

This is old news now but...

Have you checked out the new [Antiracism & Equity Podcast](#) yet? Episode offer food for thought and pause, OR, a special guest, in which case, it will perhaps not be as brief. Perfect for a commute that requires distraction, or to listen to while knitting quietly as it rains.

New episodes drop on Wednesdays.



This week's question to consider:

Did you know that the ubiquitous Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs may very well be based on indigenous knowledge? I sure didn't! Let's explore this new information together.

Pro tip: Whitewashing is everywhere, as is appropriation. Advocacy and social justice work calls for us to examine things with a critical eye to decide. But it's not always a terrible story. Sometimes it's just... additional context.

The ideas around Maslow's hierarchy of needs are ubiquitous. Though proposed in 1943 in a psychology journal, it has become common parlance in education, and outside academia entirely.

Thing is, it is a comforting idea.

Thinking in terms of basic human needs, it makes sense to us as teachers to consider that a student may not be in an optimal position to learn if, say, their physiological needs and safety needs are not met, on a basic level. This has always made sense to me, thinking in these terms; how can a student concentrate when on high alert and worrying about their next meal, or exhausted? There is less brain space available for the quiz when there is a portion devoted to managing the basics of life.

After all, it's super comforting to think that things are fixable. And if you can point to the thing, you can work to fix the thing.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a motivational theory in psychology comprising a five-tier model of human needs, often depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid.



Maslow's hierarchy of needs

source: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>
retrieved: November 1, 2022

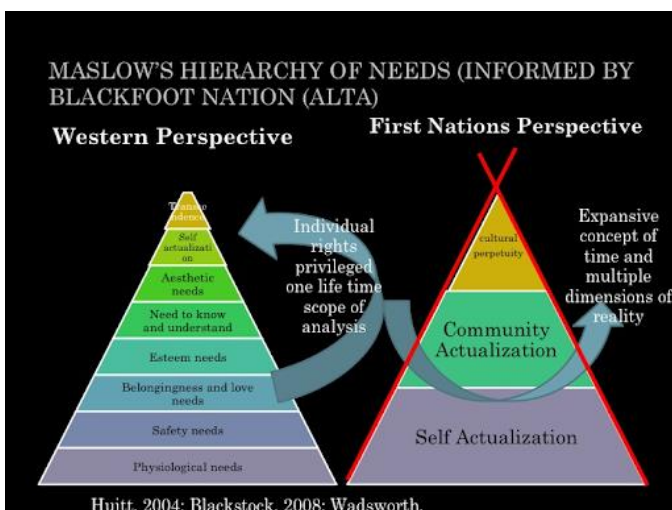


Image source: University of Alberta professor C. Blackstock, 2014
Image retrieved from <https://shanesafir.com/2020/12/before-maslows-hierarchy-the-whitewashing-of-indigenous-knowledge/> on October 13, 2022

There are a few problems with the theory, however.

One potential problem is that it was perhaps originally conceived of by the Blackfoot people, who described a tipi, rather than a hierarchy, of needs a bit differently.

Professor C. Blackstock contrasted the hierarchy and a first nations perspective wherein self-actualization, seen at the top of the pyramid, is the foundation of the tipi.

This idea is very interesting and showcases the contrast in First Nations perspectives compared to western (colonial? mainstream?) perspectives, especially when it comes to community. The

notion that individualism is the root of self actualization, and the idea that one person reaching their potential is about things that serve the person, is very recognizably a western idea. The First Nations understanding of community as the goal, with self-actualization taken for granted as a birthright, is fascinating to me.

If we take this tipi vs pyramid idea as fact, here is further proof that whitewashing is a thing, and it's a thing that has been around for some time, in many, many, many ways. The ways, they keep popping up. There will always be learning. And unlearning.

But let's look a little closer.

Here is another consideration.

Though it's positioned as a hierarchy on a difficult-to-forget triangle, even Maslow didn't describe a hierarchy, but rather a theory of motivation.

Maslow's book, published in 1954, called [Motivation and Personality](#), expanded on the ideas.

From *The Academy of Management*, published in March of 2019, the abstract to the paper entitled [Who Built Maslow's Pyramid? A History of the Creation of Management Studies' Most Famous Symbol and Its Implications for Management Education](#):

“ Abraham Maslow's theory of motivation, the idea that human needs exist in a hierarchy that people strive to satisfy progressively, is regarded as a fundamental approach to understanding and motivating people at work. It is one of the first and most remembered models encountered by students of management. Despite gaining little support in empirical studies and being criticized for promoting an elitist, individualistic view of management, Maslow's theory remains popular, underpinned by its widely recognized pyramid form. However, Maslow never created a pyramid to represent the hierarchy of needs. We investigated how it came to be and draw on this analysis to call for a rethink of how Maslow is represented in management studies. We also challenge management educators to reflect critically on what are taken to be the historical foundations of management studies and the forms in which those foundations are taught to students. ”

Taught to psychology students. Comes up all the time in education. Found in several other disciplines, like social work, healthcare, sociology research, behavioural science, even management training.

Is there merit to the idea?

If we look at Wikipedia, because of course we are going to look at Wikipedia, the crowd sourced magnificence that provides a good idea of the general knowledge, there are a few suggestions.



source: [Wikipedia, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#)
retrieved: November 1, 2022

One is the suggestion of an overlap of the needs, rather than a hierarchy. I can get behind that. The pyramid is easy to remember, but needs aren't on a checklist.

Another is the suggestion that the notion of Indigenous origins has gained traction in social media but has no merit.

No merit? Well, great. Now there is doubt of the veracity of this information (according to Wikipedia), but how do we vet sources when there are no particularly credible sources? Also, that one professor from the University of Alberta... is that professor less credible? Where are the biases? Blackstock is an Indigenous person, but does that necessarily mean that there is no merit to the claims?

I don't know how important it is to know the answers to these questions. I do think that it's important to invite thinking and consideration and new information to colour how we perceive our guiding theories.

These ideas serve us, or they don't serve us, and it's interesting to think of origins, but it isn't necessary to conclude anything to continue doing the work of antiracism. Ultimately, knowing takes time, and sometimes the knowledge isn't there, isn't clear, or isn't necessary, to move forward.

This whole exploration has had me thinking a lot of community, though. In many of the western philosophies I have encountered, the idea of self actualization or transcendence of self is thought to be the highest possible level of achievement. I don't think that's true, though. In considering that tipi, the idea of self-actualization (and all that it implies) being a birthright, and the next thing to seek being community, and ultimately perpetuity... I have been thinking about how this intersects with the education system.

Before I was a teacher, I was an engineer. I'm also an introvert, and a recovering perfectionist. This combination of qualities has resulted in an interesting career trajectory, though. When I let go of engineering as a career, realizing that I wasn't interested in the options that were available to me, nor was I interested in pursuing another branch of engineering, I thought about what I wanted my life to look like, and at the heart of that life, was community. There were other factors of course, but one of the considerations was that a school is the heartbeat of a community. When you teach kids, you are automatically part of several communities: the community of teachers who teach the same kids; the community of teachers who teach in the same building; the community of adults who help to form those kids' understanding of the world.

I can't help thinking that there's merit in considering the tipi imagery as a goal, where community building offers more opportunity for everyone in it to reach their self-actualized self. Although... again, perhaps not so much a hierarchy as a flowing back and forth, overlapping.

I don't have a pithy ending to this one, but I feel all right about it. Sometimes it's enough to know what we know and keep an open mind so that if new information comes, we can take it in too. Antiracism work can look like that too.

Recommended Resources

YouTube Video by Andrewism (November 2021) | [Rethinking Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs \[11:09\]](#)

Shane Safir Article (2020) | [Before Maslow's Hierarchy: The Whitewashing of Indigenous Knowledge](#)

Career Professionals of Canada (January 2017) | [How Maslow's Theories Stands Up Today](#)

Tribal Education Departments National Assembly (March 2016) | [Maslow's Hierarchy Connected to Blackfoot Beliefs](#)

Thought.co article by E. Hopper (August 2021) | [Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Explained](#)

Wikipedia entry for Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (retrieved Nov 1, 2022) | [Criticisms Section](#)

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