

Relevance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Indicators in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A South African Perspective

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ABSTRACT The outbreak of COVID-19 has seriously affected humanity. Disruptions to social, family, educational and work settings have had devastating effects on livelihoods and the general well-being of individuals and communities. This critical review sampled 33 empirical studies in order to look at the use of Maslow's Hierarchy in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. The main objective of the study was to offer a critical perspective, using descriptive and interpretative summaries of the data, on the relevance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, to the South African population, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The hierarchy highlighted challenges experienced by the majority of the South African population. The social issues suffered by the South African population directly relate to poverty, education and unemployment, which means that the majority, are unlikely to have high self-esteem and cannot self-actualise to become the best person they can. Future research should consider reviewing foundational indicators of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The global outbreak of coronavirus in December 2019 in Wuhan, China has completely changed human behaviour (Zhu et al. 2020). According to Roser (2020), there have been other viral illnesses, which have impacted the global population, for instance, the Spanish Flu (1918-1920). Palder et al. (2020) state that COVID-19 has had the greatest impact on the day-to-day life of people worldwide in living memory. There have been lockdowns and disaster management strategies in most countries. According to Patrick and Cormier (2020), as of 26th March 2020, approximately one third of the world's population was under some type of COVID-19 related movement restriction. These limitations have increased substantially since then due to trying to 'flatten the curve' of infection (World Health Organisation 2021) as well as to prevent healthcare systems from collapsing.

Ayati et al. (2020) report that the response from the pharmacological sector has been fast and many vaccines, all properly tested, are now available. However, developed countries have been first in line for the vaccine rollout and South Africa still has a long-way to go in providing vaccinations to

the general populace although the programme has started for health workers (Mwai 2021). There is also the challenge of ever-new variants, which the original vaccines do not provide as much cover against (Fontanet et al. 2021). The second wave in countries such as South Africa and the United Kingdom is past its peak and lockdown restrictions are being eased. However, in South Africa a third peak is predicted in May or June 2021 (SABC News 2021). It is unlikely that the populace will have gained 'herd immunity' through inoculations at this stage as to-date only around 270,000 front-line healthcare workers have received COVID-19 vaccinations.

The COVID-19 management strategies defined by the South African government has laid bare the underlying tenets of an unequal society. The South African Government highlighted basic requirements in its lockdown strategy, which are the same globally, namely, social distancing, wearing facemasks and safe hygiene practices (Department of Health [DoH], South Africa, 2021). These made the fundamental assumption that people have basic needs such as shelter, access to clean water and food. However, the government failed to address stress, anxiety, and the increase in mental illness during the pandemic,



Fig. 1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs depicted as steps

Source: Katjene, Nel and Govender, 2021

which has impacted negatively on the population (Salari et al. 2020). In South Africa, a very large portion of the populace lives in poverty and does not have basic life-necessities. Moreover, since lockdown, this has worsened, as there have been significant job losses. At present the estimated unemployment rate is estimated conservatively at thirty-four percent (Statistics South Africa 2021).

Humanistic psychology was presented as a third force in psychology after psychoanalysis and behaviourism in the 1950s and gave impetus to the birth of positive psychology (Rothmann 2003). According to Rockwell (2019), humanistic psychology highlights unconditional regard, self-responsibility and interdependence, experiential learning, and the building of holistic communities amongst people globally. Maslow (1943) followed the humanistic tradition, and he proposed a hierarchy of needs that activate and direct human behaviour (Maslow, 1970b). However, at the time the theory was widely criticised for its lack of empirical data and the many methodological shortcomings in his research (Geller 1982; Wahba and Bridwell 1976). Nonetheless, Winston (2018) asserted that Maslow's (1943) hierarchical theory was both bold and necessary.

Maslow (1970b) proposed five innate needs for the overall psychological and physical well-being of human beings. As COVID-19 continues to devastate the South African population, the lower order needs, namely, physical needs, safety and security needs, and love and belonging needs are not met in a substantial portion of the population. As a result, higher order needs such as self-esteem, or perceived notions of self-esteem (Baumeister et al. 2003), and self-actualisation are a distant desire. Fundamentally, if higher-level needs are not addressed, lower-level needs are not satisfied

(Pinkus 2020; Thielke et al. 2011). The hierarchy was depicted by Maslow as a triangle, however the researchers also believe it can be illustrated as a series of hierarchical steps, as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows the hierarchical and stepwise nature of human needs, which starts with physiological needs for food, water, air, sleep, and sex (Shaughnessy et al. 2018). If these needs are satisfied the individual will attempt to satisfy safety and security needs and as these needs are satisfied, then belongingness and love are sought. It must be noted that if physiological needs cannot be met human beings take more risks and thus are subject to violence and other forms of injury (Hopper 2020). Safety needs are next on the hierarchical ladder, as Maslow (1943) believed that the need for safety and security are important for both infants and adults (Hopper 2020; Schultz and Schultz 2012). In 1971 Maslow pointed out that although most adults must satisfy safety needs the way they do it impacts on their behaviour. In a violent society satisfying safety needs is different to satisfying them in a more structured and stable society (Abaho 2020).

Once physiological and safety needs have been reasonably satisfied, humanity attends to the need for belongingness and love. These can be expressed through a close relationship with a friend, spouse, lover or through social relationships. Maslow (1970a) indicated that people generally seek to overcome feelings of loneliness and alienation. This involves both giving and receiving love and affection, which leads to attaining a sense of belonging (Pinkus 2020). The following are what Maslow (1943) classified as higher order needs, which an individual needs to fulfil to become a self-actualised person. Esteem needs are put into two categories. Firstly, people need to feel respect for themselves in the form of self-worth

and secondly, they need recognition to attain social success and status from others (Pinkus 2020; Schultz and Schultz 2012) often through the process of work engagement (Shonubi et al. 2016). If this need is satisfied, individuals become competent and productive people but if not, they lack self-esteem and feel discouraged with no confidence in their ability to cope with day-to-day living. It is also true that people who lack self-esteem, which is more apparent amongst the young, are likely to develop mental illnesses such as depression (Browning et al. 2021; Henriksen et al. 2017).

Self-actualisation is the highest order need in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy and depends on the maximum realisation and fulfilment of an individual's potential, talents, and abilities (Schultz and Schultz 2012). According to MacLeod (2020), self-actualisation is the attempt to seek personal growth and ultimate life experiences, which ultimately lead to contentment and life-satisfaction. If an individual satisfies all other needs in the hierarchy but cannot fulfil this one, they will be restless, frustrated and disconnected. In describing this Maslow (1970b: 46) wrote, "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write...to be ultimately at peace". Furthermore, as MacLeod (2020) noted that to become self-actualised needs much effort, as an individual must mature and live a considered life.

In later life Maslow (1970b) proposed a second set of innate needs namely, cognitive needs. These referred to the need to know and understand. These complement his original hierarchy but exist outside it. He suggested that the need to know is stronger than the need to understand, and thus 'knowing' must be fulfilled to some extent before the need to understand emerges. Schultz and Schultz (2012) state that there is evidence to support these cognitive needs. For instance, historically people risked their lives in the quest for knowledge, which places the need to know and understand above safety. Moreover, emotionally healthy adults are attracted to mysterious and unexplained events and try to uncover the truth about them. Maslow (1970b) highlighted that the hierarchy of the need to know and the need to understand, which are fundamental to being able to contextualise the environment in which humanity lives, and thus he suggested that to become self-actualising, individuals need to know and understand, and thus cognitive needs overlap the original five need hierarchy.

In South Africa in the normal course of daily living Maslow's (1943) suggested needs have not been met for at least fifty percent of people who are living below the poverty line (Chutel 2017). According to Maslow (1943), these needs are to some extent instinctual but do have a hereditary component. Nevertheless, these needs can be affected by education, social expectations, and fear of disapproval. Additionally, although humanity comes equipped with these needs at birth, the behaviours that are used to satisfy them are learned and thus subject to variation from one person to another (Pinkus 2020).

According to Saladino et al. (2020), COVID-19 has had a major impact on the global population. They suggest that vulnerable populations such as health workers and children are likely to develop mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Social distancing is perceived as one of the contributors toward this, as empathy and social distancing do not go hand in hand. This is echoed by a release from the United Nations (Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020), which states that the pandemic is particularly severe on vulnerable communities. This includes indigenous peoples and those who live in poverty. It is noted that people who do not have access to shelter, safety, running water and food everyday are much more likely to be exposed to the coronavirus. Furthermore, if these issues are not addressed then the pandemic is very likely to increase social exclusion amongst exposed groups.

Chu et al. (2020) note that 4 billion people globally have had exposure to COVID-19. They also state that the pandemic has severely restricted human travel and movement. They report that there are many psychological and social needs or consequences that are not met related to quarantines and social distancing, particularly for people who live on the edges of society. Gross (2020) suggests that Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs can be used as a template to monitor for teaching and learning remotely during the pandemic. Fundamentally, students have many socio-emotional challenges, which may be lack of food and poor coping skills and lack of technology (internet access). They, as well as their teachers, may feel inadequate because of these issues. She states that basic needs must be met if children (and teachers) are to function effectively in this scenario.

Ryan et al. (2020) report that authorities, to prevent any harm or instability to communities, need to look at frameworks that restart society while maintaining effective public health procedures in terms of social determinants of health. These are, economic stability, education, healthcare and health, districts, infrastructure, and community contexts. The authors comment that those who fall into economically unstable groups cannot tolerate long periods of lockdown. Moreover, governments must understand Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs in terms of communities' economic risk vulnerability. Furthermore, they suggest that a framework should be devised underpinned by the hierarchy to guide governments in this process.

Cerbara et al. (2020) report that although some measures, such as social distancing are necessary to prevent coronavirus infection, they are likely to prove a negative in terms of psychological wellbeing. In their study they found that Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs comes into play and that in an emergency basic needs are the first that need meeting (food, water, shelter, safety). They reported that communities had emotions such as anger and fear when their economic safety was threatened. The authors concluded that many people had suffered emotionally when they had been inadvertently placed in a position of being unable to fill their basic needs.

It must be recognised that people can move between needs on Maslow's (1943) hierarchy over time, depending on their circumstances. Conditioning around lower-level needs is also stronger, and thus a stimulus attached to the introduction or removal of a physical need produces a greater behavioural effect than a stimulus related to self-actualisation (Thielke et al. 2011). In the fight against COVID-19 there have been critical issues related to meeting the basic needs for survival in SA, as the government grants are small and many do not qualify for them. As a result, many people are living well below the poverty line (Zembe-Mkabile et al. 2020).

Objective of the Study

The critical review had the objective of offering a critical perspective on the link between Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and the South African population needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rationale for the Present Study

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is one of the most used psychological theories in the world. It is taught at tertiary institutions globally and underpins many research studies. It was deemed important to conduct this review during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to understand if the hierarchical needs of the population in South Africa are met in relation to the needs hierarchy.

METHODOLOGY

This critical review looked at the relationship between Maslow's Hierarchy and its relevance during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. Various search engines were used to find appropriate literature such as, EBSCO Host, Google Scholar and Science Direct. The key words 'social,' 'psychological,' 'COVID-19' and 'Maslow's hierarchy' and 'South Africa' were used in the search.

Thirty-three empirical studies were found using the aforementioned approach and 18 were used, as they were judged appropriate by the authors. These studies offered a critical perspective on Maslow's Hierarchy. The articles either described or explained the hierarchy and/or used it in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other information, from articles, books, news forums, and channels, relating to the pandemic and Maslow's (1943) hierarchy was used to provide background to the critical review. Three reviewers were used to make the task manageable.

Charting the Data

The authors used a process for charting and extracting the data adapted from Mueller et al. (2018). Articles about or using Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs and COVID-19 were identified and year of publication and the aim was noted. The type of article was identified, as well as the country it was written in. The setting of the study or review was noted and study results, conclusions and/or discussion noted. The first reviewer charted and extracted the data, which was verified by the second reviewer and further substantiated by the third reviewer.

Data Analysis: Organising, Summarising and Reporting the Results

A descriptive, interpretative summary of the data was reviewed and then discussed in terms of the research objective. The following process adapted from Munn et al. (2018) was followed, literature on Maslow's (1943) theory and COVID-19 was perused, working definitions of his hierarchical constructs were given, and a gap in the literature was identified namely, there is no research on the relevance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. Typically, in this type of review an assessment of the value of the literature used was not completed.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were limited, as there were no human participants. The authors engaged in the following processes, adapted from Suri (2019) inherent to any review that scopes available literature, as they reflected on the article and discussed objectivity and subjectivity, informed the audience of how they included articles, and were transparent to the reader in how the review was conducted.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa the basic needs of much of the populace were unfulfilled, and as a result, they were unlikely to have positive self-esteem and be able to self-actualise. These needs according to Pinkus (2020) and Schultz and Schultz (2012) are necessary if an individual wants to have a fulfilled and ultimately happy life. Furthermore, because of the unemployment rate exacerbated by COVID-19, violence and poverty have laid these needs bare. As a result, the importance of physiological needs in helping people become self-actualised has become apparent. This is difficult, as to become self-actualised, people have to become mature psychologically and emotionally (MacLeod 2020) which is impossible if their physiological needs are not met.

The impact of the pandemic has put a strain on relationships because of social distancing, and thus the need for love and belongingness has been challenging and for many, they have not been met. Self-esteem needs, which compromise an individual's ability to become the best person they can

(Pinkus 2020) through self-actualisation have been displaced by the urgent need to fulfil basic physiological needs such as shelter and food (Ryan et al. 2020). This happened because of the high rates of unemployment in South Africa (Statistics South Africa 2021), facilitated by the global lockdown. Self-actualisation is needed for people to perceive reality in an efficient manner, which enables them to become resilient and secure in who they are and what they do in life (Maslow 1971). He also suggested that to be motivated in life lower order needs must be satisfied in order for people to self-actualise and reach their natural (physical) and psychological and work achievements (Shonubi et al. 2016). In this regard, it is apparent that in South Africa the vast majority cannot do this. For instance, people who do not have jobs cannot provide food and water, which in many areas in the country is provided via one tap for thousands. Most of the lower working classes are thus preoccupied with reorganising and rethinking their livelihoods. They have survived hand-to-mouth for weeks and months, and this will likely continue years into the pandemic's grip. Moreover, although higher order needs are less necessary for survival, they contribute to humanity's resilience and growth (Pinkus 2020). Satisfaction of higher needs leads to improved health and longevity (MacLeod 2020). For this reason, they are also beneficial psychologically and lead to contentment, happiness and self-fulfilment (Pinkus 2020).

As the COVID-19 lockdowns continue, the likelihood of both higher and lower order needs not being met are likely to increase significantly for all parts of the South African population, particularly the lower to middle-working classes. This tipping point will be when they see their current needs as unmet and their opportunity for future growth though realising their potential disappear (Shaughnessy et al. 2018). This is directly related to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy. For example, people make decisions based on perceptions of their physiological needs before considering their safety needs, and thus, they are more likely to take personal risks and be subject to trauma or injury or mental health issues. Furthermore, the populace, particularly younger people, as seen in other countries, could also develop more mental illnesses (Browning et al. 2021), which in turn, also leads to lack of self-esteem generally (Henriksen et al. 2017).

There are many challenges that the COVID-19 lockdown poses to all levels of society none of which is more important than loss of self-esteem (Ryan et al. 2020). This is also related to an increase in mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety (Salari et al. 2020). Unemployment is rising in South Africa and globally, which means that as people struggle, or cannot meet lower order needs they will lose their self-esteem, or perceptions of self-esteem (Baumeister et al. 2003; Shonubi et al. 2016), and not be able to self-actualise into becoming the best person they can. The researchers suggest that this will impact the overall survival, health, and well-being in countries like South Africa, which has limited infrastructure and is dogged by poor governance.

CONCLUSION

As individuals and communities ascend the needs hierarchy it is important to structure health behaviour and policy evaluation through research and practical application. Social determinants of health are internationally recognised as key to any healthy society and must be integrated with the hierarchy when considering management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Factors such as poverty, education and other social determinants must be considered when trying to achieve health equity. Integrating the hierarchy with social determinants, integral to South Africa can help reframe the way the public, policymakers, and the private sector achieve suitable COVID-19 management. In conclusion, in South Africa multilateral partnerships at all levels of society to meet the basic needs of people, especially vulnerable groups, are needed. These include the conditions in which people live and work and the broader forces that influence daily life, such as economic policies, development agendas, social norms, social policies, and political system and healthcare services, good water and sanitation, lifestyle education and general education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The first recommendation is that more research on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs should be undertaken in South Africa, particularly on how it can be used to underpin the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, a systematic

review should be undertaken on the hierarchy in terms of its use during the initial acute phase and later chronic phases of the pandemic in terms of patient management.

In terms of Maslow's Hierarchy, it is recommended that the government of South Africa review policies related to the populations basic needs. The government should ensure this is carried out urgently, as without basic needs satisfaction of psychological and self-fulfilment needs cannot be attained. This will ultimately undermine the economic growth and future of the population and country as a whole, which ultimately will undermine.

LIMITATIONS

This was a limited critical review, and thus not all literature was consulted. Journal articles and other material were not checked for accuracy consistent with this type of review articulation.

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