African philosophy of humanness that emphasises the virtues of sharing, peace, unity and harmony in society (Mawere and Mubaya 2014). It represents a view on self as in co-living with the other.

Ubuntu involves empathy and focuses on wholeness of the conglomerate, whether a household, family, or community of any sort. It acknowledges that facts are relational/contextual, and incorporate many components, and transfers everything into an embodiment in people (holism). Ubuntu is a metaphor that embodies the significance of human solidarity and stands explicitly against inequality or isolating individualism (van Stam 2014). Within Ubuntu, all interactions are oriented towards the common ground, the community, the family, the birthed relationships, and in relation to the physical land. The latter is congruent with African Science, where three facets of existence are taken into account: the physical, the spiritual, and the interaction between the two (Chimakonam 2012).

In indigenous African interactions, reality is approached equal to a *commons* (cf. Trancoso et al. 2015). The prime motivations for interactions are *relationships* and *community*. These can be witnessed during elaborate greetings and inquiries into family well-being, affirming respect and aiming to (re-)establish and confirm relationship on a continuous basis.

Our observations can be summarised through a list with an variations in emphasis

between an Ubuntu tradition and Western tradition, augmented from van Stam (2012c), dualistically presented in Table 1.

Ubuntu Tradition	Western Tradition
Relatio	Ratio
Who	What
Community	Individual
Responsibilities	Rights
Relationships	Goods
Character	Credentials
Member	Actor
Paradox	Consistency
History	Future
Orality	Literacy
Authority	Power
Proven	Emerging
Reactive	Proactive
Paradox	Consistency
Elaborate	Concise
Existence	Essential

Table 1: Emphasis dissimilarities in Ubuntu and Western tradition

Most analytical tools for cultural differences come from the seminal works of Hofstede, Hall, Kluckhohn, Strodtbeck, Carbaugh, and Trompenaars. It must be noted that all these experts emerged from a Western background. As the list of diverge emphasis in traditions (like Table 1) can be of any length in our diversified world, and will change over time, these kinds of lists basically show contemporary differences in cultural codings. For an explanation of underlying reasons, the enshrined norms and values should ideally be informed by indigenous sources. Such input is greatly needed, especially in assessment of the underlying structures, and their effects in the field of Human Motivation.

These inputs show how Maslow's Theory of Motivation does not align with, nor includes concepts of human motivation in an African setting. African epistemology, like Ubuntu, however does provide for such input. If a harmonized, globally valid Theory of Motivation would exist, we contend such can be deducted only through an intellectual journey allowing for diversity.

Findings in the African context

Nakazibwe (2015) shows how rational decision-making on priority needs by women farmers follows very different logics than the one provided in commodity chain thinking. This points to the need to look at how human motivation manifests itself in a gender. Nakazibwe shows how women prioritise a commodity, not because of an individual desire for profit that can be made but because of the access to group processes that it gives and the information, exchange, support mechanisms, and cultural approval derived from this. An example is pastoralist decision-making to sell title deeds after group land division because the land and cattle belongs to the pastoralists anyway so the value of the individual title deeds does not exist in this logic.

From the researchers' observations in the lived reality of Southern Africa, the following African components of Human Motivations can be derived, in no particular order:

1. Pursuit of relationships
2. Strengthening of community
3. Acknowledgement of authority
4. Sharing and avoidance of shame

It is fundamental to point out that absence of the satisfaction of these needs in an African perspective leads to inertia, which can be either active or passive. Active inertia is executed in non-actions, like withholding of – or denying access to – information, exclusion or ex-communication, while passive inertia includes numbing of expressions and/or actions which eventually leads to isolation.

In conformity with Maslow's reasoning for certain conditions which are immediate pre-requisites to needs satisfaction, the following constructive behaviours are observed in the African context:

1. Expressed permission, grounded in lasting relationships
2. Tangible production, with sustainable achievements through commendable actions in the community
3. Capacity development, building abilities in communities within existing structures of authority
4. Honourable representation, through recognition of wholesome conglomerate of

people, resources and ecology

Discussion

Communications and negotiations on commons are hampered by Western-centric mix of theories (among which is Maslow's pyramid), ethics models and their hermeneutic and existential interpretations. Murphy and Ellis (1996) in *"On the Moral Nature of the Universe"* describe a helpful layering of sciences, each layer building abstraction with the input from the layer below, or by piercing apart aspects of the levels above. The aforementioned scholars describe a Science of Ethics spanning the social and applied sciences. This model provides guidance on how to deal with a mix of ethical models that influence motivation for human behaviour emanating from different world views.

It is only recently in the West, in the late modern period (ca. 1900-1990) that the concept of pure individual power has emerged, that sanctifies the view that one can do as one likes with one's person and one's property (Murphy and Ellis 1996: 1596). This view has been adopted in - and subsequently propagated by - the West. It is this concept of power of the individual that is a precept in Maslow's thought. His thought emerges from a focus on the individual, and her/his agency, ultimately expressing him/herself in "a fullest (and healthiest) creativeness" ([Maslow 1943](#)). The authors observed that the approach to motivations framed within an individualistic view on the reason of activities (as proposed by Maslow) is unsuitable for understanding genuinely social processes like the African epistemology as set in Ubuntu which does not provide moral grounding for self-renunciating efforts.

General examples of a communal-agency are African sayings like "It takes a community to raise a child", implying that even for the most basic needs (the physiological needs in Maslow's reasoning), a balance is sought in agency vested in community and individuals. Therefore, a motivation to engender community can be seen as among the most basic needs. As Africa is an environment with abundance of resources (Unwin 2008), the fulfilment of primary needs is seen as a collaborative venture of communities, individuals and the spiritual realms.

The dominant Western view shown by Maslow represents an external influence in

proceedings, ethics and judgments in Africa. For instance, 'pure sciences' employ Maslow's contextually-loaded conceptions of human nature, such as assumptions about the intrinsic egoism of individuals, conceptions of human dignity, or more broadly, views on human good or human flourishing. Therefore, African practitioners' interaction with Western academics is hampered (van Stam 2014). Maslow's precepts and philosophy are not in line with the African precepts and philosophy as an African based epistemology recognises leading concepts of interdependence, interconnectedness, reconciliation, collectivism and solidarity. These concepts are inherently non-egoistic.

The African reality, and resulting 'pyramid' can be seen as perpendicular to Maslow's reasonings. Where he describes the freedom for the individual, for instance, for inquiry and expression, in the African context such freedom must be regarded from a community perspective. In Maslow's thinking, the outset is an individual (and her/his needs), after which the community could be seen as the total sum of the individuals it contains. From an indigenous African point of view, however, the outset starts with the community, after which an individual can be regarded as a particular derivative of the community.

The researchers observed that behaviour and characteristics can be well understood, developed, and evaluated within a social context. In many parts of Africa, however, these understandings with the social context are significantly different from those derived through a Western schema. What will count as a virtue rather than a vice or morally indifferent characteristic, however, is determined by the needs of social practices and by the location of those characteristics within the whole of the community's life story.

This discordant situation calls for diversified perspectives on appropriate means of interactions in the world, and guidance on misinterpretations of events. Maslov's theory leads to an approach that often regards human interaction as the negotiation of resources, as if all resources are owned by an individual entity and its dissemination needs to be pursued through a process of negotiation. In the African context, the process is mostly approached from a different perspective, as human interactions are foremost meant to establish relationships. When discussion on sharing of resources occurs, the perceived governing authority over the resource is considered to offer resource-sharing as a means of strengthening the relationship.

The result of the negation of the variance in human motivation is often personal and

economic damage, domination, and systematic oppression.

The absence of recognition of a large variety of motivations of human behaviour gives rise to domination by hegemonic (and individually oriented) power, which in turn fuels inequality and social injustice. In the interactions between the Western economic and its social (Maslow) view of realities, and African economic (Relatio) and social (Ubuntu) view of realities, the predatory view - where a win-lose situation is acceptable - seems to dominate in the present.

Conclusion

Each culture and subculture judges human behaviour according to its own norms and values. Maslow's theory of human motivation is a widely accepted theoretical framework which grounds the development of other motivational theories. These theories are presented to be universal and to apply everywhere. However, these academic frames are grounded in one particular set of cultures only: the Western ones. We show the theory is not applicable in many parts of Africa.

Our work shows that in many Africa settings, motivation is derived from the pursuit of relationships, the strengthening of community, the acknowledgment of authority, sharing of resources, and the avoidance of shame.

We conclude that Maslow's theory for Human Motivation does not represent a universal motivational theory. To facilitate better understanding of expectations and interpretations of realities, it is good to critique Maslow's thought by people embedded in non-Western contexts. It is equally important for those raised within Maslow's settings to understand the concepts of human motivation in other contexts and cultures.

This paper has demonstrated that while Maslow's theory might be considered seminal work, the theory is not applicable to many African contexts owing to the huge differences in ideology.

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