



**Who Built Maslow's Pyramid? A History of the Creation of Management Studies' Most Famous Symbol and Its Implications for Management Education**

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3 **WHO BUILT MASLOW'S PYRAMID? A HISTORY OF THE CREATION OF**  
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5 **MANAGEMENT STUDIES' MOST FAMOUS SYMBOL AND ITS IMPLICATIONS**  
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7 **FOR MANAGEMENT EDUCATION**  
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## Abstract

Abraham Maslow's theory of motivation, the idea that human needs exist in a hierarchy that people strive progressively to satisfy, 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, its popularity 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.

## Keywords:

Motivation; hierarchy of needs, Abraham Maslow; management knowledge; management history

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3 Why has the hierarchy of needs been so popular? The appeal of the pyramid  
4 image should not be underestimated...Maslow might have chosen a different icon  
5 (e.g., a Native American medicine wheel) but it would not have had the same  
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Why has the hierarchy of needs been so popular? The appeal of the pyramid image should not be underestimated...Maslow might have chosen a different icon (e.g., a Native American medicine wheel) but it would not have had the same iconic appeal.

(Peterson & Park, 2010: 320)

Abraham Maslow may be the most “iconic figure in the history of management ideas” (Cooke, Mills, & Kelley, 2005: 133). Why? Largely because the pyramid or triangle<sup>1</sup> of human needs is likely the most famous image in management studies. The idea that human needs exist in a hierarchy form, with basic, extrinsic needs at the bottom, and that employees are motivated to satisfy each need level as they progress up the pyramid until they realize their true potential through the gratification of their “self-actualization”, is typically the first theory of motivation presented to management students and the theory of management that they recall most vividly.

The pyramid is a useful point for management textbooks to start their presentation of motivation theories (often the first content described beyond introductory material) because it is seen to be “intuitively logical and easy to understand”, and reinforces a common-sense view of human nature (Robbins & Judge, 2015: 218; Schaller, Neuberg, Griskevicius & Kenrick, 2010). Students learn that managers should design work and benefits in a way that allows employees to satisfy their needs (Ballard, 2015: 32-33), thus leading to increased job satisfaction, commitment and organizational performance. Some instructors and textbooks may suggest that skilled managers should understand where each of their employees is located on the pyramid and tailor their roles accordingly.

Management textbooks further ingrain the idea of Maslow’s pyramid in the mind of

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<sup>1</sup> Some sources we investigated present it as a pyramid, whilst others present a triangle. For consistency and to avoid confusion, we refer to it as ‘pyramid’ throughout, however, in most presentations of Maslow’s theory it appears in two dimensions as a triangle.

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3 readers as they criticize Maslow and his theory. They claim it is simplistic to believe that  
4 people are motivated to satisfy just one category of need at a time; that a universal  
5 classification across all individuals and all cultures is problematic; and that, in any case, it is  
6 unscientific, being based on personal beliefs rather than objective evidence (Hitt, Black,  
7 Porter, & Hanson, 2007; Robbins, Bergman, Stagg, & Coulter, 2015). These criticisms are  
8 useful for textbooks' sequencing as they describe the evolution of motivation theories from  
9 the early more basic approaches to the more advanced and sophisticated. For example,  
10 textbooks usually follow Maslow with a discussion of Clayton Alderfer (1969) and his ERG  
11 theory.

12  
13 While there is some variation in the naming of the five category levels in the image,  
14 what remains constant is the symbol that has become synonymous with Maslow – the  
15 pyramid. Two management books published on the initiative of Maslow's daughter, Ann  
16 Kaplan, make note of the "now famous pyramid" (Stephens, 2000: 1; Stephens & Heil, 1998:  
17 xx). In Maslow on Management, (Stephens & Heil, 1998 - a reprint of Maslow's 1965 work  
18 *Eupsychian Management*, with an introduction by the editors), a pyramid motif appears at the  
19 start of each chapter, a testament to its significance. The online preface to a popular podcast,  
20 Talking About Organizations, sums up the common view: "What Maslow is most famous  
21 for... is the pyramid of human needs" ([www.talkingaboutorganizations.com/maslow/](http://www.talkingaboutorganizations.com/maslow/)).

22  
23 "Maslow's pyramid" is pervasive beyond management studies. In psychology  
24 Maslow is regarded as one of its most eminent theorists of the last century (Haggbloom et al,  
25 2002), so is not surprising that the representation of his work has attracted attention (Koltko-  
26 Rivera, 2006; Winingar & Norman, 2010). In *Perspectives on Psychological Science* Kenrick,  
27 Griskevicius, Neuberg and Schaller (2010) asserted that "the powerful image of a pyramid of  
28 needs... has been one of the most cognitively contagious ideas in the behavioral sciences"  
29 (292). Drawing on developments in evolutionary biology, anthropology and psychology,  
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3 Kenrick et al. concluded “the basic foundational structure of the pyramid is worth preserving,  
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5 but that it should be buttressed with a few architectural extensions” (292). The significance of  
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7 Kenrick et al.’s article is attested to by the four commentaries included alongside it. In their  
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9 reply to these, Kenrick and colleagues (Schaller et al., 2010: 335) concluded that “people  
10  
11 love a pyramid”, and asked readers to ponder: “So exactly how might a Maslovian pyramid  
12  
13 be most sensibly reconstructed in light of what we [now] know about human evolution?”  
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16 Many of the works that promote the pyramid, critique it and/or seek to develop it, cite  
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18 either or both of Maslow’s two “classics” on his motivation theory – the 1943 article in  
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20 *Psychological Review* and an edition of his book *Motivation and Personality* (1954, 1970, or  
21  
22 1987) to link the pyramid to Maslow. However, the pyramid does not appear in them (De  
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24 Bruyckere, Kirschner & Hulshof, 2015; Eaton, 2013). We delved deeper to see if we might  
25  
26 find how Maslow’s pyramid came to be.  
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29 Maslow was a prolific writer: of personal journals (Maslow 1979a; 1979b) as well as  
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31 published work, with his bibliography containing more than 140 entries (Maslow, 1972). But  
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33 having conducted an extensive search, including in the Maslow archives at the Center for the  
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35 History of Psychology at the University of Akron in Ohio, we found no trace of Maslow  
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37 framing his ideas in pyramid form. Further, we contacted a range of people whom we thought  
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39 could provide personal insights: from Ed Schein, who worked with many of the people in this  
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41 story, to others familiar with Maslow’s involvement with Native American nations. While  
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43 they assumed that Maslow had developed the pyramid, they admitted that they could not  
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45 recall his presenting it this way. We can say, with confidence, that Maslow’s pyramid (in the  
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47 sense of him having created it) is a misconception, albeit a widespread and compelling one.  
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51 Our article builds on others that have noted the unhelpful, continual reproduction of  
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53 Maslow’s pyramid in management textbooks (Fineman & Gabriel, 1994) – either because it  
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55 does not pass critical scrutiny (Watson, 1996) or because it was “merely a stepping-stone in  
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3 the grand scheme of his work” (Dye, Mills & Weatherbee, 2005, 1380). That his intellectual  
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5 contribution has been “bastardized ... and reduced to a parody” (Mills, Simmons and Helms  
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7 Mills, 2005: 133) is a fair assessment.

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9 Our contribution to this literature is to examine in detail how the pyramid came to be,  
10  
11 as well as its negative effects. We uncover the role played by various individuals and  
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13 institutions. In the 1950s Douglas McGregor brought Maslow’s psychological work into  
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15 management studies and Keith Davis adapted Maslow’s idea to give weight to a fledging  
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17 field. In the 1960s Charles McDermid promoted Maslow’s theory, in pyramid form, as a tool  
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19 for consultants. Also in this decade, the desire for management research to be more scientific  
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21 saw Maslow’s theory become a focal point for the emergent field of organizational behavior.  
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23 In the 1970s and 1980s, textbook writers found the pyramid to be just the kind of illustrative  
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25 content for which they were looking. From the 1990s through today Maslow’s pyramid has  
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27 taken on a life of its own in our culture as an exemplar of effective visual communication  
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29 and an easily adapted meme. This symbolism has seen the pyramid become more ingrained in  
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31 our consciousness.  
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35 An understanding of the pyramid’s origins can encourage us to think differently about  
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37 how Maslow could be represented within management studies, to provide a more meaningful  
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39 legacy than a symbol he never created. It can also be the catalyst for a deeper questioning of  
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41 our field’s historical foundations and how they are taught to students. Recent interest in  
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43 reexamining these foundations shows that Maslow is not the only theorist whose ideas have  
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45 been misappropriated. Were they alive today, founding ‘fathers’ such as Adam Smith (Huhn  
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47 & Dierksmeier, 2016); Max Weber (Cummings & Bridgman, 2011; Mills, Weatherbee &  
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49 Durepos, 2014), Douglas McGregor (Jacques, 2006) and Kurt Lewin (Cummings, Bridgman  
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51 & Brown, 2016) would have difficulty recognizing the ways in which their ideas are  
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53 presented in textbooks. Meanwhile, in addition to these misrepresentations, the pioneering  
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3 contributions of women and people from ethnic minorities are largely ignored (Cummings &  
4 Bridgman, 2016; Prieto, Phipps, Osiri & LeCounte, 2017).

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7 We return to that debate later in the paper. First, we begin with the case of Maslow's  
8 pyramid and address the question of why it prevails and is so prominent in our teaching. The  
9 pyramid's popularity is not related to a clear filial connection to Maslow. Nor is it related to  
10 empirical validation studies, which have proven disappointing (Alderfer, 1969; Hall &  
11 Nougaim, 1968; Porter, 1961). Furthermore, its ubiquity cannot be attributed to Maslow  
12 being the first psychologist to develop a theory of human needs. Langer (1937) presented a  
13 theory with physical, social, and egoistic needs. In an early human relations textbook Straus  
14 and Sayles (1960) included both Langer and Maslow. So how did Maslow's pyramid come to  
15 pass and how has its popularity grown?  
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### 29 **The rise of the pyramid: From obscure hypothesis to management monument**

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31 While Maslow never presented his hierarchy of needs (hereafter HON) in a diagram or  
32 geometrically, there was once a competing shape used to present it. It was not a triangle or a  
33 pyramid but a ladder (see for example, Wren, 1972). A Google n-gram search of the terms  
34 'Maslow's pyramid' and 'Maslow's ladder' reveals that the ladder was a common way of  
35 conveying the theory until the 1980s when the pyramid became dominant. What follows in  
36 this section is the story of how the pyramid rose to overcome this alternative representation,  
37 become synonymous with the HON and establish itself as management's best-known theory.  
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#### 48 *1950s: Maslow to McGregor – monkeys, sex, motivation, management*

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50 Maslow's early career developed within behavioral psychology. As a doctoral student at the  
51 University of Wisconsin advised by Harry Harlow, he studied primate behavior. In 1935 at a  
52 meeting of the American Psychological Association, he presented a paper on the relationship  
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3 between dominance behavior and sexual behavior in monkeys. The chair of the session was  
4 the eminent psychologist Edward Thorndike. Thorndike offered Maslow a fellowship and  
5 the eminent psychologist Edward Thorndike. Thorndike offered Maslow a fellowship and  
6 research assistant position at Columbia University. In 1937 Maslow left Columbia and  
7 accepted a teaching position at Brooklyn College. Maslow was now on his own, free to  
8 pursue his own direction (Lowry, 1973).  
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14 In December 1941 Maslow had a revelation. Sitting in his car, watching a parade of  
15 veterans pass by, he reflected on the world going to war once again. At that moment, he  
16 resolved to devote his life to developing a “psychology for the peace table” (Hoffman, 1988:  
17 148). Maslow’s wanted “a psychology that would speak to human potential and wholeness”  
18 (Ballard, 2006: 2). Maslow saw biological needs as prepotent and needing to be satisfied but  
19 once satisfied, higher level needs could emerge. Because of the prepotency of lower level  
20 needs, there must, he concluded, be a need hierarchy. In 1943 he presented his theory to a  
21 New York gathering of psychoanalytic psychologists and later that year published it in  
22 *Psychological Review*.  
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33 The HON appears to have been well received, but Maslow may have had no  
34 significant impact on management studies were it not for Douglas McGregor. McGregor  
35 encountered it in 1944 and drew on it in developing his famous Theory X and Theory Y  
36 concept<sup>2</sup>. In 1956 McGregor wrote to Maslow after presenting the HON to a group of senior  
37 executives: “We had a long discussion on the implications of your self-actualization concept  
38 and it was quite clear that the whole idea not only made sense but fired their imagination  
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47 <sup>2</sup> It has been believed that it took nearly 15 years from the 1943 paper in *Psychological Review* for Maslow’s  
48 theorizing to appear in the management domain. However, a chapter by McGregor in Hoslett’s (1946) *Human*  
49 *Factors in Management* reveals that McGregor was influenced by Maslow far earlier. The chapter is a  
50 reproduction of a paper McGregor published in *Journal of Consulting Psychology* in 1944 and shows the  
51 influence of Maslow’s earlier work on human needs on McGregor’s thinking about the dependence of  
52 subordinates on their superiors for the satisfaction of their needs.  
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3 because of its implications in industry” (McGregor letter to Maslow, November 16, 1956.  
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5 Maslow Papers M395).

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7 The reception by the executives fired McGregor’s imagination too. The following  
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9 year, he included the HON in an address he gave at MIT (McGregor, 1957a: 8):

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11 Perhaps the best way to indicate why the conventional approach of management is  
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13 inadequate is to consider the subject of motivation. In discussing this subject I will  
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15 draw heavily on the work of my colleague, Abraham Maslow of Brandeis University.  
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17 His is the most fruitful approach I know. Naturally, what I have to say will be  
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19 overgeneralized and will ignore important qualifications, in the time at our disposal,  
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21 this is inevitable.  
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25 In September 1957, McGregor wrote to Maslow again, enclosing a copy of his MIT  
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27 address, expressing his hope that Maslow would approve of the way he had used the HON,  
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29 and asking if there was further research support for self-actualization beyond what had  
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31 appeared in *Motivation and Personality* (McGregor letter to Maslow, September 26, 1957  
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33 Maslow Papers M397). Maslow told McGregor he had done ‘a very fine job’ and promised to  
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35 send him all his recent papers (Maslow letter to McGregor, October 9 1957, Maslow Papers  
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37 M397). It is not clear if these papers were sent; in any event Maslow had not done any further  
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39 research because by this time he had lost interest in empirical research. Others could do the  
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41 empirical tests if they wished, but he saw that as a distraction from his role as the innovator  
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43 and pioneer of new ideas (Hoffman, 1988).  
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47 An article based on McGregor’s MIT address was reprinted in *Management Review*  
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49 (McGregor, 1957b), a publication sent to all 30,000 members of the American Management  
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51 Association (by far the largest management interest group at the time). For reasons unknown,  
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53 however, the statement about Maslow inspiring Theory X and Y was omitted from the reprint,  
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55 as was McGregor’s comment about how he had overgeneralized Maslow’s ideas. While the  
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3 paper drew heavily on the HON, there was no citation or reference to Maslow.  
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5 In his classic *The Human Side of Enterprise* (1960), McGregor did not reference  
6 Maslow's HON as he discussed the hierarchy, but he did include *Motivation and Personality*  
7 in a reference list at the end of Chapter 3 on page 44. The book had a transformational effect  
8 on the nascent field of organizational behavior (or "human relations" as it was known then).  
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10 Indeed, a survey of members of the Academy of Management in 1974 identified it as the  
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12 most seminal contribution to the management literature (Matteson, 1974).  
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18 A close reading of *The Human Side of Enterprise* reveals the heavy influence of  
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20 Maslow's thinking. McGregor's phrase "man is a wanting animal" (1960: 36) resembles  
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22 Maslow's "man is a perpetually wanting animal" (1943: 370); and McGregor's "Man lives by  
23 bread alone, when there is no bread" (1960: 36) is very close to Maslow's "It is quite true that  
24 man lives by bread alone – when there is no bread" (1943: 375). So, while it is generally held  
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26 today that *The Human Side of Enterprise* "catalyzed Maslow's growing impact on business  
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28 theorists and executives, and brought him fame" (Hoffman, 1999: 251), at the time of its  
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30 publication, and for some time after, Maslow's influence was obscured. It is understandable,  
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32 in this light, that Huizinga concluded in 1970 "that most people who cite Theory Y cite the  
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34 hierarchy of basic needs as if it were a part of Theory Y, and therefore omit to mention its  
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36 real source" (1970: 54).  
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41 McGregor's incorporation of Maslow's thinking into his work in this obscure fashion  
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43 facilitated later misinterpretations of Maslow and might have contributed to others placing  
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45 the HON in a pyramid. For example, among the most popular criticisms of the hierarchy of  
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47 needs today is the view that people are motivated to satisfy only one need at the time, that a  
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49 need must be fully satisfied before they move to a higher level need on the pyramid, and that  
50 a satisfied need is no longer a motivator of behavior. This view is promulgated by McGregor,  
51 not Maslow. McGregor (1960: 39, emphasis in original) summarizes: "The man whose  
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3 lower-level needs are satisfied is not motivated to satisfy *those* needs. For practical purposes  
4 they exist no longer.”

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7 Maslow (1943: 388) himself was clear that such a view would be a “false impression”  
8 of his theory. In explaining his need categories, Maslow presented extreme examples. For  
9 instance, a man who is starving is overwhelmed by the physiological need to satisfy his  
10 hunger: “such a man may fairly be said to live by bread alone” (374). But he was quick to  
11 point out that such situations are rare – most people “are partially satisfied in all their basic  
12 needs and partially unsatisfied in all their basic needs at the same time” (388). Maslow is  
13 adamant that “any behavior tends to be determined by several or *all* of the basic needs  
14 simultaneously rather than by only one of them” (1943: 390, emphasis in original).  
15 Acknowledging this nuance would make a ladder a more appropriate representation than a  
16 pyramid (if a geometric representation be necessary), since, as promoters of good  
17 infographics point out, a hierarchical triangle “should be used to organize things into different  
18 and never overlapping levels” (McCready, 2016).  
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33 Another common critique of Maslow today relates to the pyramid’s universalizing  
34 assumption that all individuals in all societies have the same needs arranged according to its  
35 hierarchy and are pursued in the same order. Once again though, while this assumption is  
36 promoted by McGregor’s use of Maslow’s ideas, it is rejected by Maslow himself. Maslow  
37 (1943: 387) acknowledged that while most of his clinical patients seemed to have their needs  
38 arranged in his needs hierarchy, there were “a number of exceptions.” For some, self-esteem  
39 was more important than love. The most important exception was the “martyrs”, who are  
40 prepared to sacrifice lower level needs in the pursuit of self-actualization. Maslow (1943:  
41 390) was clear that “no claim is made that [self-actualization] is ultimate or universal for all  
42 cultures.”  
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54 Yet another area of slippage between Maslow and interpreters concerns the labels  
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3 given to each of the five need levels that are now understood to make up the pyramid. Table 1  
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5 compares those presented in Maslow's original 1943 paper, three editions of *Motivation and*  
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7 *Personality*, McGregor's descriptions in his 1957 and 1960 publications, two contemporary  
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9 books which discuss Maslow's legacy to management, as well as a small selection of top-  
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11 selling management textbooks. Robbins et al.'s (2015) treatment is typical, with the third  
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13 level being "social" needs. Their source is the 1987 edition of *Motivation and Personality*,  
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15 but neither this edition, nor the two which preceded it, use this term. In *Motivation and*  
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17 *Personality* Maslow added "belongingness" to "love" as the description of the third needs  
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19 level developed in 1943, but he did not use the label "social." Similarly, Bateman and Snell  
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21 (2009: 482) cited Maslow (1943) as the source of their pyramid, which has "social" and "ego"  
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23 needs – neither of which were used in that paper. McGregor, we suggest, is the likely  
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25 inventor of these labels since they appear in all published forms of *The Human Side of*  
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27 *Enterprise* in 1957 and 1960.  
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33 INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

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40 *1960s: Davis and McDermid – Pyramid pioneers*

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42 While McGregor did much to popularize Maslow's ideas in management, no pyramids or  
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44 triangles appear in McGregor's works. The first published triangular representation of the  
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46 HON we found was in Keith Davis's (1957) *Human Relations in Business* (see Figure 1). It is X  
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48 not an equilateral triangle as the pyramid will become, but a series of steps in a right-angled  
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50 triangle leading to a peak. Davis would be unfamiliar to most scholars now, but he was active  
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52 in the Academy of Management in the late 1950s, (eventually becoming its President in  
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54 1964), and at the forefront of discussions about the field's emerging status as a profession. He X  
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3 is described by management's most highly regarded historians as "Mr. Human Relations" for  
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5 his profound influence on the emerging field (Wren & Bedeian, 2009: 44). To elevate  
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7 management's status within the university, Davis (1957) argued that management needed to  
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9 take the teaching of its history more seriously. To be respected outside the university,  
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11 management academics needed to position themselves as experts (Davis, 1959). The  
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13 triangular symbol that Davis created out of the HON addressed these issues: the triangle with  
14  
15 steps captured the thinking of an important figure in the history of an established discipline of  
16  
17 which management could claim to be a new branch. Additionally, it helped those sharing  
18  
19 their expertise in industries with an easily applicable model. Davis's addition of the  
20  
21 specifically business-attired white executive (Maslow's idea was a theory of motivation for  
22  
23 all people), prefigured the HON's importation into the corporate world of the 1960s. It was  
24  
25 clearly pitched for the American market too: the flag-raising reminiscent of the famous image  
26  
27 of the flag-raising on Iwo Jima (Cooke & Mills, 2008).  
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33 INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

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40 While Davis did not invent the pyramid that we associate with the HON today, it  
41  
42 appears his stepped diagram was the inspiration for what appears to be the first rendition of  
43  
44 the pyramid. This appears in Charles McDermid's article "How money motivates men,"  
45  
46 published in *Business Horizons* in 1960 (see Figure 2).<sup>3</sup> McDermid was a consulting  
47  
48 psychologist for the firm Humber, Mundie and McClary. Since "maximum motivation at  
49  
50 lowest cost is the desired end result," McDermid (1960: 98) advised managers to use  
51  
52

53  
54 <sup>3</sup> In the 1960, 70s and 80s *Business Horizons* was often a medium for promoting popular new management  
55 ideas and frameworks. For example, it was the first forum for publicizing both the notion of a "matrix  
56 organization" (Galbraith, 1971) and McKinsey's Seven-S model (Waterman, Peterman & Phillips, 1980).  
57

1  
2  
3 Maslow's theory of motivation, which "can be arranged" as a pyramid (94), to evaluate the  
4 needs of their employees and adjust compensation packages accordingly. While McDermid  
5 did not cite Davis in any way, that he does not use "self-actualization" (the term used by  
6 Maslow), or McGregor's "self-fulfillment", but "self-realization" (the term that Davis had  
7 substituted), suggests that Davis's interpretation influenced McDermid's ideas.  
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13  
14 McDermid's was not the first attempt to develop an easy to remember and easy to  
15 apply motivation framework for managers. A year earlier, Robert K. Burns (1959: 123,  
16 emphasis in original) published a similar oriented paper in *Public Personnel Review*, with a  
17 typology of needs and a catchy phrase: "Taken together the first letters of these four needs –  
18 security, opportunity, acceptance, and recognition, spell *soar* – which is what happens to the  
19 motivation of men if these needs are met on the job." But it was the pyramid, not Burn's  
20 acronym that took flight.  
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31 INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

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37 *1970s and 80s: More science, more textbooks*


38  
39 In this section, we discuss two main factors that helped Maslow's HON in pyramid form  
40 grow in the consciousness of those studying management. First, the 1960s and 70s brought a  
41 wave of serious researchers seeking to study management scientifically with a testable theory,  
42 one that appeared to fit well with the most common object of their inquiries: people in large  
43 hierarchical organizations. Second, in the 1970s and 1980s, Maslow's pyramid was just the  
44 kind of content for which the first editions of many of the most popular modern management  
45 and organization textbooks were looking.  
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54 While Maslow was not interested in testing his theory empirically himself, a number  
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3 of scholars in the field of human relations were. This was a time when the recommendations  
4  
5 of two important studies on the future of management research and education were still  
6  
7 fresh. A report from the Carnegie Foundation argued that business schools must pursue the  
8  
9 development of a “systematic body of knowledge of substantial intellectual content... in the  
10  
11 form of a set of business sciences” (Gordon & Howell, 1959: 71-72). Likewise, a report from  
12  
13 The Ford Foundation identified the need “for research which meets high scientific standards”  
14  
15 (Pierson 1959, xv). Maslow’s thinking provided what looked like a testable scientific theory  
16  
17 in human relations at a time when there were few to be found.  
18  
19

20 Pioneering organizational behavior scholars like Clayton Alderfer (1989: 358) wrote  
21  
22 of his “intense excitement” when he read the first edition of *Motivation and Personality*, “as  
23  
24 if a new light had been turned on to illuminate human motivation.” Certainly this is how  
25  
26 Maslow’s ideas were marketed to management scholars. On the crest of a wave of popularity  
27  
28 as Maslow was introduced to the fledgling field, Maslow produced a book *Eupsychian*  
29  
30 *Management* (1965). This book with a strange name and somewhat rambling thoughts was  
31  
32 created from transcribed tape-recorded journal entries Maslow made in the summer of 1962  
33  
34 while a Visiting Fellow at Non-Linear Systems in Del Mar, California. Warren Bennis, who  
35  
36 wrote the Foreword for the book, described it as “an outlet for an experiment in truth, an  
37  
38 opportunity to test hypotheses, even seemingly outrageous ones” and “a sketch-pad for his  
39  
40 unfinished, and possibly, most creative work” (1965: vii).  
41  
42  
43

44 Those who put the HON to the test throughout the 1960s and 70s greatly appreciated  
45  
46 Maslow’s creation of a new field of research with his theory that behavior was not just the  
47  
48 result of unconscious desires, as the psychoanalysis conceived, or shaped by rewards and  
49  
50 reinforcement, as the behaviorists had imagined, but was also driven by the desire to fulfill  
51  
52 internal needs. Subsequently, scholarly articles such as “An empirical test of a new theory of  
53  
54 human needs” (Alderfer, 1969), “An examination of Maslow’s need hierarchy in an  
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organizational setting” (Hall & Nougaim, 1968), and “A study of the perceived need satisfactions in bottom and middle management jobs” (Porter, 1961) tested HON-based hypotheses.

✘ Chris Argyris also played an important role in applying Maslow’s theory about individual motivation to life in 1960s organizations. His book *Integrating the Individual and the Organization* (1964: 32) promoted an “oversimplified model of Maslow’s concept” with lower and higher level needs. Argyris saw “modern industrial societies” generally having taken care of lower-level needs, whereas this was not the case in “undeveloped societies”. Lower level needs relating to “organizational activities at the lowest level.” He wrote that rewards related to self-actualization “tend to exist primarily for the upper levels of management, for researchers and some engineers, and some sales people” (1964: 32, 37, 255).

Phil Sc. While an increasing number of empirical studies (e.g., Alderfer, 1969; Lawler & Suttle, 1972; Payne, 1970) failed to confirm aspects of the HON, management researchers were reluctant to dispense with it, concluding that failure to confirm was probably more a product of deficiencies in the research than with the theory itself. Moreover, it is probable that senior executives who were providing research access and other resources for this kind of empirical research at this time would have found agreeable a theory that implied those at the top of the hierarchy had reached a more advanced state of human development (Cullen, 1997). In any case, this was a time when pyramids were a popular way of representing management challenges. The structure and dynamics of bureaucracy were capturing the attention of social scientists (e.g. Blau, 1956) at a time when management consulting firms such as McKinsey & Co, Bain and Company, and the Boston Consulting Group were competing to woo clients with new management ideas. Problems of poor organizational performance were diagnosed as a lack of control, and the prescriptions administered came in the form of detailed job descriptions, rules, procedures, committees and a carefully mapped out chain of command

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3 expressed in pyramid form (O'Shea & Madigan, 1997). Elsewhere, Chandler (1962: 1) was  
4  
5 developing a new sub-field, strategic planning, by defining the object of inquiry as what  
6  
7 happens at the highest-level of a pyramidal hierarchy. The consultants were in the business of  
8  
9 building and selling pyramids. It was not a big leap to suggest that just as high performing  
10  
11 organizations have pyramids, so too do their employees. X

12  
13  
14 By the late-1970s, however, management researchers were starting to lose faith in the  
15  
16 HON. Wahba and Bridwell's (1976: 234) meta-analysis of 10 studies investigated the  
17  
18 theory's empirical validity and concluded it was "almost a nontestable theory" because of  
19  
20 Maslow's lack of rigor, loose language and vagueness in conceptualizing his ideas (see  
21  
22 Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977 for a similar assessment). But by the time these criticisms started to  
23  
24 gather momentum, another vehicle for promoting Maslow's pyramid had emerged: the  
25  
26 modern management textbook.

27  
28  
29 Most of the best-selling management textbooks of today were first published in the  
30  
31 late 1970s and early 1980s (e.g., Baron, 1983; Robbins, 1979; Wheelen & Hunger, 1983).  
32  
33 While there had been some management textbooks before (e.g., Davis, 1957), factors  
34  
35 emerged to change the management textbook industry. In response to the Carnegie  
36  
37 Foundation and Ford Foundation reports of 1959, management scholarship was becoming  
38  
39 more scientific and quantitative. Its insights were not in a form easily digestible by students.  
40  
41 X  
42 As Hunger and Wheelen (1980) reported on their survey of management educators: "Most  
43  
44 [respondents] took the stance that schools have gone too far with quantitative methods [and]  
45  
46 modeling [and] felt it was time to return to the teaching of more practical skills and  
47  
48 techniques" (29). The number of students studying business subjects at universities was  
49  
50 growing and advances in publishing technology enabled a new kind of textbook that occupied  
51  
52 a middle ground between being practical and maintaining academic credibility. In the preface  
53  
54 of one of his popular books, Stephen Robbins described what was to follow as the

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2  
3 “culmination of what I’ve learned works and doesn’t work in the teaching of the basic course”

4  
5 (1984: xviii). Amongst the list of features he identified as being different to textbooks that  
6  
7 had preceded were “pragmatism” – students wanted useful knowledge – and “figures and  
8  
9 exhibits”, which were useful aids, he claimed, in the learning process.  
10

11 In these new textbooks, the subject of management was divided into discrete chapters:  
12  
13 e.g., motivation, organizational design, managing change; and in each sub-field different  
14  
15 theories and ideas would be presented, generally chronologically, to show the progression of  
16  
17 the sub-field. Each chapter would also include exercises or cases studies where students could  
18  
19 test their knowledge by applying the theories and frameworks. Diagrams, particularly ones  
20  
21 divided into steps like Maslow’s pyramid, made the subject look practically applicable and  
22  
23 the knowledge easily testable. To this day the pyramid stands tall as a foundation stone in any  
24  
25 textbook chapter on motivation.  
26  
27

28  
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30  
31 *1990s-today: The perpetual power of the pyramid*  
32

33 As empirical studies have continued to shed doubt on the validity of the HON, related  
34  
35 critiques about the presentation of Maslow’s pyramid have increased (Fineman & Gabriel,  
36  
37 1994; Watson, 1996; Dye et al., 2005; Mills et al., 2005). So, why does Maslow’s pyramid  
38  
39 and the HON theory that it purportedly represents continue to prevail and be so prominent in  
40  
41 our teaching? It has much to do with, we believe, the power of the geometric form that  
42  
43 Maslow never promoted, and whose characteristics he actively argued against.  
44  
45

46 While the meaning of shapes has not been studied in relation to management theories,  
47  
48 researchers in graphics, branding and traffic sign design have determined that using  
49  
50 geometrical forms to frame, order and present ideas can have powerful effects (Macnab,  
51  
52 2008). For nearly 100 years, advocates of Gestalt theory have explored how viewers group  
53  
54 together different objects into groups or a single coherent whole when the separate elements  
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3 are arranged together in a particular way. Research has concluded that the arrangement of  
4 elements follows principles of similarity, continuation, closure, proximity, figure/ground  
5 relations, and symmetry and order. Elements so arranged feel more connected, coherent and  
6 complete (Arnheim, 1954).  
7  
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10  
11 The arrangement of the HON into a simple graphic gives the HON an appearance of  
12 coherence and completeness. Moreover, presenting the HON as a pyramid or equilateral  
13 triangle on its base conveys specific characteristics that may be well suited to management  
14 and corporate audiences. Pyramids and equilateral triangles are the most difficult straight-  
15 sided shapes to break or bend; thus they represent power and strength (Newman, Garry,  
16 Bernstein, Kantner & Lindsay, 2012). Relatedly, pyramids convey religious significance,  
17 reflecting a pathway from earth to heaven or describing powerful trinities, such as body-  
18 mind-spirit or father-son-holy ghost or past-present-future. They also indicate scientific  
19 credibility, universality and precision. An upright triangle illustrates an objective view, and  
20 its geometry conveys exactitude.  
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33 A triangle's ability to point in a single direction explains the Greek symbol delta ( $\Delta$ ),  
34 meaning change. By suggesting change, action, and conflict, triangles capture attention and  
35 put people on alert. Traffic signs that indicate hazards tend to be upright triangles.  
36 Conversely, because triangles resting on a point rather than a base have been proven to illicit  
37 feelings of conflict, tension, doubt, nervousness, risk, a focusing of the mind, and looking  
38 downward, they are ideal for "Yield" or "Give Way" signs (Armbruster, Suchert, Gärtner, &  
39 Strobel, 2014; Larson, Aronoff, & Stearns, 2007).<sup>4</sup>  
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48 In many cultures, triangles represent masculinity (a triangle standing on its base like a  
49 pyramid signifies male, whereas one standing on its tip signifies female). It is a symbol of  
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54 <sup>4</sup> One writer who investigated the origins of Maslow's ideas concluded that Maslow based his triangle on the  
55 tip of first nations people the Blackfoot, following a summer Maslow spent with the tribe in 1938 (Michel,  
56 2014). However, in Blackfoot tradition, the triangle rests on its tip, not its base – which would, according to  
57 views of these experts, be quite detrimental to Maslow's HON as a reassuring and popular theory for managers.  
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3 energy (a triangle its base signifies fire) and reflects inspiration and aspiration. As stated by  
4  
5 Macnab (2008: 201), “the triangle is the symbol of inspiration through the transcendence of a  
6  
7 mundane base. The divisive line at the bottom of the triangle returns to its divine origins, the  
8  
9 point of infinity and wholeness.” This symbolism encouraged Adidas to develop its  
10  
11 traditional three stripes logo into the form of a pyramid (Wang, 2015).  
12

13  
14 In the age of teaching with PowerPoint, Maslow’s pyramid went on to become a  
15  
16 staple in the slide packs (often developed in tandem with increasingly glossy and graphic-rich  
17  
18 management textbooks). Indeed, experts claim that the layered pyramid is an exemplar shape  
19  
20 for anybody looking to design an effective presentation (McCready, 2016). The pyramid has  
21  
22 gained further power as it has extended beyond management writing and teaching to become  
23  
24 part of the modern fabric of life and pop-culture. Searching Maslow’s pyramid reveals dozens  
25  
26 of versions and reinterpretations of the form: pyramids that outline five levels of robot needs,  
27  
28 vampire and zombie needs, and Internet needs (with Wifi generally being seen as a base need  
29  
30 without which young people can no longer function on any other level). There is even a  
31  
32 Maslow Hotel in Johannesburg, dedicated to the HON, with its levels of accommodation  
33  
34 arranged in pyramid form.<sup>5</sup>  
35  
36

37  
38 Following World War II Maslow’s HON captured the prevailing ideologies of  
39  
40 individualism, nationalism and capitalism in America and justified a growing managerialism  
41  
42 in bureaucratic (i.e., layered triangular) formats (Cooke & Mills, 2008; Cooke et al., 2005;  
43  
44 Cullen, 1997; Dye et al., 2005). But Maslow’s HON may be the only management theory that  
45  
46 has ‘gone viral’ and become a meme, and it is doubtful that this would have happened if it  
47  
48 did not come with packaged in a pyramid with five clear categorical levels. While it may be  
49  
50 difficult to prove links between the pyramid shape and the HONs prominence, no other  
51

52  
53 <sup>5</sup> The Hotel “aspires to create an environment that optimally satisfies the fundamental needs of the individual so  
54 that the mind is free to achieve its highest potential, self-actualisation.”  
55 <https://www.suninternational.com/maslow/stories/business/how-maslow-got-its-name/>  
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3 management theory has been so closely linked to a particular geometric symbol (Clark, 2012;  
4  
5 see also Peterson & Park 2010). Repetition in this form has not only strengthened  
6  
7 misconceptions of Maslow's HON but also made it (and our misconceptions) more  
8  
9 ubiquitous, more ingrained, and harder to change (De Bruyckere et al., 2015).  
10

### 11 12 13 **Pyramid scheme: Winners and losers**

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15 Our investigations into how Maslow's pyramid became not just the most famous  
16  
17 symbol in management studies, but a meme, raises broader questions about how management  
18  
19 knowledge has developed through the field's history, as well as questions about how we, as  
20  
21 management educators, pass on that knowledge to students. These questions concern the  
22  
23 politics of knowledge, especially the interests that are served by ideas being presented in  
24  
25 particular ways. Presenting the HON as a pyramid suited almost everyone involved:  
26  
27 consultants like McDermid who needed a memorable framework to sell to clients; the  
28  
29 Academy of Management who wanted its members to be seen as being relevant to practice;  
30  
31 textbook publishers and authors who needed not just an idea that had practical applications to  
32  
33 the 'real world', but the academic credibility that a 'founding father' such as Maslow could  
34  
35 provide (and then a progression that could be demonstrated by showing his ideas to be  
36  
37 simplistic and outdated); and researchers who could propose extensions to the pyramid to  
38  
39 address gaps in Maslow's thinking.  
40  
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44  
45 It also suited Maslow himself. This distinguishes the pyramid from other examples of  
46  
47 misrepresentations within management studies of famous historical figures, such as Smith,  
48  
49 Weber and Lewin, who died well before their ideas were appropriated by others. Maslow  
50  
51 lived for 10 years after McDermid's presentation of the pyramid and did little to correct it,  
52  
53 despite expressing in his writing a dislike for reductionism, or what he called "rubricizing":  
54  
55 "a cheap form of cognizing, i.e., really a form of *not*-cognizing, a quick, easy cataloguing  
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3 whose function is to make unnecessary the effort required by more careful, idiographic  
4  
5 perceiving or thinking” (Maslow, 1962: 126).

6  
7 Maslow’s personal journals (1979a; 1979b), which he began writing in 1959 and  
8  
9 which detail his inner thoughts, emotions and conflicts, are revealing. By the time the HON  
10  
11 was beginning to be celebrated by McGregor, Davis, McDermid and others (Haire, 1956;  
12  
13 Pellegrin & Coates, 1957), aspects of Maslow’s professional life were unravelling. He felt  
14  
15 underappreciated in psychology, whose journals has been taken over by experimental studies,  
16  
17 which depressed Maslow for their lack of creativity and insight. He also had more pragmatic  
18  
19 concerns, suffering periods of ill health and financial difficulties. Maslow found personal and  
20  
21 professional redemption in his acceptance in the management community and financial gain  
22  
23 through speaking engagements and consulting. He welcomed the new field showing an  
24  
25 interest in his ideas and offering the potential for personal benefit. It is not surprising then  
26  
27 that he would let the reinterpretation and simplification of his ideas by his admirers pass.  
28  
29

30  
31 However, while some benefitted from the creation of Maslow’s pyramid, not  
32  
33 everyone did. The biggest losers, we suggest, have been management students. We identify  
34  
35 three specific negative effects in this regard: that the pyramid is a poor representation of  
36  
37 Maslow’s HON; that the preoccupation with the pyramid obscures the context within which  
38  
39 the theory was created; and that by focusing exclusively on the pyramid, we miss the other  
40  
41 contributions that Maslow’s thinking can make to management studies.  
42  
43

44 The first problem with Maslow’s pyramid is that it is plainly wrong, not so much  
45  
46 because he did not create it, but because a pyramid – while a good fit for a universal and  
47  
48 aspirational theory containing a rigid hierarchy of mutually exclusive categories – is a poor  
49  
50 representation of Maslow’s original thesis on motivation. A rectangular shape like the ladder  
51  
52 that many used before the pyramid became *de rigueur* (e.g., Porter, Lawler, & Hackman,  
53  
54 1975; Wren, 1972), would be a more accurate representation of his 1943 conception. A  
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3 ladder addresses the “narrowing” elitism of the pyramid and its implication of a definite end-  
4  
5 point to the progress of human development, rather than allowing for the possibility of “steps”  
6  
7 beyond self-actualization (Rowan, 1998, Wilber, 2000). The ladder also attenuates the most  
8  
9 common misrepresentation of the HON – that people occupy only one level at any particular  
10  
11 time. The depiction of the HON as a pyramid, with horizontal lines demarcating the different  
12  
13 levels, makes it difficult to imagine that people can be simultaneously striving to satisfy a  
14  
15 number of different needs. When one is on a ladder, multiple rungs are occupied by the feet  
16  
17 and hands, and other rungs may be leaned on as well. The ladder as thus described is far  
18  
19 closer to Maslow’s original thinking.  
20  
21

22  
23 Moreover, a ladder better denotes movement both up and down the hierarchy, another  
24  
25 overlooked feature of Maslow’s theory. As prominent management historian Daniel Wren  
26  
27 (1972: 329) noted in the first edition of his *The Evolution of Management Thought*: “In  
28  
29 Maslow’s theory, people moved up the ladder of needs as each level was satisfied [but] they  
30  
31 could [also] move in a reverse direction if fulfilment of a lower-order need was threatened or  
32  
33 removed.” Indeed, Wren continued to use the ladder to describe the HON until the most  
34  
35 recent, 6th edition (Wren & Bedeian, 2009). Removing the pyramid from management  
36  
37 textbooks and replacing it with a ladder would be a step forward.  
38  
39

40  
41 This leads to our second problem with the pyramid, which is that it is presented as a  
42  
43 simplistic “cookie cutter,” one-size-fits-all approach to managing people, which is not at all  
44  
45 what Maslow intended. The case of Maslow’s pyramid is representative of the way historical  
46  
47 figures in management studies and their ideas are presented, frozen in time and devoid of  
48  
49 their historical context (Cooke et al., 2005; Dye et al., 2005; Hassard, 2012; Jacques, 1996;  
50  
51 Genoe McLaren, Mills & Weatherbee, 2015). While the potted histories of management that  
52  
53 often occupy ‘chapter 2’ of introductory textbooks are criticized for their oversimplification  
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55 (Jacques, 2006; Jacques & Durepos, 2015), at least Frederick Taylor and his scientific  
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3 management is to some extent situated in events of the day, to give students insight into the  
4 reasons for their emergence and spread. In contrast, Maslow's HON almost always appears in  
5 chapters on motivation and with little or no discussion of context.  
6  
7

8  
9 Whilst today's textbooks judge HON harshly against the criterion of scientific  
10 validation, understanding the context could lead to a more sympathetic, and more informed  
11 assessment. Maslow was an eminent psychologist – President of the American Psychological  
12 Association, the founder of humanistic psychology, and an intellectual. He was not a  
13 management scholar or consultant, nor did he desire to be. Maslow was watching the world  
14 go to war for the second time in 30 years and he believed his field of psychology could  
15 contribute an understanding of its causes, were it not for its scientific conservatism and  
16 preoccupation with method. Paradigm shifts in thinking would only result, he believed, from  
17 a more creative, risk-taking approach, which his HON stands as an exemplar of (Lowry, 1973:  
18 47). At the time, Maslow's efforts to break free from the straight-jacket of empiricism were  
19 well-received. Two years before his classic 1943 article in *Psychological Review*, Maslow  
20 published a paper in the same journal on the principle of frustration, which would become a  
21 cornerstone in his motivation theory. Klein (1942) described it as “a superb example of sound  
22 armchair psychology” (233) and said Maslow had proved that psychologists need not be  
23 “concerned about being stigmatized as philosophers” (233) and “need no longer worry about  
24 the feelings of inferiority of our psychological forbears because of the greater precision and  
25 rigor of the natural sciences” (233).  
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46 Is a more context-sensitive depiction of Maslow's HON in management textbooks  
47 realistic? After all, are textbooks not forced to be reductive in order to provide students with a  
48 broad understanding of the field's foundations? While this argument has intuitive appeal, the  
49 existence of textbooks that provide a more sophisticated, context-rich account of the HON  
50 and other aspects of Maslow's theorizing (e.g. Clegg, Kornberger & Pitsis, 2016; Mills et al.,  
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2005) demonstrate that it can be done. But it also raises the question of whether textbooks are sufficient to deliver the basics of management education, even for introductory courses.

Why not also get students to read original sources, which is common practice across the social sciences? After all, compared with academic journals of today, where papers are often written in a style impenetrable to all but a small number of “insiders”, the writings of historical figures such as Taylor, Lewin and McGregor are accessible and digestible even by new undergraduates.

In the case of Maslow, this would be revealing. Students would see that he anticipated criticisms that textbooks would later make of his theory and explicitly cautioned against his ideas being interpreted in these ways. Maslow did not say that the HON is unidirectional, that achieving higher levels makes you a superior being, that once a need is satisfied it no longer affects behavior, or that it applies to all people in the same way (Maslow, 1943; 1954). It would be clear to students that Maslow’s theory in his writings is more sophisticated and nuanced than the simplistic HON presented in most textbooks.

This connects with our third problem with the pyramid – its symbolism and memorability prevent us from looking beyond it in intellectual terms to create a new Maslow for management studies. If students read Maslow in the original, they would realize that he was writing about human needs, not organizational needs. He was not writing a guide for managers in organizations but about people as individuals and how societies diminish individual creativity. His work was about freedom of inquiry and expression, which were among the necessary preconditions Maslow stated for the satisfaction of human needs. Maslow was about individual growth and fulfillment, knowing yourself, reaching your potential.

In the 1950s creativity and its barriers became increasingly topical, partly because of the Soviet Union’s space program successes (Hoffman, 1988). This is in part how Maslow

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2  
3 made his reputation beyond the academy. Following the publication of *Motivation and*  
4  
5 *Personality* in 1954, he emerged as one of the few established psychologists to challenge the  
6  
7 prevailing conformism of the 1950s and speak out on how large organizations and social  
8  
9 conformity stifled individual self-expression. In a 1958 lecture he observed that “A first rate  
10  
11 soup is more creative than a second rate painting, and that generally, cooking or parenthood  
12  
13 or making a home could be creative while poetry need not be” (Maslow, in Covin, 1974: 108).  
14  
15 One need not strive to get to the top of an organization to be fulfilled – in fact such striving  
16  
17 might be detrimental to one’s existence as a creative being.  
18  
19

20  
21 This is not the only way in which Maslow was opposed to modern management  
22  
23 conventions. In *Eupsychian Management* he revealed his frustration that organization  
24  
25 theorists, including Schein and McGregor, were seeing his theory of human nature as a means  
26  
27 to a financial end – short-term profits – rather than the end which he saw, a more enlightened  
28  
29 citizenry and society (1965: 240). Few managers or organization theorists, he complained,  
30  
31 “have the courage to think in far terms, in broad-range terms, in utopian terms, in value terms”  
32  
33 (1965: 40). Motivating employees to be more productive at work was not the end that  
34  
35 Maslow desired for the HON.  
36  
37

38  
39 Maslow would later seek to correct this deficiency himself, with his unfinished  
40  
41 conceptualization of Theory Z in which he postulated that people, once economically secure,  
42  
43 would strive for a creative and productive work life that could satisfy higher-level needs  
44  
45 (Maslow, 1998). This blurred the boundaries between “work” and “life” in many ways  
46  
47 prefiguring subsequent workplace initiatives where work is seen as an integral part of life.  
48  
49 But Maslow died before finishing his work on Theory Z (Hoffman, 1999). Regrettably, the  
50  
51 pyramid became Maslow’s major legacy to management studies.  
52  
53

54  
55 These three problems and the losses they inflict are significant and relate not just to  
56  
57 Maslow. A reductionist, superficial and often misleading coverage of key ideas in  
58  
59  
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1  
2  
3 management studies, typical of the best-selling, most influential, largely U.S. textbooks, does  
4  
5 not serve our students well. Therefore, it would be worthwhile as management educators to  
6  
7 reflect critically on what we are trying to achieve in our introductory courses in management  
8  
9 as they provide lasting first impressions of the field that students carry through their careers  
10  
11 (Christopher, Laasch & Roberts, 2017).  
12  
13  
14  
15

### 16 **Beyond the pyramid: Implications for management education**

17  
18 *I would like to believe that various kinds of experiences and decades of academic research*  
19  
20 *would expand our knowledge base. So it is sometimes a bit of a shock to see how much we*  
21  
22 *thought we already knew 50 years ago and how little our conclusions have changed in the*  
23  
24 *field of social/organizational psychology since then.*

25  
26  
27 *Ed Schein (2015: 7-8)*  
28  
29  
30

31  
32 Having shown the pyramid to not be Maslow's creation, what should we do? Some writers,  
33  
34 reflecting on the criticisms leveled at Maslow but still enamored with the pyramid, have  
35  
36 argued that we should update, refurbish or "renovate" it for a new world (Kenrick et al.,  
37  
38 2010; Schaller et al., 2010). Some consider the HON fatally flawed but note that "old theories,  
39  
40 especially intuitive ones, die hard" and retain it to highlight how new theories of motivation  
41  
42 build upon the old (Robbins & Judge, 2015: 218). A few have suggested that HON should be  
43  
44 excluded from new editions of textbooks (Kremer & Hammond, 2013). This is not what we  
45  
46 are recommending.  
47

48  
49 We argue that the popularity of the pyramid obscures a more significant problem.

50  
51 Reflecting on his more than 60 years of publishing, Ed Schein raised doubts about whether  
52  
53 his field has progressed as far as we might wish to believe, suggesting the enormous growth  
54  
55 in research might be obscuring insights we learned decades ago, rather than providing new  
56  
57

1  
2  
3 ones. With growth has come fragmentation with jargon-laden sub-fields, that rarely  
4  
5 communicate with each other and produce research dominated by “quantitative abstraction”  
6  
7 (p.3). Concurrently there has been a proliferation of surveys, models and instruments  
8  
9 developed by consultants and practitioners that focus on improving organizational  
10  
11 performance, but their work has little connection to the academic research we produce  
12  
13 (Schein, 2015).  
14  
15

16  
17 If a leader in our field like Schein has openly questioned our progress, then perhaps  
18  
19 we should listen and engage the issue. We need better awareness, evaluation, and integration  
20  
21 of historical writings relevant to management. We need an appreciation of insights from the  
22  
23 time before empiricism dominated research and the modern textbook dominated teaching.  
24  
25

26  
27 While we have argued presenting Maslow’s HON as a ladder would be a better  
28  
29 representation of his theory, we should not need a ladder, pyramid or any other symbol to  
30  
31 generate insights from Maslow’s thinking on the nature of human needs. Maslow’s currency  
32  
33 was words, not figures and diagrams, and is a valuable reminder that not all good ideas come  
34  
35 in the form of a memorable symbol or 2 x 2 matrix. We encourage a “restoration” of  
36  
37 Maslow’s original thinking rather than the “renovation” of the pyramid. Restoration would  
38  
39 include encouraging people to read the original source of the HON, Maslow’s 1943 article,  
40  
41 rather than relying on far-removed secondary, even tertiary, interpretations that misrepresent  
42  
43 Maslow’s more nuanced insights.  
44

45  
46 We also advocate introducing students to the breadth of his thinking beyond the HON.  
47  
48 They would benefit from understanding that his academic writing spanned nearly 40 years,  
49  
50 across the most tumultuous period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that included economic depression, war  
51  
52 and social movements for equality and justice. As Alderfer has noted (1989), Maslow’s  
53  
54 thinking shifted as he sought explanations for these events, and also for what was happening  
55  
56 in his own life as a scholar, father and husband. The simplification of his HON into the  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 pyramid perpetuates a simplistic view of a complicated man and misunderstandings of his  
4 writings (Cooke & Mills, 2008; Cooke et al., 2005; Dye et al., 2005; Mills et al., 2005).  
5  
6

7  
8 In addition, the story of Maslow's pyramid should cause us to reflect on how the  
9  
10 forms used to communicate ideas and theories convey meanings that may change the nature  
11  
12 of those theories, or promote perspectives inconsistent with those theories. For example,  
13  
14 presenting strategic thinking as coming from those at the tip of the organizational triangle  
15 may lead to undervaluing the contributions that may come from other stakeholders. Likewise,  
16 presenting a model of change management in a linear step-by-step diagram may suggest a  
17 process far more simplistic than reality, leading to disappointing results (Cummings et al.,  
18 2016). Hence, we should consider whether the benefits of a memorable image in a  
19  
20 PowerPoint outweigh the potential over-simplification or misrepresentation of what is being  
21  
22 taught and seek to manage this balance (Kaplan, 2011; Knight, Paroutis & Heracleous, 2017).  
23  
24  
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30 Beyond this, there is value to be gained by giving students an appreciation of how the  
31  
32 subject of management studies has formed, through interactions among researchers, educators  
33  
34 and consultants, practitioners, philanthropic foundations, and governments. All played a role  
35  
36 in the creation and popularisation of Maslow's pyramid. Gaining insights into these processes  
37  
38 can stimulate students' critical thinking. The history of the pyramid and Maslow's theory  
39  
40 could be a powerful case study because most students will have previously encountered  
41  
42 "Maslow's pyramid" and taken it as a given. As a case study, it would have the greatest value  
43  
44 in an introductory course where it could help develop and further the critical thinking skills of  
45  
46 future managers.  
47  
48  
49

50 In exploring Maslow's wider contribution, management educators and students will  
51  
52 need to wrestle with another dilemma. Maslow has been criticized for elitist, sexist, racist and  
53 biological determinist views, as well as his stance on the Vietnam War (Cooke & Mills,  
54  
55  
56  
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2008; Cullen, 1997; Grant & Mills, 2006; Knights & Willmott, 1974/5; Prichard, 2002).

Many of his ideas were not fully-formed (as he acknowledged throughout his career) or even well thought-through. However we should be wary of judging Maslow through the lens of today's values (Dye et al., 2005), but we should at the same time recognize that a number of his ideas about race, gender and a biological elite were offensive when he said them and remain so today, leading many in the scientific community, such as Carl Rogers, to distance themselves from him (Hoffman, 1988: 298).

However, to discard Maslow completely would be a loss, because he really did practice the free and creative thinking that he believed society needed, and which Schein (2015) suggested is largely absent in academia today. As such, Maslow still offers “a rare opportunity to observe a fertile and imaginative mind at work unfettered by the conventions of scientific reporting” (Vroom, 1967: 97). Maslow's original question that spurred his motivation theory was not “how can managers motivate workers to maximize productivity and profit” (as one might believe when seeing the pyramid in management textbooks and used as a consulting tool), but “what do we need for happiness and fulfillment in life” (Hoffman, 1988: 137). The test of enlightened management, he believed, was the effect of organizational policies on people's behavior outside of work, in the community. Inspiring the study of management and its relationship to creativity and the pursuit of the common good would be a much more empowering legacy to Maslow than a simplistic, five-step, one-way pyramid.

## Conclusion

The creation of Maslow's pyramid has implications that go beyond a concern with Maslow's potential contribution to our field. It has implications for how we understand our field's

1  
2  
3 historical foundations, and how those foundations shape our conception of what management  
4  
5 is, what it could be, and how we teach our students as a result.  
6

7  
8 Consequently, what we advocate here is a critical historical approach to both research  
9  
10 and teaching. Fundamentally, this means moving beyond the idea that the reason for  
11  
12 examining management history is to get an understanding of what happened in the past, or to  
13  
14 download the “file” that is contained in chapter 2 of management textbooks (Wren, 2002). It  
15  
16 means seeing history as a narrative that can interpret past events in many different ways,  
17  
18 depending on the perspectives taken and the values underpinning them.  
19

20  
21 Many, if not most, of management studies’ foundational ideas have been adapted  
22  
23 from other disciplines, such as social psychology and economics, with these ideas filtered  
24  
25 through our field’s long-standing commitments to free-market capitalism, managerialism,  
26  
27 organizational hierarchies, and the primacy of the individual. Acknowledging that historical  
28  
29 interpretations are socially constructed and reflect deep-seated value commitments (Gergen,  
30  
31 1973), opens up the possibility for creating new histories of management from different  
32  
33 perspectives. It also demonstrates that the narrow view presented in conventional histories of  
34  
35 management need not limit us, but instead we can create new and informative histories of our  
36  
37 field – based on different events, times, people and places than have dominated to date.  
38  
39

40  
41 This recognition can spur those interested in revisiting historical foundations and  
42  
43 rethinking our field’s past and future. With regard to research, this may involve going into the  
44  
45 archives, reading the work of foundational thinkers in their original form, locating their  
46  
47 contribution to our field within the body of their whole work and within the historical  
48  
49 context, and comparing the presentation of their ideas in their home discipline alongside how  
50  
51 they are presented in management studies. Or, it may involve looking at the forgotten roles  
52  
53 played by those who currently do not populate management histories, such as women and  
54  
55  
56  
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1  
2  
3 non-European ethnic groups (e.g., Prieto et al., 2017; Cooke & Alcadipani, 2015). These  
4  
5 approaches can help us overcome what has become a very stale orthodoxy that simplifies the  
6  
7 past and limits future perspectives and developments (Cummings & Bridgman, 2016).  
8  
9

10 A critical historical approach may also change how we teach management. As we  
11  
12 have argued through our study of Maslow in this essay, our textbooks could do a better job of  
13  
14 representing the past. We need to encourage our students to think of management history as  
15  
16 something that exists beyond the ‘chapter 2’ of their introductory textbooks, while we re-  
17  
18 write these textbooks. But the change should be deeper than this. Fostering a critical  
19  
20 historical philosophy can help students to think creatively, a skill that students must develop  
21  
22 to fulfill their potential in their future careers (Cummings, Bridgman, Hassard, & Rowlinson,  
23  
24 2017). Studying the history of management today need not, and should not, be about the  
25  
26 memorization of facts. It should foster thinking critically about how conceptions of our  
27  
28 field’s theories, like Maslow’s Pyramid, have come to be, how the past could provide us with  
29  
30 different foundations if we adopted alternative perspectives, and consequently how we can  
31  
32 create different conceptions to guide our future.  
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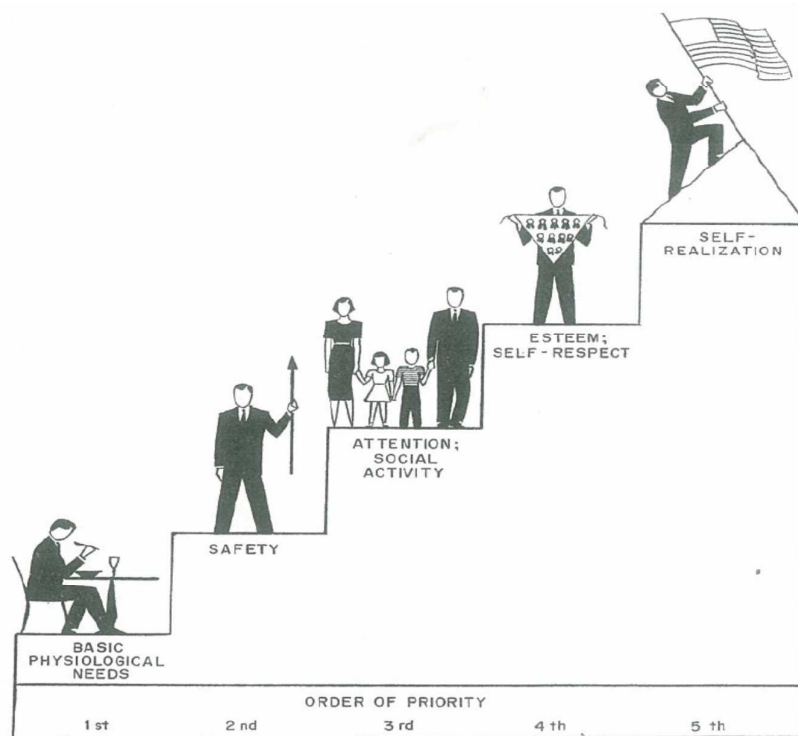
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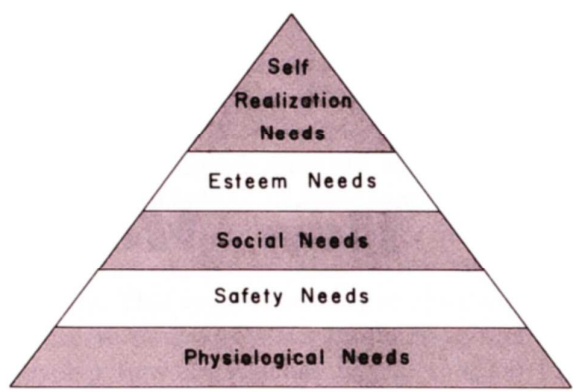
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|--------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|---|--|
| Maslow (1943)      | Maslow (1954, 1970, 1987) | McGregor (1957a, 1957b, 1960) | McDermid (1960)  | Stephens & Heil (1998)<br><i>Maslow on Management</i> ;<br>Stephens (2000)<br><i>Maslow Business Reader</i> | Schermerhorn et al (2014);<br>Robbins et al (2015) |
| self-actualization | self-actualization        | self-fulfillment              | self-realization | self-actualization  | self-actualization                                 |
| esteem             | esteem                    | ego                           | esteem           | esteem  | esteem   |
| love               | belongingness and love    | social                        | social           | social  | social   |
| safety             | safety                    | safety                        | safety           | safety  | safety   |
| physiological      | physiological             | physiological                 | physiological    | physiological   | physiological                                      |

**Table 1. The development of Maslow's five levels of motivation**



**Figure 1. An early rendition of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (*Human Relations in Business* - Davis, 1957, p. 41)**

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**Figure 2. Probably the earliest published rendition of “Maslow’s pyramid” (“How money motivates men”, McDermid, 1960)**