Alan Zhang

15.341 Response Paper

Class 2: Motivation

I’m not convinced with the notion that motivation operates in accordance to a linear tiering of needs. To rank some needs higher in worth than others, either because they are more basic or because they take precedent once basic needs have been satisfied, as these papers attempt to do, is a concern for me. One must be so bold as to define for all humans what ought to be considered basic needs. This is presumptuous and leads to a decontextualized way of treating people that is hazardous.

[1. Most interesting single point or insight]

This linear tier of needs is at the core of Maslow (1943). “The basic human needs are organized into a hierarchy of relative prepotency”, except, as Maslow cautions later on, when it is not. In fact, his own list of caveats suggest that more often than not this proposed hierarchy of prepotency actually does not apply. For instance, he quibbles about the “degrees of fixity”, acknowledges “reversals”, admits that one “experiences sheer life-and-death hunger only by accident and then only a few times through his entire life”, hedges that there are other factors and “determinants”, recognizes that “expressive” behaviors may dominate goal-directed behavior, and confesses that he does not account for the great variation due to “cultural specificities”, “personal traits”, or social conditions. Moreover, Maslow appends onto the main hierarchy another, noncontiguous set of needs which includes what he calls ‘preconditions’ and ‘capacities’ and ‘desires’ that are to be thought of as adjacent to ‘needs’ but have a ‘degree of closeness’ to the basic needs. “Once these desires are accepted for discussion, we see that they too form themselves into a small hierarchy in which the desire to know is prepotent over the desire to understand” (384). Given all this baggage of exceptions and addendums, where is the parsimony? Why bother diffusing this seemingly simple hierarchical form into the public consciousness if its predictions do not hold in real life, if it does not explain actual situations? I think that this grand theory has achieved a lot as a rhetorical and political tool for justifying certain ‘deprivations’, ‘provisions’, and ‘gratifications’, to use McGregor’s terms.

While it may be the case that at any given moment, at least in the span of minutes or hours, a certain need for say recognition or food or safety takes precedence above other needs in the mind of an individual, it seems on the whole unrealistic that people are motivated by only needs of a single category. Rather, what explains the link between a need and the immediacy of action taken to satisfy that need is not its inherently higher or lower value but its salience. An emergency is urgent, I think, regardless of whether a threat is to the physical person or his social/virtual persona. Saying that this sort of reaction is motivated implies choice, but how much choice is there in compulsory action? Immediate needs prompt immediate resolution. It may be an immediate need to quiet starvation (food) or to put out a fire (safety) or to intervene in irreversible attacks on one’s reputation (esteem). Assuming, as Maslow does, that one is not typically starving but merely has an appetite, and that one is rarely ever in peril but may occasionally feel unsafe, and that one is hardly ever at risk of being a pariah or untouchable but only ever in disfavor, this ranking of needs seems to have little predictive value. One would satisfy any need regardless of its category if it was urgent. The reaction would be immediate if the threat was immediately decapacitating or debilitating. Sociology does not suddenly become important only once physiology is satisfied. In real life, in organizational settings, this hierarchy collapses, and all needs are equally deserving to be met.

I wonder what the appeal is of this idealized formulation, considering that its hierarchy model of needs is not representative of any person’s lived experience. It has mainly symbolic value I think. It legitimizes a hegemonic myth that some resources are to be valued higher than others. Coincidentally, it is suggested that the immaterial, noneconomic provisions are prized (of greater value) over the material, basic, digestible, wearable ones (which because they satisfy more basic needs are of lower value). Maslow promotes the idea that “a want that is satisfied is no longer a want.” Once met at some basic level, we are safe to ignore and neglect its provisions. Maslow continues: “The organism is dominated and its behavior organized only by unsatisfied needs. If hunger is satisfied, it becomes unimportant in the current dynamics of the individual”. One can then be led to think that because a person is not in immediate bodily danger and not starving, that the person is not motivated by safety or food as much as they would be by high-order, more abstract needs, like self-actualization and freedom to express. But as I said earlier, I think all needs are equally deserving to be met, and this model of motivation gives management a way to unilaterally devalue some needs strategically and exploitatively.

This theory of a hierarchy of needs leads some people to take an absurd self-congratulatory perspective that justifies and promotes coercive management practices. “By making possible the satisfaction of low-level needs, management has deprived itself of the ability to use as motivators the devices on which conventional theory has taught it to rely – rewards, promises, incentives, or threats and other coercive devices” (McGregor, 1957: pp 11). It is irresponsible I think for one to conclude this, that because management is paying its dues in keeping workers alive, sufficiently fed, and sufficiently safe, that these “direction and controls are essentially useless in motivating people” (11). McGregor (1957) imports Maslow’s rhetoric to justify this organizational thinking: “Man’s needs are organized in a series of levels, a hierarchy of importance. A satisfied need is not a motivator of behavior… The carrot and stick theory does not work at all once man has reached an adequate subsistence level and is motivated primarily by higher needs… Except as you are deprived of it, it has no appreciable motivating effect upon your behavior” (pg 9). Not motivating at all? No appreciable motivating effect? I would love to see the data to support that claim.

*[4. My thought or question to discuss in class]*

Maslow’s symbolic model of a tiered status of needs can serve certain agendas when misapplied. For instance, even though the hierarchy was originally specified at the individual level in specific moments of urgent need, its logic can be carried abroad and used to administer careers and entire classes of workers. In managing workers and careers, and when designing institutions and establishing policies, surely all needs are relevant, and need simultaneous consideration. The scale and scope and diversity expands. However, people who accept this fanciful and simplistic hierarchy model of needs and provisions may be led to assume that one can simply trade off supposedly low-value provisions for higher-value benefits. When ‘lower’ order needs are assumed met, regardless of the reality, managers may feel basic provisions are no longer their responsibility to cater. Not just at specific moments, but ever. Rather, they may feel warranted to discard economic and security motivators for more ‘fulfilling’ freedoms. For instance, so many of today’s contract, gig, and platform workers are exploited by this rationale, their job insecurity and dismal pay justified by alternative compensation schemes that reward flexible schedules and greater employment mobility/autonomy. It is frustrating for me to see people be financially undercompensated, and put in dangerous and unhealthy work conditions, while management has taken it upon themselves to decide that task choice freedom and job mobility are worth more than and are substitutable for security, safety, health, and well-being.

The Festinger & Carlsmith (1959) article is not relevant to the above discussion so I’ll give separate attention here to it.

[1. Most interesting single point or insight]

* + “If a person is induced to do or say something which is contrary to his private opinion, there will be a tendency for him to change his opinion so as to bring it into correspondence with what he has done or said. The larger the pressure the weaker the tendency.”
  + It seems that one can be committed to defending and spreading a belief that, at least at some point, one did not take to be true or honest. More than that, the reversal may be authentic, not subterfuge or deceptive but reflective of an actual cognitive shift that has taken place to remedy dissonance. This expands the meaning of the phrase “everyone has a price” to suggest that inducements of a certain amount can ‘purchase’ not only voiced assent but also actual agreement. Interestingly, the payment does not need to be one of economic value (money), but can also be of moral value. In this experiment, the moral value took the form of recognition that the experiment is scientifically important.

[2. Improve on research]

* + Were I to repeat the experiment, I would manipulate the affiliation of co-conspirators. I would assign different experimenters to administer the instructions (to tell the next subject that the game is fun) and collect the survey response (rate the fun of the game). I suspect that there is some relational effect confounding the original results of this study. The test subject may feel that he/she is conspiring with the experimenter in the shared ploy of deceiving the next subject, the sucker. If the test subject has no reason to believe that the person asking how fun it was has any affiliation with the person requesting that the fun be promoted, the $1 hush money might not carry the same symbolic meaning. One could use different people, different settings, or even better, separate to the two tasks by a few days, to separate the affiliations.

[3. Applied to organizational context – I wonder if similar effects of compliance result from digital records of dissonance. A history of discrepant and contradictory beliefs persist in computational memory, and would those statements, chats, emails, posts and publications lead to similar dissonance-reducing cognitive reversals?