November 2012

Henry Dixon

Psychology Independent: Motivation & Emotion

Mr. Spence and Ms. Batty

The Roots of Fear

According to Abraham Maslow, humans are motivated to do specific things according to a hierarchy of needs. The physiological needs that humans experience (e.g. hunger and thirst) are paramount and surpass all latter classes of needs. However, while hunger and thirst are noted to be at the top of this hierarchy, Maslow notes that a lack of oxygen would supersede any hunger, which suggests that perhaps within each section there is a sub-hierarchical structure at work.

Following basic physiological needs is the need for safety and feeling secure. Subsequently is the need for belongingness and love, the need to avoid loneliness and to be accepted in a community. Following this is where the needs become more deeply philosophical, although they are all arguably on a philosophical continuum following the basic physiological needs: humans have a need of esteem, the feeling of recognition and respect from peers. Thereafter is the need of self-actualization, the need to live up to one's potential, before finally the need for self-transcendence: the need to find meaning. Not unlike Jean-Piaget with his work in development, Maslow makes a vague attempt to attribute the later needs to particular years of one's life in the course of psychological development.

Although not the entirety of emotion, fear serves as a good example of emotion in the context of psychology because of its relatively absolute nature (i.e. it's easier to tell if you or someone else is afraid than if they are disgusted). Outside of this reading, there were two instances wherein the nature of fear in the context of psychology came into my consciousness (perhaps a manifestation of the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon), which surprised me. GQ magazine discussed fear (albeit tritely) and purported that the amygdala was the root of all fear, and that fear was controlled within this section of the brain. The author lamented that we were unable to target specific memories within the amygdala, thereby controlling fear, because this specific tact would allow for perhaps the ability to erase fears.

Within a few days of my reading this article, NPR reported an (very slightly more scientific) article on the very same topic. However, NPR included current research on the subject, and Elizabeth Phelps, a professor of Psychology at New York University presented the findings of her team. In an experiment reminiscent of that of Ivan Pavlov, researchers linked a neutral memory with a mild shock using techniques exhibited by classical conditioning. The researchers found that they could actually remove the memory using information procured from other research done in animals involving specific drugs injected into the amygdala. Interestingly, this is precisely what the GQ author yearned for, and now research is being done upon both animals and humans regarding the very topic.