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Title: Maslow's hierarchy and social and emotional wellbeing

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Abstract

Mental health, or more broadly, social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) is dependent on many factors, both internal and external. The external factors such as socio economic disadvantage are fairly well documented and generally their link to SEWB are fairly easy to understand, although the degree of impact they have may be debated. The internal factors such as motivation are much more difficult to explain. One framework that is still used to explain motivation since it was first published in the 1940s is that of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Put simply this framework suggests that people are motivated by different needs that can be classified in a hierarchy with the lower level needs having to be fulfilled before the higher level needs can be. Better understanding the link between cultural disconnection and SEWB may offer clear solutions to how it can be addressed.

This paper will argue that those higher level needs are closely linked to culture and that consequently any disconnection from culture can impede, if not make impossible, their attainment. If this link can be demonstrated it becomes possible to explain how the SEWB of people who have been disconnected from their culture such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians is at greater risk of impairment.

Keywords: Culture, Mental Health, Motivation, Needs, Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Maslow's hierarchy and social and emotional wellbeing

While Maslow first reported his hierarchy of needs in the 1940s he continued to develop it and some authors have produced what they believe to be versions that more accurately reflect his later ideas. Table 1 shows one of these as described by Koltko-Rivera (2006).

Maslow described the individual as an integrated and organic whole motivated by needs that are hierarchical - unfulfilled lower needs dominate thinking and behaviour until they are satisfied. Once satisfied, the next level dominates or is expressed in everyday life. Only when the deficiency needs (1-4) (see Table 1) are satisfied, are individuals free to pursue the higher needs (5-6). "Indeed, the fulfilment of the basic needs is considered a prerequisite to such pursuit" (Zalenski and Raspa 2006).

Zalenski and Raspa's (2006) description of the person at each level give some indication of the increasing importance of culture to the explanation of how these needs can be met. For example Safety needs are in part determined by law and order. What constitutes an acceptable way of ensuring safety is defined by society and the values that underlie those definitions are determined by cultural values and beliefs. The next level of Belongingness and Love are achieved through affiliation with a group, a process that is very much impacted by cultural values and beliefs about what is acceptable to the group. Individuals function within established norms of performance rules of inclusion and exclusion. The next level of Esteem needs are achieved through recognition or achievement, both of which can only be attained through meeting, or exceeding, the expectations of

society; expectations based on the values and beliefs determined by culture. When we look at the higher level needs of Self actualization and Self-transcendence the importance of culture becomes even greater. These entail the individual maximizing their unique potential in life. It is culture that determines what an individuals' potential is or rather what is considered to be a potential worthy of attainment. At this level the cultural demands which must be met to demonstrate achievement are at their most rigorous. "Living at this level can lead to peak experiences and even transcendence - the experience of deep connection with others, nature, or God, and the perception of beauty, truth, goodness, and the sacred in the world" (Zalenski and Raspa 2006). Culture plays a central part in determining what all of these things are.

The term "social and emotional wellbeing" has been used in Australia since the 1980s. The term has encouraged people to take a more holistic view of mental health by incorporating broader socio-historical and personal choices (Garvey 2008). It incorporates mental health, defined by Garvey (2008) as "a state of emotional and social wellbeing in which individuals can cope with the normal stresses of life and achieve their potential. In such a state, individuals may also contribute to community life, and engage in positive and beneficial relationships with others".

It can be seen that there is a relationship between these definitions and Maslow's hierarchy of needs and it can be argued that the level of SEWB of an individual corresponds to the level of needs achieved on Maslow's hierarchy. To achieve a higher level of SEWB, one must be able to fulfil lower level one's needs. This means more than just the survival needs but includes the higher level needs. Whilst it is not necessary to

remain in a constant state of self-actualisation it is necessary to be able to achieve it at times; to know that it is possible to reach one's potential. If this is not possible then the maximum level of SEWB that can be achieved will be correspondingly lower. Table 2 indicates the characteristics associated with each level of SEWB that relate to having met the needs of the corresponding level in Maslow's hierarchy.

What is culture for the individual?

Culture defines the beliefs, behaviours, sanctions, values and goals that mark the way of life of a group of people. It includes for example language, values, rituals or expectations for behaviour, social controls, what we eat and how we communicate. It provides the context within which we view the world and make decisions about how we will live. Significantly it enables us to develop our self identity, defining who we are and what our role is (Gorman and Best 2005). In Freudian terms it enables us to form our culturally enriched ego-ideals, ideals that we internalise and which are essential for psychological health, for SEWB.

Culture determines roles, criteria against which we measure how well we fulfil these roles, how we define ourselves as the sort of person who embodies the ideals of the role and we then internalise these (Lear 2006). Lear explained this when he stated “[One] needed to constitute oneself as a person for whom living up to the relevant ideals constituted who one was...It required a steadfast commitment stretching over much of one's life to organise one's life in relation to these ideals” (Lear 2006).

If culture enables us to determine our roles and enables us to internalise ideals then it also enables us to make judgements about what behaviour are appropriate and what are not. When we contemplate behaviours that we have internalised as inappropriate we experience the emotion of shame. This enables us to self regulate our behaviour. Whilst initially shame may have been inculcated as a result of the reactions to our behaviour by other people, especially by parents, once these values are internalised they don't require the presence of another to make us experience shame (Lear 2006).

What is the impact of cultural disconnection on social & emotional wellbeing?

If culture provides the context within which we define ourselves, and defines the needs that motivate us, needs which progress through a hierarchy to self actualization and self-transcendence, then it stands to reason that someone who has been disconnected from their culture will be impeded from achieving those needs. As the relevance of culture to needs becomes greater the higher up the hierarchy we go then people who have been disconnected from their culture are likely to be constrained to the lower levels of motivation. At its extreme this would mean they would find it difficult to go beyond the first level of survival needs because little else would have any meaning without the context that culture provides.

Jonathan Lear in his book “Radical Hope: Ethics in the face of cultural devastation” explains how acts that previously had higher meaning in the light of cultural values and beliefs could become relegated to meeting lower level survival needs. He describes how for

the Crow people, when they were forced to give up their hunting and warrior existence to live on a reservation, not only lost those activities which were central to what defined them as people but other acts such as the preparation of a meal were relegated from preparing a husband to be a great warrior to simply providing sustenance (Lear 2006). According to Lear “All acts are located in the larger scheme of purposefulness” (2006). If the larger scheme is destroyed the actor loses this larger purpose. “For an act is not constituted merely by the physical movements of the actor: it gains its identity via its location in a conceptual world, and it is the world which has broken down”(Lear 2006).

Lear uses the example of a chess piece to demonstrate how the devastation of a culture can remove the conceptual context in which we define our very identity. If a chess piece were person with an understanding of identity, rules and goals created by the world of chess, then if the owners of the chess set stopped playing chess, that piece wouldn't simply have lost its way of life but it would no longer have the concepts with which to understand itself or the world (Lear 2006).

Referring again to the Crow peoples, Lear argues that when their way of life was destroyed so was the end or goal - the Telos - of that life. Not only were they unable to pursue happiness in the traditional ways, their very concept of what happiness was could no longer be lived. They had lost the concepts with which their happiness had been understood (Lear 2006).

There is also an obvious impact on peoples' behaviour. In the absence of a culture to help define the ideals and the appropriate versus inappropriate behaviours it becomes

difficult for an individual to know how to behave or when to experience shame. This could result in socially unacceptable behaviour or an inappropriate sense of shame.

Implications for the Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

It is well established that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians experience considerable disadvantage compared to non Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in areas such as educational attainment, labour force participation, unemployment, homeownership, income, incarceration, housing and homelessness and health status (Pink and Allbon 2008). Despite ongoing government projects attempting to address all of these areas of disadvantaged, there has only been a slight improvement in some areas.

It could be argued that a factor contributing to this lack of success is the cultural dislocation that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have experienced as a result of colonisation. Hunter (1993) discussed at length the impact of rapid social and ecological change on Aboriginal cultures brought about by colonisation. In particular he relates this to the possible effects on the construction of identity.

The impact of this dislocation on people's ability to meet their higher level needs may well create a barrier for them participating in programs aimed at addressing their disadvantage. If there cultural dislocation means that they are unable to define and recognise their higher level needs, then programs aimed, for example, at increasing their participation in education, will not be perceived as relevant to their needs. People are

motivated to participate in activities that they perceive as helping them to meet their needs. If education is not perceived as meeting a need, then there will be little motivation to strive for a higher level of education.

Exploring the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians from this framework may facilitate the development of a different and possibly more effective approach to closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and Non Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed a link between culture and SEWB, arguing that when people are dislocated from their culture their ability to satisfy their needs is consequently impaired. If this link will open in a is accepted then it is possible to suggest that this could be a critical factor explaining the problems found by Indigenous groups who have had their cultural connections partly or completely severed. If these groups are unable to identify, let alone meet, the higher level needs as proposed by Maslow, then their ability to achieve social and emotional wellbeing are equally impaired. This could explain the failure of many programs aimed at improving SEWB, especially those that concentrate on specific areas such the individual's health as opposed to those that work with communities to increase their capacity as a community and in particular that strengthen their cohesiveness and resilience.

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Tables

Table 1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

	Motivational level	Description of person at this level
6	Self-transcendence	Seeks to further a cause beyond the self and to experience a communion beyond the boundaries of the self through peak experience
5	Self-actualization	Seeks fulfilment of personal potential.
4	Esteem needs	Seeks esteem through recognition or achievement.
3	Belongingness and love needs	Seeks affiliation with a group.
2	Safety needs	Seeks security through order and law.
1	Physiological (survival) needs	Seeks to obtain the basic necessities of life.

Table 2 Comparison of Motivational Level, Description of the Person, and Characteristics of the SEWB level

Motivational level	Description of person at this level	Characteristics of person at this level of SEWB
6. Self-transcendence	Seeks to further a cause beyond the self and to experience a communion beyond the boundaries of the self through peak experience	Is concerned about others and strives to contribute to the good of the community either locally or more globally
5. Self-actualization	Seeks fulfilment of personal potential.	Has a sense of their ability to achieve further goals and a sense of what they want to strive for.
4. Esteem needs	Seeks esteem through recognition or achievement.	Has a realistic positive opinion of themselves and their ability to gain respect and recognition from others
3. Belongingness and love needs	Seeks affiliation with a group.	Is confident in their relationships or in their ability to form caring relationships. Is able to identify with a group or

		groups.
2. Safety needs	Seeks security through order and law.	Feels safe and confident that they will not be harmed
1. Physiological (survival) needs	Seeks to obtain the basic necessities of life.	Has all of the survival needs met. Feels confident that they will continue to be met.