Need theories

Lesson 6.1.1 | Organisational psychology

Core ideas

Need theories explain motivation as a drive to satisfy psychological or practical needs through work.

Maslow's hierarchy arranges five needs from physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualisation.

In workplaces, lower-level needs can connect to pay, rest and security, while higher-level needs can connect to teamwork, respect, achievement and personal growth.

Saeednia's research is useful because it tried to measure satisfaction of Maslow's basic needs with a structured scale rather than relying only on broad theory.

McClelland argued that workers can differ in need for achievement, need for affiliation and need for power.

Need theories are easy to apply to everyday work, but they can overgeneralise because motivation also depends on culture, job design, personal goals and situational constraints.

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Key terms

Need theory: An explanation of motivation based on needs that people try to satisfy.

Hierarchy of needs: Maslow's idea that needs can be arranged from basic survival needs to self-actualisation.

Physiological needs: Basic needs such as food, water, rest and physical survival.

Safety needs: Needs for security, stability and protection from harm.

Belonging needs: Needs for relationships, acceptance and group membership.

Esteem needs: Needs for respect, recognition and a sense of competence.

Self-actualisation: Developing one's potential and pursuing personal growth.

Need for achievement: McClelland's motive to succeed, meet standards and master challenging tasks.

Further detail and evidence

Maslow's five needs, from lower to higher: physiological (food/rest), safety (security/protection), love/belonging (relationships), esteem (respect/achievement), self-actualisation (realising potential). A relatively unmet need is proposed to motivate action; the strict order should be evaluated rather than assumed universal.

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Continued

Saeednia (2011) developed a measure of the hierarchy using child interviews to generate material and a larger child sample to examine the scale. Evidence of acceptable measurement properties is not proof that every adult employee must satisfy needs in a rigid order.

McClelland: need for achievement seeks challenging but attainable success and feedback; affiliation seeks acceptance and close relationships; power seeks influence. Personalised power serves the individual, while socialised power can serve organisational/group aims. People differ in the relative strength of these learned needs.

Applying the ideas

Secure employment may address safety, a supportive team belonging, and responsibility/skill development esteem or self-actualisation. An achievement-motivated worker may prefer clear feedback and moderate challenge; affiliation and power can predict different preferred roles. Do not equate every person's motivation with money.

Evaluation and connections

Need theories organise workplace practices but broad concepts can be difficult to operationalise. Multiple needs can operate together, and culture changes what is valued. A scale developed with children has limited direct validity for adult workplaces. Compare individual need patterns with situational opportunities to satisfy them.