



# Maslow: man interrupted: reading management theory in context

Maslow: man  
interrupted

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to build on recent work in the field of management and historiography that argues that management theorizing needs to be understood in its historical context.

**Design/methodology/approach** – First, the paper attempts to show how a steady filtering of management theory and of the selection and work of management theorists lends itself to a narrowly focused, managerialist, and functionalist perspective. Second, the paper attempts to show how not only left-wing ideas, but also even the rich complexity of mainstream ideas, have been “written out” of management accounts. The paper explores these points through an examination of the treatment of Abraham Maslow in management texts over time.

**Findings** – The paper’s conclusion is a simple one: management theory – whether mainstream or critical – does a disservice to the potential of the field when it oversimplifies to a point where a given theory or theorist is misread because sufficient context, history, and reflection are missing from the presentation/dissemination.

**Originality/value** – This paper highlights the importance of reading the original texts, rather than second or third person accounts, and the importance of reading management theory in the context in which it was/is derived.

**Keywords** Management history, Gender, Culture

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

A cogent argument has been made elsewhere for the importance of historiography in management research (Kieser, 1994; Rowlinson and Procter, 1999) and, more specifically, for understanding management theory and management theorists in context. Mills and Helms Hatfield (1998), for example, in their examination of the North American business textbook, demonstrate an almost total neglect of the socio-political context in which management theory is discussed. Following on this line, Cooke, Mills, and Kelley (Cooke *et al.*, 2005; Mills *et al.*, 2002) have explored the relationship between socio-political context – namely the Cold War – and the development of management theory. Cooke (1999) has also revealed how, in the ahistorical processes of presenting and disseminating management thought leftwing ideas have been “written out”.



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In this paper we build on that collective work in two ways. First, we attempt to show how a steady filtering of management theory and of the selection and work of management theorists lends itself to the narrowly focused, managerialist, and functionalist perspective that Burrell and Morgan (1979) held up to review some 25 years ago. Second, following Cooke (1999), we attempt to show how not only leftwing ideas, but also even the rich complexity of mainstream ideas has been written out of most management accounts. We explore these points through an examination of the treatment of Abraham Maslow in management texts over time.

Our conclusion is a simple one. Management theory – whether mainstream or critical – does a disservice to the potential of the field where it oversimplifies to a point where a given theory or theorist is misread because sufficient context, history, and reflection are missing from the presentation/dissemination.

### **Why Maslow?**

Certainly we could have taken a number of management theorists or theories to illustrate our central theme of the importance of reading in context. Kurt Lewin is one obvious example. Despite Lewin's significant contribution to management theory (Cooke, 1999; Marrow, 1969; Mills *et al.*, 2002) his work is often reduced to little more than a simple line-drawing illustrating “unfreezing-changing-refreezing” as a process of organizational change. On occasion a business textbook will reference Lewin's work with groups of boys on leadership (Lewin *et al.*, 1939), before the textbook moves on to more “advanced” theories. The young business student could hardly be blamed for assuming that Lewin was indeed a facile and outmoded thinker. And what about Max Weber? If anything, Weber has fared worse than most. Not only has his work all but disappeared from recent textbooks, but also when it does appear he is more often than not presented quite inappropriately as the inventor and/or prophet of bureaucracy, rather than its sociological detractor (see, for example, Lamond, 1990). Beyond Lewin and Weber there are many theorists that we could have chosen to exemplify our argument. We have chosen Maslow because of the continued and widespread interest in his work. As we indicate below, Maslow's work continues to inform a vast range of business problems from customer relations management (CRM) to motivation. We have also chosen Maslow because of the range and complexity of his work and the limited extent to which that is explored in management and organizational theory.

It should be said that our focus on Maslow is also an outcome of pre-existing choices that have been made by numerous management theorists who selected Maslow's work above that of many other theorists in the field. This raises the interesting question of how do certain theories or theorists get selected to occupy the stage of worthy management subjects? That is a paper in itself. A recent survey of North American business textbooks found that certain theories (such as equity theory, total quality management, and business process reengineering) were highlighted in the business textbook almost immediately after the initial research was introduced in the management literature, while others (particularly selected feminist theories/theorists) were either completely ignored or took several years to get cited in the mainstream business textbook: Acker and van Houten's (1974) gendered analysis of the Hawthorne Studies, for example, despite its publication in the *Administrative Science Quarterly*, was virtually ignored by the business textbook for close to 25 years (Mills, 2004).

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As far as we can ascertain at this stage, Maslow appears to have been introduced to the business textbook in North America by Davis (1957). Davis, who was to become President of the Academy of Management (AoM) in 1964, refers to Maslow's work in a chapter on the "Mainsprings of motivation". Under the heading "Priority of needs", Davis (1957, p. 40) states:

Psychologists recognise that needs have a certain priority. As the more basic needs are satisfied, a person then seeks the higher needs. If his basic needs are not met, they claim priority, and efforts to satisfy the higher needs must be postponed. A need priority of five levels is established by A. H. Maslow. These needs are:

1. Basic physiological needs
2. Safety from external danger
3. Love, affection and social activity
4. Esteem and self-respect
5. Self-realization and accomplishment.

In the 1957 edition Davis only references Maslow's (1943) paper on "A theory of human motivation". In subsequent editions Davis (1967) also references Maslow's (1954) book on *Motivation and Personality*.

Interestingly, when Ralph C. Davis (the 1948 AoM President) and Allan C. Filley (Davis and Filley, 1963) refer to Maslow's needs theory, they draw from Keith Davis' work and position Maslow as someone who informs the work of Keith Davis. In a discussion of "Executive Leadership", Davis and Filley (1963, p. 61) argue that leaders have to take account of the fact that "human beings have a priority of needs which they seek to satisfy on the job and off. This priority of needs, as reported by Keith Davis [is] based on psychological research by A. H. Maslow . . ."

In contrast to later representations of Maslow's work by other management theorists (including Keith Davis), Davis and Filley (1963) comment:

While the exact order of priority may vary somewhat between persons, the above catalogue of needs represents the normal order of priority for most people.

This is far from the notion of a "hierarchy" of "needs". Neither Keith Davis (1957) nor Ralph Davis (Davis and Filley, 1963) refer to "self actualization" as the highest order need.

### **A man and his triangle: the enigma that is Maslow**

It is clear from various accounts of Maslow that his work was very complex and can be read in a number of ways. Certainly he was a complex thinker. He garnered early interest from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for signing an open appeal to the "Platform Committee of the Republican and Democratic Parties" of 1952 to repeal the Internal Security (McCarran) Act that effectively made the Communist Party and any government-designated "communist front" organizations illegal (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1954-1968). On the other hand, Maslow was also found in the forefront of those condemning anti-war demonstrators during the Vietnam War: Maslow argued that the anti-war demonstrators should be locked up and the key thrown away (Cooke *et al.*, 2005).

In terms of gender politics Friedan (1963) devotes over 14 pages to Maslow's "thought provoking" theories of sexuality in her now classic feminist work, *The Feminine Mystique*. The feminist analysis of Maslow's work by Cullen (1992, 1997), on

the other hand, finds his work deeply gendered and dismissive of women. Furthermore, while Maslow was concerned that his theories make a broad contribution to humankind there is more than enough evidence that he was happy to lend himself to management concerns with productivity through motivational manipulations (Hoffman, 1988).

A sampling of Maslow's work reveals an interest in learning, dominance, sexual behavior, hierarchy in pairs and in groups, psychic illness, leadership and personality, self-esteem, destructiveness, intelligence, holistic thinking, psychological needs, self-actualization, motivation, aesthetics, power relationships, personal development, creativity, human nature, culture, and "humanistic education" (for an extensive list of Maslow's publications see Hoffman (1988, pp. 343-8)). All of these issues have much to tell us about organizational behavior yet it is Maslow's work on motivation, and only a small part at that, which has made its way into business education by way of the textbook.

In the next sections of the paper we will review selected areas of Maslow's work and thinking to reveal the complexity of his research and the implications for organizational analysis.

### Reading Maslow

Abraham Maslow was a psychologist who, over a number of years, developed and refined a general theory of human motivation. According to Maslow, humans have five sets of needs that are arranged in a hierarchy, beginning with the most basic and compelling needs (Johns and Saks, 2005, p. 139).

Surveying 120 of the most widely used organizational behavior textbooks used in North American universities in the last 25 years we find that most contain a paragraph much like the one written above. In essence, textbook production has reduced more than 50 years of Maslow's scholarly research and writing to one simple theory of motivation. The received view of Maslow has become embodied in his popular and widely known hierarchy of needs as represented by an innocuous triangle, which has been reproduced near mindlessly by scholars, educators and practitioners over the last 50 years. This tradition of use continues in our educational practices to this day (Johns and Saks, 2005; McShane, 2004; Robbins and Langton, 2003). Indeed, as Cullen (1997, pp. 355-6) expands, Maslow's "hierarchy of needs is ubiquitous in management education and theory [and is . . .] so pervasive that it has almost become invisible".

#### *The ubiquity of the triangle*

Undoubtedly, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, as depicted by a small triangle, is the piece of work most often attributed to him. When asking a group of students or practitioners to identify a theory of motivation, one is hard pressed to find an answer other than the hierarchy of needs. Korman (1974, p. 248) attributes the popularity of Maslow's Hierarchy to the "times" (e.g. 1960s), the humanistic, self-actualization thrust in psychology, and the "almost intuitive common-sense approach" proffered by the triangle. Others attribute the popularity and wide acceptance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to the fact that it "substantially reflects realities in the business world" (McFarland, 1964, p.524) or its apparent "face-validity" from the practitioner's perspective (Rausch *et al.*, 2002).

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The use of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs pervades an incredibly wide range of literatures. In a veritable smorgasbord of representation, it is found in the journals of almost all of the social disciplines, in the media and popular press, and in the trade and practitioner magazines. Maslow's hierarchy has been adapted and incorporated in to a broad range of theoretical or practical applications and the scope and scale of the hierarchy's use and application covers an amazingly wide range of topics.

A cursory review of the latest academic and practitioner publications reveals its use to guide the implementation of CRM systems (Gentle, 2003) or to explain why money is an insufficient motivating tool for information systems (IS) professionals (Santodus, 2004). It is being used to support various managerial perspectives for change (Lucey *et al.*, 2004), or to explain why industrial societies have ceased to use certain manufacturing and materials practices (Luke, 2004). It is a theory used to explicate the potential results of shifting immigrant demographics and the subsequent impact on a nation's workforce culture (Nicholson-Lord, 2004), or to theoretically distinguish between cultural populations in psychological studies (Kickul *et al.*, 2004) and motivational differences (Kuo and Chen, 2004). It has been used as a heuristic for the comparison of the main streams of literature concerning corporate reputation (Berens and von Riel, 2004), or even in an attempt to lower recidivism in convicted felons (Jones, 2004). In marketing, it has been used to define customer needs (Ritson, 2004), or to segment individuals based on those needs (Pincus, 2004), as well as to explain the mechanics of motivation of CEOs, senior management and directors of firms (Senter, 2004). It has been used to support views on ethical and moral development (Huang, 2004), and as a practitioner heuristic, advocated by consultants, for the facilitation of the motivation of employees from a specific generation, so-called Gen Y workers (*HR Focus*, 2004). It has even been applied in support of health care strategy (Bardwell, 2004). The peculiarity of this situation is that despite the undeniable popularity of the "triangle", research demonstrated a lack of empirical support for Maslow's Hierarchy as early as 1973 (Miner and Daschler, 1973). The little empirical support there is for Maslow's hierarchy has been found when one of the hierarchical elements is tested and found to be a moderating influence on another variable of interest (Fried *et al.*, 2003; Hagerty, 1999).

The validity and use of Maslow's hierarchy remains a contentious issue even within the discipline of psychology, pitting the social against the experimental, with critics arguing that Maslow's theory is non-testable and, given the lack of empirical validation, is therefore pseudo scientific (Corning, 2000). Wahba and Bridwell (1973, p. 514) emphasize this Maslowian paradox in that "The theory is widely accepted, but there is little research evidence to support it" and note that "It has become a tradition for writers to point out the discrepancy between the popularity of the theory and the lack of clear and consistent empirical evidence to support it". This tradition of "use-despite-verification" continues to this day in our major organizational texts (Johns and Saks, 2005; McShane, 2004; Robbins and Langton, 2003). Ironically, almost four decades earlier Maslow confided in his journals that he was concerned by the "over-extensive use in business of [his] theories and findings" which, he felt were "being taken as gospel truth, without any real examination of their reliability, validity". To correct this jaundiced view of his work he made a note to himself to "publish the critiques of [self actualization] SA and also of [his] motivation theory" (Lowry, 1979, p. 189).

Similarly, Maslow himself supported the notion of revisiting and testing his theory of motivation, “Then the question comes up again: why don’t people replicate, e.g. the SA research? They spend so much time on so much crap. Why not some time on something critically important? I just don’t understand it. My motivation theory was published 20 years ago and in all that time nobody repeated it, or tested it, or really analyzed it or criticized it. They just used it, swallowed it whole with only the most minor modifications” (Lowry, 1979, p. 190). After his death, there has been a growth in the extent to which Maslow’s needs theory has been uncritically adopted at the same time as the growth in dismissals of Maslow’s work as lacking empirical support.

In the remainder of this paper we will explore Maslow’s work through the reading of his journals and will attempt to hear the rest of the conversation, as if it had not been interrupted. It will also situate his research within time and space, thus providing some much-needed context. Finally, the paper will demonstrate that the continued reliance on theories constructed within this particular time and space are oblivious to the needs of certain groups. If we are to truly understand organizations, we must listen to all the voices within them.

#### *Beyond the triangle*

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs was merely a stepping-stone in the grand scheme of his work. Contrary to the prominence given to it in mainstream management theory, Maslow never felt that the “triangle” was his great contribution. Instead, the five needs listed in the hierarchy that we see today were merely used to identify needs for what Maslow deemed “unhealthy people”. The needs listed were considered lower level needs and their fulfillment was required in order for individuals to become psychologically “healthy”. In opposition to much of the research of the day, Maslow was mainly concerned with studying “healthy” individuals – those who had reached, what he termed, self-actualization. It was the study of those who had achieved self-actualization that really energised Maslow and it was here that he felt his real contribution could be made. As stated by Hoffman (1988, p. 275), “developing his theory of metapsychology, focusing on our highest needs and aspirations, became increasingly important to Maslow”. Maslow wrote that there were two kinds of self-actualizing people – “transcenders” and “merely healthy”. In his paper, “Theory Z” (in Bennis and Schein, 1969), he spent considerable time differentiating between the two and positing testable hypotheses.

Unfortunately, textbook dissemination of Maslow’s work has universally ignored this subsequent work which focuses on higher level needs and continues to perpetuate the use of a theory designed to move people a mentally unhealthy state to a healthy one. This has implications for organizational analysis. It suggests that management theorists and practitioners alike need to take into account that the desired state of psychological wellbeing is self-actualization. If that is the case then merely appealing to different levels of the needs hierarchy to motivate employees to greater performance may actually perpetuate rather than address a lack of psychological wellbeing: the continued focus on lower level needs may only serve to reinforce them and stifle growth into higher level need arenas. Arguably, management theory has, until now, ignored potentially truly great contributions that focus on the psychological welfare of people rather than the production outcomes of motivation. Much of the management

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literature has also overlooked what Maslow deemed to be other significant need categories – dominance, sexuality, knowledge and enquiry.

*Dominance and sexuality.* Much of Maslow's early work was conducted on dominance and provides some basic clues to "the potential relationship between organizations and dominance" (Mills *et al.*, 2005, p. 135). Maslow not only believed that "dominance" was a key element of social relationships, but also that it was a vital determinant of social behavior and organizations (Hoffman, 1988, pp. 69-70). His research suggested that people develop different dominant needs, with some who are driven to dominate and others who feel the need to be dominated. Apart from where Maslow linked dominance to sexuality (see below) this area of work proved of little interest to management theorists. That is perhaps not surprising given the potentially uncomfortable insights that could have been generated into the impact of dominance relationships and organizational behavior (Mills *et al.*, 2005, p. 135).

Outside of management theory Friedan (1963) attempted to revive interest in Maslow's work on dominance. In particular Friedan was impressed by Maslow's argument that so-called "high dominance" women were more like "high dominance" men than "low dominance" women (Mills *et al.*, 2005, p. 133). Maslow, in fact, claimed that his notion of self-actualization consisted of an amalgam of masculine and feminine features. Although fundamentally essentialist in his views of gender Maslow nonetheless suggests in his work that dominance needs may be to some extent socially influenced by cultural factors, arguing that "our conception of the universe, of science, of intelligence [and] of emotion are lopsided and partial because they are constructed by man" (quoted in Hoffman, 1988, pp. 234-5). Indeed, Maslow went on to state that: "If only women were allowed to be full human beings, thereby making it possible for men to be fully human" western culture might finally generate a balanced, rather than a male, approach "to philosophy, art, science" (quoted in Hoffman, 1988, pp. 234-5). Regrettably this viewpoint was contained in a letter to a friend where Maslow confided that he felt unable "to get up courage enough to write anything on the subject" of women and culture (quoted in Hoffman, 1988). We can only guess at the impact of Maslow's work on dominance and sexuality if he had had the courage to revise and develop it, or if others had expanded on his work. We can suggest, however, that it may have lent an important air of legitimacy to gender research at a time when it was completely ignored by management studies (Hearn and Parkin, 1983). Certainly it may have contributed to emerging feminist work on the impact of sexuality and dominance in the workplace (Acker and van Houten, 1974; Collinson, 1988; Gutek, 1985; Pollert, 1981). There is little doubt, as we shall demonstrate later, that a good part of the reason that Maslow failed to gain the requisite courage was due to his own discriminatory views of women and their abilities.

*A need to know!* In his now famous *A Theory of Human Motivation*, Maslow (1943) also introduces the need to know and to understand. He posits another hierarchy built up of prepotent needs such as the desire to know and the desire to understand. His work suggests that we have a need for freedom of enquiry and expression, and a need to know – "a need for curiosity, learning, philosophizing, experimenting and exploring" (Mills *et al.*, 2005, p. 134). He proposes an overlap between this hierarchy and the hierarchy of basic needs. Further, Maslow introduces another need – "an inborn need to experience and express aesthetic emotions" (Hoffman, 1988). It is not clear where these needs fit in regards to the "triangle" but it is suggested that these

needs are of higher order and exists above the commonly accepted, five-stage hierarchy. More fully disseminated and explored these needs could have encouraged a broader and earlier questioning of workplace learning, aesthetics, and the impact of organization on human development.

While subsequent works by Maslow were well received at the time much of the content seems to have been lost since then. For example, after completing *Motivation and Personality* (Maslow, 1954), which propelled him into mainstream psychology, Maslow was extremely proud and felt that “he had written one of the most important works in the history of psychology” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 205). It was here that Maslow boldly proposed a positive approach to psychology – i.e. study beyond the hierarchy – but this work is hardly noted in the recounting of his contribution. *Eupsychian Management* (Maslow, 1965) brought Maslow:

[...] immediate attention among the leaders of America’s business schools. Many in the management field viewed it as his most important book to date, providing concrete recommendations specific to his compelling theories of human nature. His novel concepts concerning employee motivation, ‘human assets’ accounting, the psychology of entrepreneuring and leadership, and especially, synergy exerted tremendous influence as they reached a receptive generation of managerial theorists and organizational consultants in the 1960s (Hoffman, 1988, p. 285).

It seems that, while Maslow’s work could have provided various significant insights to management theory, much of it seems to have been lost. The remainder of the paper will examine these “lost” contributions, as identified through his personal journals.

### *Humanist psychology*

The placement and framing of Maslow in contemporary management or OB texts leads many to wrongly conclude that his motivation theory is simply a managerialist tool (Mills *et al.*, 2005), enabling managers to better determine the nature, and handling, of the appropriate carrot to be offered to employees. In essence, business students are taught that managers who understand their employees’ motivations (i.e. where they fall on the hierarchy of needs) will be better able to influence the motivation of those employees, thus improving the productivity of the organization. Satisfied workers merely happen to be a by-product.

A deeper reading of Maslow, incorporating his own thoughts as reflected in his journals, sheds new light on the intent of the author. Maslow felt a great need to make a difference in society. He contends that, from his early graduate years, he was “determined to write a big introduction to psychology that would do some good for mankind” (Lowry, 1979, p. 331). It was not his intention to create a tool for the subjugation and control of employees. In fact, he saw the hierarchy as a path to “enlightenment” for individuals and felt that organizations should attempt to create spaces for employees that were conducive to achievement of self actualization, the top of the well-known pyramid.

Maslow believed that man (*sic*) has “within his nature a yearning for truth, beauty, goodness, justice, order, humour, completion, etc . . . but this emerges only as lower basic needs are satisfied” (Lowry, 1979, p. 148). Accordingly, Maslow saw his hierarchy of needs as a path to these values (labeled “B values”):

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Thus this striving (all striving, any striving) is the same as the urge to complete oneself, to be, to become fully human, to be a whole, satisfied, unitary, complete, final, perfect thing rather than just an incomplete, unfinished piece or part of something. This is to be fulfilled, actualized, instead of potential or promise. This is the contrast between motivated (stirring, restless, incomplete, satisfied, unsatisfied, becoming, trying, effortful, unsatisfactory, imperfect) and unmotivated (metamotivated, resting, satisfied, fulfilled, perfect, final, complete, etc.) (Lowry, 1979, p. 141).

He envisioned a Utopia, which he called “Eupsychia”, where society, as well as the organizations within them, encouraged the growth and self-actualization of all individuals. This, in turn, would lead to the internalization of B values, and a pride in one’s work that would cause the eradication of faulty products and poor services. Because of the value placed on truth, beauty, goodness, etc., “bad” values would be minimized. This vision of Utopia was evident throughout his work in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and served as the basis for much of his theorizing.

Maslow believed that man could be emancipated through consciousness-raising and self-actualization. This, in turn, had an activating effect where, “lifting the individual’s repression leads him to become a Eupsychian force – and this is already adding up to a social force toward Eupsychia, even if not very powerful yet” (Lowry, 1979, p. 269). Lifting individual repression would, in effect, serve to activate societal changes. He acknowledged his theoretical placement between Freud and Marx. He agreed with Freud’s contention “that man can overcome repression without social changes. (Yes, he can!)” (quoted in Lowry, 1979), and that society “only influences [man’s] being by greater or lesser repression of his innate biology.” (quoting directly from Fromm, 1962 in Lowry, 1979, p. 269). Nonetheless, again drawing on the words of Fromm (1962, quoted in Lowry, 1979, p. 269), Maslow states approvingly that:

Marx on the other hand was the first thinker who saw that the (widespread) realization of the universal and fully awakened man can occur only together with social changes which lead to a new and truly human economic and social organization of mankind.

Thus, Maslow (quoted in Lowry, 1979, p. 269) concludes:

You need a fully awakened man to know which social changes to make, which direction to go in, how to do it, how to translate the (purely) institutional change into human (SA) terms . . . The process of social and individual betterment must go on simultaneously as a single process.

Maslow’s use of Freud, his self-identification with the work of Marx, and his emphasis on consciousness-raising are not consistent with the positivistic, managerialist vein within which he has been portrayed. It may be more insightful to note the overlapping of his theories across different epistemological and ontological positions. For instance, his emphasis on consciousness-raising in attempts at human liberation plays to radical humanism over positivism. As does his desire to create a level playing field for all by levying a huge inheritance tax to ensure that no one is born into privilege. He also saw the provision of equal-opportunity healthcare and education for all – to ensure that all individuals are given equal opportunities to self-actualize. On the other hand, his focus on improvements within the existing ownership structure of the workplace speaks more to functionalist concerns. Despite the wide ontological and epistemological frames within which Maslow’s broader work may be situated, his corpus has been

effectively reduced to one that embodies the mainstream managerialist conceptualization of motivation as embodied in his five-stage hierarchy of needs.

*Culture*

When perusing the typical OB text, we rarely see the presentation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs within a greater context. It is usually presented in a positivistic, prescriptive manner, with little regard for characteristics of the individual's external environment. This has left Maslow's work open to two forms of problem. On the one hand, his work is presented as if lack of context was embedded in his work. This encourages the view that Maslow's needs theory is a narrowly focused psychological perspective that ignores socio-psychological and sociological context. On the other hand, this has led some to critique Maslow's work as reflective of a male-oriented western viewpoint of human behavior (Cullen, 1992, 1997), whose application is problematic outside of the North American context (Raymond *et al.*, 2003). These criticisms are not entirely deserved, particularly in the claim that he ignored the sociological context.

Maslow understood that his theory was only useful when culture was considered. He acknowledged that the nature of human needs, the bases of his theory, were both biologically determined and socially constructed (Maslow, 1943). However, the presentation of his work in most texts seems to overlook this. Reflecting in his diary on his needs theory Maslow (quoted in Lowry, 1979, p. 373, our emphasis) writes:

Need level (which = frustration level) determines which are the most pressing values, what is yearned for, definition of Utopia, etc. For the one who needs safety or love, that is the most important thing in the world and SA is not important. But need level is to a large extent (how large?) *determined by culture* . . . The higher the culture, the more "secure" or healthy it is, and the higher the need level. Thus the satisfaction or frustration of 'instinctoid needs' rests on level of culture, on other people, on status of parents, etc. To this extent, ideologies, philosophies, yearnings, Utopias, rest on level of the culture.

In a similar vein, Maslow grappled with the cultural relevance of the hierarchy. In the 1930s he embraced the notion that "every culture is unique, all values and mores are relative, and no culture therefore can judge as better its own values, much less seek to impose them upon another culture" (Hoffman, 1988, p. 113). It is perhaps ironic, given his statement of cultural uniqueness and the fact that his later work did lend itself to an ethnocentric view of the world; one of Maslow's earliest projects praised the culture of the Blackfoot Indians as being superior to western culture. Maslow associated the Blackfoot emphasis on generosity with the high levels of "emotional security" that he found among the members of the tribe. In direct contrast to the Blackfoot he concluded that competitiveness within American culture was harmful.

Nonetheless, Maslow struggled with the concept of cultural relevance, sometimes stating that the hierarchy was applicable across all cultures while at other times stating that the culture of origin greatly affected the applicability of the model. In 1959, he wrote the following in an unpublished paper: "So far, I have been studying self-actualization via autonomy, as if it were the only path. But this is quite Western, and even American" (Hoffman, 1988, p. 243), perhaps settling his struggle with the cultural relativism of his theory once and for all. The very least we can conclude is that Maslow had at least reflected on the ethnocentric roots of his psychology and lamented the fact that the reflection was confined to an unpublished paper. He did not, however,

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divorce his needs theory from the broader context and had that been more fully represented in the literature it may have broadened the debate on the relationship between psychological welfare and organizational context.

### *Leadership*

One of Maslow's greatest concerns, as they appear in his journals, seems to be the "valueless-ness" of society. He conceptualizes this valueless-ness as "uncertainty" and he blames this on "the absences of adult standards because the adults are (1) s\*\*\*s and *not* admirable; and (2) confused and with no fixed values to offer, only phoney ones that they hardly believe in themselves" (Lowry, 1979, p. 128). Maslow concludes that:

(1) most people don't have a will, an identity, a self; (2) they are therefore uncertain about everything – they have no real opinions or judgements; (3) therefore they are easily convinced by anyone who is decisive, sure of himself, without doubt; (4) anyway, all people, especially uncertain ones, are looking for certainty, and since they can't get it from within, they'll get it from without; (5) they will follow any decisive leader, true or false, and feel better thereby; (6) paranoids (obsessionals) are 'certain' for safety-need reasons and therefore look decisive, strong-willed, etc., in their behaviour (Lowry, 1979, p. 375).

His theory is that leaders emerge because of their apparent decisiveness. This theory stems from his work with primates, during his dissertations years. During this time, he determined that the uncertain monkeys always appeared to follow the certain ones – the ones that portrayed an image of certainness and confidence, "The dominant monkey was sure of himself. So is the dominant man. And in a world of unsure people, they all turn to him for answers" (Lowry, 1979, p. 24).

He uses this theory to explain why people follow perceived leaders, regardless of the consequences:

[...] my original thesis was that most people are so uncertain about their wishes, judgements, etc., that they follow anyone who is decisive, sure of himself. And since this decisiveness can come from paranoia, that's why Hitler, Stalin, McCarthy *et al.* were followed. (It's not a taste for evil; it's a taste for certainty) (Lowry, 1979, p. 357).

However, he also acknowledges:

[...] many leaders who are decisive, unwavering, sure of themselves are not paranoid (e.g. Freud), because of their profound confidence in themselves and in the truth of what they've seen. The good captain, the good father, must be like this so as to reassure the panicky ones, the waiverers (Lowry, 1979, p. 133).

Maslow's thinking on leadership is interesting from a number of perspectives. To begin with, it can be argued that the appearance of these ideas in Maslow's 1930s work on primates reflects more general concerns with the rise of fascism and Nazism and the leader-follower research being pursued by the Frankfurt School (Held, 1980). In a similar way Lewin's work on leadership not only reflected the political theorizing of the time, but also became embedded in his theoretical categories of democratic, autocratic, and *laissez-faire* leadership styles (Mills *et al.*, 2002). More problematic is the élitism embedded in Maslow's viewpoint, an élitism that, as been noted elsewhere (Cooke *et al.*, 2005), is the cornerstone of his notion of a "hierarchy" of needs. Also problematic is the gendered notions that inform Maslow's views of leadership (e.g. the "good father") (Cullen, 1992). Despite the problems Maslow does raise some interesting issues about

the link between values, certainty and leadership that may provide useful insights with further research.

### *Psychotherapy*

The benefits of psychotherapy are emphasized in Maslow's journals. Given his occupation, this is not surprising. However, what is of particular interest is Maslow's application of psychotherapy in the quest to achieve self-actualization (SA). Not only does he recommend that psychotherapy be used for achievement of SA, but that it be used in preparation of the journey toward SA, as psychotherapy "prepares (individuals) for positive self-transformation techniques of all kinds" (Lowry, 1979, p. 459).

Also of interest is Maslow's recommendation that group psychotherapy be used within his own academic department at the university where he is employed. He recognizes the value of psychotherapy in organizations. This was a relatively novel idea and could be considered to have been ahead of its time.

Since Maslow, there has been a resurgence of interest in using psychotherapy in organizations. Kets de Vries (1978) noted the need for counseling within organizations. Later, Chiaramonte and Mills (1993) identified the need for self-reflection counseling as an instrument for organizational learning, and argued that self-reflection is a vital skill for managers to possess. They recognized that self-reflection allowed people in organizations to think over their experiences, assumptions, and beliefs about work, thus gaining valuable insights and contributing to the organization. Schein (in Quick and Kets de Vries, 2000) also supported the use of psychotherapy in organizations and hailed the benefits of self-reflection. Gustavsen (2001, p. 374) recommended that introspection and meditation be used "not only as phenomenological research methods, but also as instruments of transcendent change". Lowe *et al.* (2002) also argued that psychoanalysis could prove to be a valuable tool for the understanding of the gendering of organizations. Despite this recognition, the application of psychoanalysis in organizations appears to be in its infancy, and few researchers, if any, have provided a clear picture of what this might look like. Most recently, application of Hubert Hermans' Self Confrontation Method (Hermans *et al.*, 1990) has been proposed as a psychoanalytic tool which might be appropriately used in organizations (Bissonnette and Mills, 2002; Dye and Mills, 2004, 2002; Weatherbee and Mills, 2002). This too, is in its infancy and may have perhaps have opened up as an avenue of research at an early stage had this aspect of Maslow's thinking been engaged with in the management literature.

### *The meaning of work*

Maslow recognized the relationship between work and self-esteem:

If work is introjected into the self (I guess it always is, more or less, even when one tries not to), then the relation between self-esteem and work is closer than I had thought. Especially healthy, stable self-esteem (feeling of worth, pride, influence, importance, etc.) rests on good, worthy work to be integrated into, thereby becoming part of self. Maybe more of the contemporary malaise is due to the introjection of non-prideful, robotized, broken-down-into-easy-bits kind of work than I had thought (Lowry, 1979, p. 187).

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Maslow asserted that man (*sic.*) needs meaningful work in order to self actualize and suggests that Henry-Ford-style assembly-line types of organization fail to provide this as:

[...] the whole man is not needed – just his hands, or a particular, easily learned, partial skill; the job is broken down into parts and bits not needing highly trained people; judgement, taste, idiosyncrasy, connoisseurship, professionalism, autonomy, pride – all these are minimized. It leads towards an entrepreneur or manager sitting in an office planning for a large organization of ad hoc trained, unskilled, interchangeable, autonomous people (Lowry, 1979, p. 402).

In contrast to this stark vision of industrial organization, Maslow argues:

If you take into yourself something important from the world, then you become important. You have made yourself important thereby – as important as that which you have integrated and assimilated to self. At once it matters if you die, or are sick and can't work, etc. (Lowry, 1979, p. 185).

He also contends that:

[...] our “organizational world”, as we have come to know it (mechanistic, specialized, etc.) keeps us from self-actualization and asserts that, reliance on statistics and other external cues, like timetables, schedules, etc., can serve in the extreme as a substitute for inner voices, inner decisions, certainties. That is, some people don't get an inner voice to eat or sleep or urinate and look at the clock instead to know whether or not they should eat (Lowry, 1979, p. 508).

Individuals become dependent on external cues, ignore or never develop their inner voices, and become uncertain and unable to make decisions on their own. This is precisely, according to Maslow, what leads individuals to seek those who are certain, to seek leadership from others. Here we see an important nod in the direction of a more humanist version of motivation and the problems for industrial civilization.

### *Organizational change*

Maslow also recognized that change would become inevitable in organizations, stating that:

We must learn to live with perpetual change and with practically no stability, tradition, etc. and it must remain so, or even with faster rate of change (Lowry, 1979, p. 16).

For Maslow, this era of rapid change required, “not an improved man but an entirely different *kind* of man, the creative and flexible one who, in the midst of rapid and perpetual change, can be a person and not just an adapter” (Lowry, 1979, p. 16). This new “man” would be, “flexible, creative, not relying on any traditions, or on routine or habit or any other way of life learned from past and based on assumption of this past continuing on into future. *The future must be unknown*, and the new man would have to stop *needing* stability, order, routine” (Lowry, 1979, p. 16).

This theory of change is not unlike the Tom Peters' (1992, 1994) version of change that was popularized in the 1980s and 1990s. The emphasis on inevitable change and the required change in the mindset of personnel sounds all too familiar. But it could also be argued that this presaged the advent of interest in organizational learning and the learning organization (Bratton *et al.*, 2004). In this regard, Maslow raises an interesting point when discussing the period of rapid change. He asks: “If the future is

not like the past, what is the good of specialization or professional training?" (Lowry, 1979, p. 17). Intuitively, this seems a logical question. He further identifies the implications of this on education and training by asking, "What must education be like to produce the creative man? What good are facts, rote memory" (Lowry, 1979, p. 17). According to Maslow (Lowry, 1979, p. 17), we need "creative education" to help create this new flexible, creative man who thrives on perpetual change.

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*Maslow and gendered organization theory*

In the words of Fondas (1997, p. 257), "Management theorizing is not gender neutral". As we have seen above, Maslow's work was applauded by Betty Fiedan for recognizing that the highest state of being (self-actualization) consisted of masculine and feminine characteristics. And that he seems to have believed that women's ability to reach a higher state of being was influenced by male-dominated views of social life. We have also seen that his work has been characterized by feminists as informed by deeply held gendered views (Cullen, 1997). Maslow's diary entries indicate that, if anything, Cullen (1997), may have underestimated the degree to which Maslow's idea of the world was rooted in gendered thinking but the diaries also reveal that Maslow was conflicted on the role of women in society, believing more that gender was biologically determined rather than socially constructed.

Although his motivation theory claims to have evolved from a study where he interviewed women about their sexual habits, Maslow's conception of "women" was relatively shallow and the link between their sexual habits and motivation theory is never made clear. What he did conclude from his work on sexuality and dominance was that "'normal' sexual happiness can occur in society only when the male plays the dominant role" (French, 1985, pp. 524-5). In the *Farther Reaches of Human Nature* Maslow contends, "none of his points applied to women and he did not know what did" (French, 1985, p. 376).

Maslow seems to have believed that "gender" was the equivalent to "sex", and therefore, biologically determined. In his diaries he articulates, unabashedly, his belief about where women fit in society, and rarely is this fit suggested to be in an organization (as was indicative of the era). For example, he states that a woman who self-actualizes becomes stronger and that "the woman's strength and forcefulness are quite compatible with being a good wife, even a *better* wife than otherwise" (Lowry, 1979, p. 139). Similarly, when discussing a colleague, Maslow writes, "I like Horney as far as she goes, but I don't think of her as a systematic thinker. She was a clinician primarily and *a woman too*" (Lowry, 1979, p. 166, our emphasis) – this despite apparent respect for Horney's work (Hoffman, 1988). Statements of this nature are littered throughout Maslow's journals. Perhaps his most misogynous viewpoint is expressed where he argues:

Women don't have to explore as men do, to look under every rock, climb every mountain, take clocks apart to see how they work. They don't have to solve things. Puzzles and riddles don't challenge them as much. They don't have to get into crevices (they *are* the crevice) (Lowry, 1979, p. 354).

And he is at his most paternalist where he argues that:

Only the woman *needs* to be loved, first and foremost, and will give up justice, dignity, law and order, truth, *anything* to hang on to being loved (Lowry, 1979, p. 251).

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Despite these views, Maslow was prepared to argue that Freud's view of women was "inaccurate and demeaning; clearly, there was more to female psychology than procreative anatomy" (Hoffman, 1988, p. 234). According to a letter written to a female colleague in 1956 (Hoffman, 1988), Maslow felt that women could, in fact, self-actualize but that their differences, emotional, cognitive, and perceptual, warranted a different journey toward self-actualization. In this early period, even Maslow recognized that the hierarchy of needs, constructed by and for man, was not necessarily appropriate or applicable for women (Hoffman, 1988).

Perhaps Maslow's perception of women was a symptom of the times, and perhaps his theory of motivation, developed for the times, was not inappropriate. In fact, it may have served the era well. However, Maslow's theory of motivation, that which is most commonly associated with his name, and is as popular today as it was 30 years ago, is presented without this important context. For example, textbooks rarely proffer the fact that the theory is more than 40 years old and was constructed during a time where the North American workforce consisted mainly of white, Anglo-Saxon men. Should this be provided, readers would be able to draw their own conclusion about the applicability of Maslow's theory to today's world of work. However, this simply is not the case.

Since the late 1970s, attempts have been made to "ungender" organization theory (Grant, 1988). Scholarship within the women's voice perspective has been promising and significant strides have been made to hear the voices of women (see Bell and Nkomo, 1992; Calás and Smircich, 1991; Gilligan, 1982; Grant, 1988; Martin, 1990; Smircich, 1985). However, by continuing to publish Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs without context, and without theories of motivation representing women's voice to balance the picture, we are merely perpetuating the genderedness of organization theory, and the silencing of voices. We may have a better understanding of the causes of gendered theories of management where we attempt to understand them in context.

### *Theorizing the other*

Women's voices are not the only ones to be silenced by the continued presentation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, without context and counterbalancing theories. The voices of gay men and blacks are also visibly suppressed. On the topic of gay men, Maslow states: "the man who prefers an uncomfortable shoe for his foot is biologically wrong. There are biological suitabilities" (Lowry, 1979, p. 187). He goes on to explain this more graphically. In essence, he is stating that gay men are "biologically wrong" and therefore, not considered to be of the "normal" range considered in his research. This is emphasized in his reference to gay men as being in the same category as criminals and delinquents, "I had thought of using prostitutes and homosexuals to throw light on dominance-subdominance, but now I think I'd add all criminals and delinquents" (Lowry, 1979, p. 385). His treatment of different races is similar, as is evident in the following passage:

Useful thought to work up: thinking about foolish tactics of Negroes and their rioting and burning, splitting among themselves, childish impatience, blaming everyone else and demanding manhood instead of developing it themselves, impotence, absence of leadership (Lowry, 1979, p. 650).

This treatment is consistent throughout Maslow's journals. Yet we also know that he had profound respect for the culture of the Blackfoot Indians.

One must be careful not to “judge” Maslow through today’s lens. In fact, he laments such ethnocentric behavior throughout his journals. The intent of acknowledging the voices silenced by Maslow’s theories was not the admonition of his work. It is merely an attempt to demonstrate the importance of context (time and space) when reading organization theory. Merely reproducing Maslow’s work, without re-visiting and re-analyzing is simply too easy and fails to acknowledge the changing face of work.

### **Conclusion**

While organization theorists have been called to account for the history that underpins their works, the use of historical analysis in pursuit of understanding within organizational studies remains “extremely rare” (Kieser, 1994). This is viewed as problematic as more often than not our understanding of organizations is directly dependant on the work of our academic forbearers as we add links in these epistemological chains. If our forbearers failed to incorporate history in their works then what we see and recognize as the accumulated body of knowledge that is organizational theory potentially hangs suspended from a structure that is far weaker than we believe – with the strength and temper of each link varying significantly, invoking the specter of Damocles. Simply reproducing highly simplified aspects of a theorist’s work, such as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, in each new management or OB text is doing a disservice to the breadth of debate that is often involved in a corpus of research work. It may limit a person’s theoretical corpus to a managerialist frame, and avoid the potential rewards inherent in listening to the multiple voices in organizations.

In the case of Maslow, we have constructed an identity of the man that he may neither have wanted, nor intended. We have come to identify him with a “rump theory” that has been misunderstood and misappropriated from the very beginning. The theory has been taken out of context in numerous textbooks, which have attributed uninformed goals to the theory, and have basically ignored the potential of work surrounding the theory. What has been interpreted as a tool of managerial control was intended, at least to an important degree, as a tool for the emancipation of human kind. Maslow laments the relative scarcity of humanistic work as he writes: “Why is so little done with science that would help people or help the society or virtue in general?” (Lowry, 1979, p. 619) and: “There are so very few people doing humanistic work (defined as for the benefit of mankind and its improvement)” (Lowry, 1979, p. 620) and might well be appalled by the interpretation of his well-intended work.

A reading of Maslow’s journals demonstrates quite vividly how time and space serve to shape organizational theory and herald a call to re-visit so as to determine their relevance in the current time and space. Finally, by reifying the concept of “Maslow as needs hierarchy” we miss any and all other contributions that Maslow could potentially have offered us. Perhaps the following is indicative of what is to come:

All sorts of memories come flooding back about the first perception of each of my works. The motivation theory read to the psychoanalytic groups – Kardiner, Levy, Rado, Alexander, French *et al.* – not a reaction, no comment, no nothing. Now it’s famous. They didn’t see it. But I did, and I had this profound, stubborn confidence in it . . . Just as I have absolute confidence in the B-psychology I’m doing now. And in the metamotivation stuff which everyone will be studying and memorizing and attacking from now on; 25 years from now, it will be “classical” (Lowry, 1979, p. 151).

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While we appear to have missed this 25-year mark, perhaps it is not too late to re-visit Maslow and to discover some previously overlooked contributions. If nothing else, let us do it with context in mind for we must be careful not to “interrupt” the speaker, nor should we attempt to define the person or their contribution by some small subset of his /her work. We need to move beyond the received view, beyond that conversation that was interrupted. In a more general sense we conclude that the perception of mainstream management theory as narrowly focused and managerialist (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Clegg and Dunkerley, 1980; Mills *et al.*, 2005) is in small part due to textbook dissemination of theories and theorists that, in their drive for simplicity, cut out the complexity of approach. Maslow has served as an exemplar. On its own his hierarchy of needs can be read as a simple tool for manipulating employee motivation. If, on the other hand, we had been exposed to Maslow’s corpus of work we would have been challenged to think about such things as the impact of work on self-esteem; the relationship between culture, organization, and motivation; the exploitation of uncertainty and dominance by unscrupulous leaders; and reflection on the contribution of management to human development. We may also have had an early opportunity to understand and respond to the gendered and ethnocentric nature of emerging theories of motivation.

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