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MOVING BEYOND MASLOW
AN EXPLORATION OF MOTIVATION

Stuart Pritchard

www.roffeypark.com
Motivation = Maslow

I have come across Maslow's hierarchy of needs on at least four training courses. Like the Periodic Table and Newtonian mechanics, everyone knows that motivation works as Maslow said, don't they? Maybe not. Watson (1996) noted a tendency for business students to take theories at face value, labelling every problem with an easy explanation. This paper attempts not to emulate Watson's students, so in it I will explore and question a range of motivation theories and relate them to practice.

What is my current practice? I see it as being a catalyst for action and people development - hence the desire to understand motivation. I work as an engineering consultant – and spend a lot of time inspiring others to action and helping them learn, grow and embrace new challenges. Big civil engineering projects are never routine, and the staff involved often work away from the office. Additionally, they usually need to learn new skills, as projects will frequently present challenges they have not come across before. I therefore need to ensure people are engaged by their work, and learn as they go.

The dictionary defines motivation as “motivating force, incentive” and motive as “an incitement of will; a consideration or emotion that excites to action” (Chambers 2003). So a motive involves turning will into action, and motivation is the force that achieves this. Sometimes this is a conscious process; for example, my motivation for going to work is to pay my bills. Sometimes however, our motivation is unconscious – away from work I have long been motivated to write music, but I have no idea why.

Vroom & Deci suggest motivation has different meanings. In organisations, motivation often means getting people to do things, or dealing with the consequences of them not meeting expectations. Psychologists use the term more specifically, to mean what energises action, how action is directed, and to what extent action is under voluntary control (Vroom & Deci 1992). My intention is to explore motivation in the latter sense. I have excluded the influence of conditioning based on reward and punishment. Robertson et al (1992) point out that conditioned compliance explores observed behaviours, rather than the forces driving those behaviours. A behaviourist might say behaviour is all that matters, but my interest lies in how inner motivation works, rather than learned conditioning.

In this paper I will explore the major theories of motivation, their differences and similarities, and their relevance to practice. Beginning with the classic theories, I progress to some newer thinking in the area. In so doing I hope to convey a sense of developmental history - how academic theory in this area has changed over time.
Carl Jung believed that our motivation flows from a sort of collective unconscious, which he defined as two aspects of. The “instinct” is our natural impulse to action to fulfill our needs, whilst the “archetype” is what forms our awareness, intuition and self-understanding. For Jung, both processes were unconscious, and related to a collective unconscious beyond the individual, providing an innate or “natural” path to action appropriate to an individual (Hyde & McGuiness 2004).

Jung’s visits to America promoted interest in psychoanalysis there, and with the rise of Nazism, many psychoanalysts fled to America, such that by the end of World War Two the country was dominant in the field. Additionally, behaviourism was the academic basis of many university psychology departments at the time, and from the two fields - behaviourism and psychology - the humanist movement began to emerge. A catalyst figure in the movement was a New Yorker - named Abraham Maslow. Maslow was influenced by Jung’s ideas on transcendence, spiritual development and self-actualisation. His election to the presidency of the American Psychological Association helped confirm these ideas in mainstream thinking (Casement 2001).

Interestingly however, Jung’s ideas related to a collective unconscious which helps to determine the natural purpose of a person. Maslow appears to have individualised these, highlighting the development of individual efforts to satisfy needs, but without suggesting a root cause. There are echoes of Jung’s more collectivist European background and Maslow’s individualist American one. So, is the root of motivation individual or collective? Or both?

For me, Jung’s collectivist ideas around an unconscious natural purpose do seem to have relevance when one is able to be still long enough to notice one’s inner self and the directions which call to one. Many people have things they are motivated to do without apparent reward or purpose, but rather because it is what they are for some reason attracted to. Sinek (2009) makes this very point, when he argues that the world’s most successful companies are so because of the congruence between their purpose and their people.

Yet there are also individual motivations, the will to win in competitive situations, for example. As we shall see, Maslow frames his arguments from this more individualistic perspective, and dispenses with Jung’s collectivist roots for motivation. It therefore seems possible, even likely, that motivation is in some fashion a mix of our collective and individual identity, and just like that identity is not something we choose entirely of our own volition, but rather something that results from our interactions with the world.
Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is a staple of management courses. A pioneer of motivation research, Maslow suggested that humans are motivated to satisfy many needs. These range from basic physical needs for food and shelter, through to safety, the need for love, esteem, and self-actualisation (see Fig.1). His theory arranged these needs in a pyramid or hierarchy, with physical needs at the base, moving up through psychological and spiritual dimensions (Maslow 1943).

Fig. 1 Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow believed that self-actualisation was the top of his hierarchy, the pinnacle of all motivations. Similarly to Jung’s ideas regarding the natural purpose of an individual (Casement 2001), Maslow believed we all have an intrinsic purpose which motivates us, known as self-actualisation:

“A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man can be, he must be” (Maslow 1943)

The hierarchy makes it appear that for self-actualisation to occur the preceding needs of physiology, safety, love and esteem must be satisfied. As a musician however, I am sceptical of this hierarchical arrangement, since I can feel a need to make music even when my lower level needs are not fulfilled. Maslow himself was aware of such issues, suggesting it was unnecessary for one level of the hierarchy to be fully satisfied before progressing to the next. Instead he suggested, most people experience decreasing levels of satisfaction as they progress up the hierarchy, for example one might be 85% satisfied in physiological needs, 70% in safety needs, and 50% in love needs.

Nevertheless, Maslow asserts that man is a perpetually wanting animal (Maslow 1943). He views motivation to satisfy one set of needs as little more than a precursor to motivation to satisfy still more needs, in an endless cycle of wanting. He offers no evidence to support that assertion however, and from my own experience of meditation and mindfulness practice, I doubt whether it is true. When Maslow was writing consumerism was just emerging, and after the terrible privations of the war how could people be blamed for wanting? However I challenge whether wanting is mankind’s natural state, and therefore whether in fact there is a hierarchy of needs at all. Might it not be that these needs actually run in parallel, but different ones surface depending on the situation?

With regard to gratification of a need, Maslow is clear, a satisfied need is no longer a motivator and effectively ceases to exist (Maslow 1943). As we shall see, this is a contrasting view to Herzberg who maintained that the desire for what he called “hygiene factors” tends to increase (Sachau 2007).

Maslow himself was well aware of the potential shortcomings of his theory, and describes it as a “suggested” theory. He also notes that it is much easier to criticise aspects of a motivation theory, than to remedy them (Maslow 1943).

Others have criticised Maslow’s work for its reliance on questionable research methods. They also point to his view that hierarchies were not just relevant to motivation, but to wider society - those who had satisfied more basic needs forming democracies, whilst more primitive societies were lower down the evolutionary pyramid (I sense the influence of 1950s America strongly here) (Cooke et al 2005).

A criticism of mine regarding Maslow’s work stems from my own practice – it has never been clear how I can apply it. In spite of being taught the theory, it was never suggested to me how I could use it to motivate others.

Evidence against the hierarchical arrangement Maslow described also comes from Viktor Frankl’s account of life in a Nazi concentration camp. Frankl was a Viennese psychiatrist who spent almost three years in concentration camps during the war. His account makes very clear that the need for self-actualisation, meaning and purpose remained strong throughout his incarceration – a time when few of his lower order needs were met (Frankl 2011). Carl Rodgers is also very clear that no matter how deeply buried or obscured, the need for psychological growth or “self-actualisation” exists in everyone (Rodgers 2004). Herzberg played a part in the liberation of Nazi concentration camps (Herzberg 2003) and I wonder to myself whether this played any part in his questioning of Maslow’s work, the way that Frankl’s account has for me.

Dan Pink suggests that our distant ancestor’s motivations were survival based, consisting only of Maslow’s physiological level. As human society evolved however, social mechanisms emerged, and our motivations for socialisation and self-actualisation developed with them (Pink 2009). This sounds plausible, but is completely unproven. Cave paintings dating back 40,000 years appear to have an advanced social purpose, providing some basis to question Pink’s ideas, since hunter-gatherer tribes then were not so different in lifestyle to
the early humans Pink refers to. Nevertheless, his point that motivation has evolved and changed with us seems reasonable. Since our motivations can change over time, it seems reasonable that they may respond to cultural changes too. Where I part company with Pink is in his assertion that our ancestors lacked the capacity for higher motivations. Indeed on page 3 of his own book he cites evidence that rhesus monkeys will solve puzzles just for fun and of their own volition. This suggests that early humans would already have had higher order motivations, further questioning his ideas.

Sixty years after his work, it’s easy to run down Maslow. Yet he was the first to attempt a comprehensive theory of motivation, and he himself knew it wasn’t perfect. The America Maslow worked in was pre civil rights, radically Christian and fervently anti-communist as it recovered from the Second World War – and for me his thinking was heavily influenced by that environment. However he put himself out to help us understand ourselves, and remains a seminal figure in motivation research.

Douglas McGregor was a contemporary of Maslow’s and was influenced by him. He observed in his consulting work that there were differences in approach between managers, which appeared to be based on differing assumptions about workers. McGregor described these “theory X and theory Y” assumptions (McGregor 1957):

**THEORY X**
- Workers are lazy by nature, working as little as possible
- Workers dislike responsibility and prefer to be led
- Workers are indifferent to organisational needs, focussing only on their own
- Workers resist change

**THEORY Y**
- The potential for development and responsibility is naturally present in workers
- Workers are willing to direct their behaviour towards fulfilling organisational goals
- Workers are not by nature resistant to change

McGregor’s work was not directly a theory of motivation; his aim was more at management approaches than personal motivations. It is pertinent to such theories however, as a consequence of the different approaches likely to stem from theory X or theory Y beliefs on the part of managers. McGregor believed that human behaviour was predictable and rational:

>“Human behaviour is predictable, but, as in physical science, accurate prediction hinges on the correctness of underlying theoretical assumptions” (McGregor 2006 p.13).

Though not untypical of his time, I do not subscribe to his positivist outlook, though I of course have the benefit of half a century of additional motivation research to draw on.

McGregor points out that theory X assumptions result in a command and control structure, where workers are treated more like children than adults. He further describes how the assumptions a manager has, and the way they manage as a consequence, can result in workers manifesting the behaviours that the manager assumes. In other words, if you treat someone as though they are lazy and dislike responsibility, that is how they will tend to behave. There are echoes here of one of the main criticisms of Maslow’s work – that it ignores the effect of socialisation (Routledge 2011). Since humans exist as social creatures, motivation is at least in part a function of our interactions with others, a point that McGregor makes, but Maslow does not.

Lewis picks up this idea – that social interactions affect motivation – something I will discuss later. He also asks why, after work places have been around so long, motivation is not better understood. His answer is that workers and work places do not share the same goals. Whilst profit maximisation is often the organisation’s goal, workers themselves have a different agenda – one associated more with autonomy and artistry (Lewis 2011). This observation amplifies something noticeable about McGregor’s work, that little seems to have been done to study what in his theories is cause and what is effect.

In practice perhaps both approaches can be useful. Some circumstances and cultures appear to use command and control successfully, while others thrive more on theory Y approaches. With regard to creating long-term motivation however, I have always found theory Y the more helpful of the two.
Basing his work on a major study of accountants and engineers in Pittsburgh, Herzberg developed motivation-hygiene theory. Its key feature is that it separates factors which prevent demotivation (adequate salary, pleasant environment, fair treatment) from those which actively motivate workers (personal growth, sense of contribution, opportunity for advancement), (Herzberg et al 2003).

Herzberg traces his motivation hygiene theory back to the most basic needs of man. From Taylorism he charts the changes in outlook which began with the idea of mechanistic rationality, through to an understanding that people are in fact driven at least as much by irrational psychological needs (Herzberg 1966). For me, this is a watershed moment in motivation theories, beginning a movement away from rational positivism and towards more humanistic ideas.

Herzberg also discussed workers being treated as children by managers, without mentioning Transactional Analysis (de Board 1998) he implies rebellious-child critical-parent interfaces. He also discusses how if you treat people this way, you’ll tend to get that kind of a reaction (Herzberg 1966). In so doing, he begins to lay the groundwork for the social aspects of motivation.

Herzberg points out that motivation hygiene theory reflects the tension between two basic human needs, pain avoiding and growth seeking (Herzberg et al 2003). Thus ideas dating back to Jung, of human psychological growth and higher purpose as motivators remain strong in his work. But what exactly did he mean by psychological growth?

Herzberg suggests this consists of six themes (Herzberg 1966):

1. Knowing more – learning or mastering a subject or skill
2. Seeing more relationships in what we know – the ability to link concepts together
3. Creativity
4. Being effective in ambiguous situations
5. Maintaining individuality under group pressure – called “individuation”
6. Real growth (which we would call self-awareness)

In practice I have noticed how hygiene factors do not tend to motivate – a salary increase for example doesn’t seem to result in greater long-term motivation. Conversely promotion prospects and recognition have worked much better, so my practice experience lends credence to Herzberg’s ideas.

Herzberg’s work introduces the idea that motivation is more than the absence of demotivation, and can be driven by irrational needs, as well as rational ones. He nonetheless builds on preceding work, continuing the concept of different “layers” of motivational needs. In attempting to unpack what is meant by “psychological growth” he makes an important contribution, and he includes the concept of self-identity in motivation. In general however he remains silent on the social aspects of motivation, the systemic interactions which compose our working systems, and their impact on our motivation. It is to that area we shall now turn.
Gray (2004) makes the point that organisations are systems, and as such have characteristics which can’t be found in each of their component parts. How then does the motivation of each person combine to affect the organisation as a whole? Are there any social aspects of motivation, for instance could team spirit be considered a kind of group or organisational motivation?

Whilst some see teams as positive motivators (e.g. Katzenback & Smith 1993) Lewis identifies some important motivational drawbacks. In teams, workers subjugate some level of autonomy and personal mastery to the needs of the team as a whole. Flexibility requires interchangeability in team roles, with mechanisms such as cross-functional training reducing workers sense of autonomy and individuality – with consequent negative impacts on their motivation (Lewis 2011).

Additionally, the Ringelmann effect (Kravitz & Martin 1986) has demonstrated that people put in less effort as part of teams and that “social loafing” (Karau & Williams 1993) can be a motivational downside of teamwork. In “social loafing” some team members put in less effort, relying on colleagues to make-up the shortfall. The closeness of social relationships seems to be key here. Research suggests social loafing is associated with groups of acquaintances and that teams composed of close friends and team mates don’t do it (Williams et al 1993). So it seems the influence of teams on motivation is a complex area, and depends to a significant extent on how people choose to identify with the group.

Where a task is important to some members of a group, the threat of poor performance can counteract the social loafing tendency. Those who place a high value on the task and don’t trust their colleagues to pull their weight can compensate for the loafers (Karau & Williams 1991). Kerr however noted “the sucker effect” whereby individuals who would not naturally tend to loaf can do so under conditions where they are surrounded by those who are inclined to. In so doing they avoid carrying the whole group on their shoulders (Kerr 1983). Oddly then, the motivation of some can be increased to compensate for the lack of motivation of others (social compensation), at other times more motivated people can be drawn into loafing by the effect of the group (the sucker effect).

These ideas strongly suggest a social aspect to motivation. They also suggest that a combination of task value, group interaction and self-identity have a significant impact on individual motivation. Thinking of my own practice, I have noticed this - where team cohesion is strong, motivation is strong.

Wagner (1995) notes the effect of people’s individualist or collectivist beliefs on their motivation to co-operate in groups, perhaps unsurprisingly finding a collectivist orientation more conducive to group work. Of more interest for this paper however, is the idea that who we are and what we believe affects our motivation for a task – or at least our preferences for how it is carried out.
Self-identity aspects of motivation

Some suggest that motivation is at its heart an issue of self-identity (Haslam et al 2000; Ellemers et al 2004). They point to a number of difficulties with the idea of self-actualisation as the pinnacle of a set of human needs, among them the lack of consensus regarding how different needs relate to each other, and the psychological processes that operate to trigger them. Haslam et al argue that social identity is a more important factor in motivation. For example we may identify ourselves as separate to others and focus only on our own needs, but where we identify ourselves with a group or organisation, we are motivated also to comply with its norms and meet its needs.

Haslam et al essentially argue that our motivation is a function of who we believe ourselves to be, and that in fact there is nothing magical about self-actualisation in terms of its ability to motivate us. They also suggest that theory X and theory Y assumptions are a function of social identity, theory Y arising from a shared identity “us” and theory X arising from differing identities “us & them”.

I am inclined to agree with Haslam et al in their premise that the question “who am I? ” is a key determinant of what I am motivated to do, because I have seen how my values and beliefs influence my own behaviour. For example I am not motivated to steal, because my sense of self-identity views morality as important. I disagree with Haslam that self-actualisation is unimportant however, because my life experience suggests to me that personal growth does motivate me, indeed it is part of the reason I explore subjects like motivation!

Ellemers et al suggest people resist organisational changes when they view them as undermining their professional identity. In other words, one possible motivation for resisting change is that it negatively impacts our sense of self. They also point out that the length of time someone has belonged to a group can influence their motivations, newcomers being motivated to behave in ways that underline their membership, older members tending to resist (Ellemers et al 2004). This broadens the influence of motivation, from something associated with taking action, to the wider issue of how people respond to change, leadership and challenges in life.

Ellemers at al also suggest that motivation, and in particular the impact of the socialised sense of self, is also relevant to leadership. Their view is that the ability of a leader to create a sense of shared identity is an important determinant of their ability to energise others to action. (Ellemers et al 2004). The implication is that where leaders and followers have a shared sense of identity, followers are motivated as a result of that commonality, and that motivation is less conditional than where shared identity does not exist. Where there is no shared sense of identity, motivation is more conditional on specific rewards and leader behaviour.

So leaders who have an identity which is too separate from the group find it harder to motivate people than those who share some common identity. Goffee & Jones (2006) make a similar point, and empirical research has demonstrated that differences such as large bonuses for leaders have a negative effect on follower motivation, by differentiating them from the social identity of the group (Haslam et al 1998). Based on personal experience, I would not disagree.
Does motivation actually matter?

In my work I have seen excellent financial results produced by employees who are not especially motivated - though much of this was achieved by efficient repetition of routine tasks. It is also true however that some of the most profitable projects are run by managers with a talent for motivating others, often by establishing a shared social commitment to a common goal. Gray states:

"if managers are to be able to influence the way their organisations behave – and so exercise some control over organisational performance – it’s essential that they first understand the nature of organisations as social units" (Gray 2004 p.ix)

Although I currently work with few managers who would fit that description, I have seen it in practice. The more complex and diverse the project, the more necessary skilful motivation seems to become - because it is harder to use command & control approaches, individual networking and initiative become crucial to success. I have also seen skilful managers create motivation by ensuring staff feel part of a team, so my own experience is a mixed bag.

Herzberg describes the “KITA” or Kick In The “pants”, which achieves compliance but not commitment. It gets the job done, not as well as true motivation, but done enough to allow the manager to move on to the next more pressing priority, in an endless cycle of partial attention and compliance (Herzberg 2003). Perhaps because some engineers lack people skills, I have seen this method used a lot, but I have also seen much more collaborative efforts to create a win-win with staff.

More broadly, the creative industries in the UK are worth around £70bn, or 6% of UK Gross Domestic Product, and growing (BBC 2014). As countries move towards the “knowledge economy”, the creativity of what is produced becomes the value generator, not simply the efficiency with which it is produced. As such, organisations which facilitate motivation and inspire creativity may well have a competitive advantage.

Some even suggest that the availability of capital is no longer the limiting resource for organisations. For many developing economies the ability to absorb capital is more of a problem, that is, the ability to apply capital to useful spending (Mody & Murshid 2004). Even in developing economies then, creativity and invention are as important as capital in producing useful outcomes. This suggests that motivation is important to all economies, not just “knowledge” ones.

Pink suggests that management is out of date in assuming that its main purpose is to monitor and control employees. He views it as much more about creating the conditions in which employees can thrive, and that to the extent we are passive and disengaged, we have become so by learning. Pink’s view is that motivation can best be produced by providing opportunities for autonomy, mastery (learning) and self-actualisation (Pink 2009). Similarly, Gray (2004) makes the point that almost everyone wants to do something – the challenge for organisations is to match the things they need done, with the things people want to do.

The common link that runs through all motivational theories is that motivation matters. It is worth understanding. My experience in practice demonstrates that - making the effort to motivate can make a difference, and understanding how to motivate people is worth the effort.
Early work on motivation rested to a significant extent on the idea that people are rational creatures, who work to maximise their returns, as a 1968 research paper describes:

“The basic premise of this research is that an individual’s conscious ideas regulate his actions” Locke (1968).

Later theories of motivation take aspects of socialisation and self-concept into account, as Shamir (1991) describes. He also points out that motivation can operate at different levels simultaneously, in contrast to the traditional view that motivation is a single entity or sequential hierarchy.

Others make the point that in sport we are not motivated simply by success, but rather by a sense of challenge. If all we wanted to do was win, we’d just play people much worse than us, but we don’t. We play the best opposition we can, because we find motivation in overcoming challenge (Gallway 1974).

Motivation is central to our lives in so many ways that researching it leaves me with far more questions than answers. It has been noted that the research is somewhat disparate, with theory and practice often pursued separately (Heppner et al 1984), and for me the field is yet to coalesce; however our sense of self and its relationship to the world appears to be a unifying theme. From this perspective one fascinating question I lack space to explore is this;

Organisations want motivation, but they also want compliance and predictability. Are these goals actually compatible? Is it possible to be fully motivated whilst you are pursuing another’s agenda?

Motivation is a complex area, which is difficult to understand fully since it springs from many wells. It is partly psychological, partly physical. It contains aspects of our emotion, our cognition, and our social interaction. Part of it is conscious, part of it unconscious, it is partly pro-active and partly reactive. For me, it mirrors the complexities of us as organisms, and is at the core of who we are both as humans and as individuals.

So what changes in practice as a result of this knowledge? The main change for me is moving more towards socialisation and self-identity as motivational factors. Creating a sense of inclusion and trying to ensure that everyone has a stake in team success might be time consuming, but it can provide opportunities to incorporate team membership into member self-identity, which will help motivation. Greater consciousness of social loafing and social compensation can help us be watchful for this in teams, and help us understand why it happens when we see it. Lastly, motivation is complex, contextual and individual. Even the world’s best leaders cannot always influence it, so we should understand there are limits to what we can do to create it.

In my view, there remains a great deal of work needed to understand motivation. Of all the thoughts we have, why do we act on the ones that we do? How do we choose? And how does how we choose change over time, or in response to stimuli?

To me these seem profound questions, which are not only at the core of motivation, but also, when taken in their totality seem to me to ask “what is my personality and my being in the world composed of” or put another way “who am I?”. 
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