Bridgman, T., Cummings, S., and Ballard, J. (2018) *'Who Built Maslow's Pyramid? A history of the Creation of Management Studies' Most Famous Symbol and Its Implications for Management Education'* Academy of Management Learning and Education

Overview

This article challenges previously held assumptions that Abraham Maslow demonstrated his theory of knowledge as a pyramid. The article explores where the pyramid came from and why it has such an enduring popularity. It introduces debates surrounding Maslow's work exploring those who have promoted, built upon it and used it as a basis for their own work. It also explores critiques and criticisms of Maslow's work and in so doing encourages us to go beyond over simplistic descriptions, definitions and interpretations of theory in order to understand what theorists are telling us about the world.

This article will also begin to introduce you to a range of theorists with whom you will become more familiar with throughout the duration of your course.

In order to answer the following questions, it will support your learning if you read chapter 9 of the text book (with a focus on pp.320-322)

There is also a short video to accompany the paper

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BwLaVYj_V9E

1. Why was Maslow's work presented as a pyramid?

Although Bridgman et al. point us in the direction of a range of evidence that Maslow never presented his hierarchy of needs as a pyramid, they argue that it is significant that it was presented in this way. Initially Douglas McGregor wanted to bring Maslow's work into management studies and Keith Davis developed the pyramid to support this. Charles McDermid went on to support this. It was felt that the pyramid gave Maslow's work a more scientific feel and the simplicity of the diagram appealed to textbook writers, who wanted to present the work visually (p.6).

The text book discusses a range of ways in which the pyramid allowed the work to be presented simply (pp.320-321).

We want students to think about this simplistic design, why it became popular and whether a complex theory can be reduced to a simple diagram. Thinking about textbooks, etc., how many present the theory in detail? Does the simplicity of the design override the theory?

2. What are the problems with Malow's work being presented in this way?

Bridgman et al. present a range of problems with Maslow's work being presented in this way, including:

- It is overly simplistic: Maslow's theory was much more complex than the pyramid diagram implies.
- It implies that we can only satisfy one set of needs at a time (pp.10-11).
- It implies that everyone shares the same set of human needs (pp.11-12)

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- These implications were not in Maslow's initial work; in fact, Maslow never argued that the hierarchy of needs was the same for everyone. He argued that the order of needs could vary, that motivation is about multiple needs working at any given time, and that there were preconditions for the theory to work effectively.

3. Why is this significant?

This misappropriation of Maslow's work both popularized and oversimplified his theory. Throughout the text, Bridgman et al. point to a wide range of critiques of his work, but some of these come from a misunderstanding of his theory, due to the oversimplification of the pyramid diagram. This has broader implications for theory. Bridgman et. al point to other theorists who have had their work oversimplified in this way, and also argue that there are implications for academics taking work outside the academy (pp.12-18). One of these implications is that work needs to be understandable to wider audiences but not lose its original meaning through its presentation.

4. Why do Bridgman et al. think context is important in relation to 'Maslow's' pyramid? Why is it important to understand the background to this?

Context is key to understanding the popularity of the pyramid, but the article also makes some interesting arguments on why understanding the way knowledge is presented is important (pp.21-). For Maslow's pyramid, the diagram allowed the theory to be 'sold' to wider audiences and, perhaps more importantly, understood, at least in part, by these wider audiences.

5. What does this tell us about knowledge more broadly?

We hope that this will help students to think about knowledge more broadly and the ways in which it is always situated in a context of prevalent ideas of a particular time, politics and political agendas, and wider society. In many ways, we hope that this question raises more questions than answers for students as they continue through their course.

The following questions can be used fully or in part as the basis for discussion on the text during seminars. There is a mix of questions, some which will encourage a closer reading of the text and others which will help students to think more broadly about the implications of the article.

Seminar questions – the following questions can be used as a basis for discussion on the text during seminars.

1. What is Maslow's hierarchy of needs?
2. How do Bridgman et al. argue that Maslow's hierarchy of needs came into being?
3. What are the key critiques they present of Maslow's hierarchy of needs?
4. Who, according to Bridgman et al., was the inspiration for the pyramid?
5. Who developed the acronym '*soar*'?
6. What evidence do Bridgman et al. present for the popularity of Maslow's pyramid?
7. Why do you think Maslow's pyramid became as popular as it did?

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8. Is the shape or the theory the enduring feature, according to Bridgman et al.? What do you think?

Hopefully by this point, after some close reading of the text and discussion about the implications, students will be able to point to ways in which both of these things are important. The pyramid has become an enduring image because of its simplicity, but the simplicity of the pyramid has implications for the understanding of the theory.

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