Open Dialogue

When a warm blanket becomes an uneasy bedfellow: A response to responses

Richard Remedios

One of the privileges of being a member of the Psychology of Education section is the opportunity to take something esoteric and put it out there for comment. In my original paper, I stated that "*The very purpose of this article is to encourage debate and argument. If everyone agrees with your thesis, then you have probably stated a truism."* From the quality and quantity of responses, I can most definitely state that my thesis was no truism. I can see that some of the hyperbolic language has raised a few hackles (admittedly caused by me); I hope I can calm the waters. Just to be clear, I do *not* think academics are *lazy* or *charlatans; t*o stir a hornet's nest, you can either wave at it or poke it with a stick. There is a good chance that I may be the lazy academic charlatan here. The issue is the question I posed, why are we still citing a theory that, through no fault of Maslow, has been superseded by better evidenced alternatives?

Most impressively, the editorial team have created a truly inclusive opportunity for people to respond, which has resulted in a breadth of categories of responses, from those who use Maslow's theory to those who have examined the theory from different viewpoints, which how Maslow's work has been incorporated into the different vernacular for different audiences. In this sense, the ubiquity of Maslow seems undeniable.

In planning my responses, as most of the responses explain why we *should* still be teaching Maslow, I'll examine these arguments and provide (hopefully), some useful counterpoint. After that, I thought it would be useful to provide some arguments about where the starting point could be and then give the specific example of how I teach motivational theory. In

the final section, I address some of the responses in more detail. For example, Cildur provides an alternative view of the unintended consequence of using Maslow's theory, ending with an insight they should copyright (before I steal it): "*The pyramid remains unshaken, but only because countless individuals are trapped beneath its weight."* I will address Cildur's arguments as they provide a useful endpoint to my overall responses. But first, I'm going to respond to a common theme across a few responses, namely, that Maslow is a useful touchpoint when teaching motivation.

"A warm and comfortable duvet on a winter's night" (Buckler, 2025a)

Looking across the responses, a common refrain is that Maslow provides a useful starting point to get students interested in theories of motivation. For example, Maunder suggests that familiarity of Maslow's theory helps students make sense of motivational theorising, whilst Jones suggests "*that our teaching is meeting something that students have already heard 'out there' in the world."* Buckler suggests that when reflecting on his week as a (teacher) practitioner, Maslow's theorising is a "simple and effective" vehicle to hang experiences on.

Let me take the "familiarity" argument first. My concern with this logic is one related to the problems of populism, that because something is popular, we should start with that because everyone has heard of it. The point I was trying to make is that Maslow has *become* familiar because educators have used it as the starting point for understanding motivational theory, and if you start with something that is a) not based on (current) evidence and b) has been superseded by more sophisticated evidence-based understandings and c) as Buckler (2025b) notes, a theory that has been superseded by its own author, then this seems like a strange place from where to develop students' understanding. I am trying to think of any other topic where you would start with one of the least well-evidenced explanations for motivated behaviour just because it is

familiar. It is like starting with "here is a theory that is highly problematic, but we will talk about it first because you are familiar with it, before going on to more appropriate explanations for motivated behaviour." It seems better to start with the more appropriate explanations.

More worryingly, as evidenced by its subsequent ubiquity, this continuous citation promulgates the belief that Maslow's basic needs and hierarchy are still useful explanators of motivated behaviour. My highly awarded educator at the conference demonstrated that very point; the speaker believed they were discussing the drivers of motivated behaviour. Bainbridge and Scholes (2025) wonder how teachers are supposed to find time to understand theory but of course this is not on teachers, it is on the *teachers of teachers*. No wonder teachers are still citing Maslow. Maslow is an important part of the motivational chronological bookshelf; it should never be the starting point.

So where should we start?

If not Maslow, where should we start? If we move along our chronological bookshelf, we might choose William James (1890) and his explanations of emotion and habit. Alternatively, we might start with Henry Murray (1938) because this was the first systematic examination of potential drivers of human behaviour and was the precursor to the broader concept of achievement motivation taken forward by Maslow (1953b) and other achievement motivation theorists (e.g., McClelland, Atkinson & Lowell, 1953). Or maybe we should start with White's (1959) work on *effectance* motivation (see later), or Berlyne's (1963, 1966, 1971; see also Hunt, 1965, 1975) work on optimal incongruity and optimal challenge. My list is massively truncated because any one of these (and other bodies of work which I am personally holding myself back from eulogising over in my ever-failing effort for brevity) would serve as *a* starting point. There is no objective place to start but that does not mean the starting point is arbitrary.

One way to think about a suitable starting point is to think about a common element for theories that (unlike Maslow) have withstood criticism and have a robust and extensive body of evidence. In 2005, Elliot and Dweck edited a textbook in which they asked prominent contemporary theorists to consider to what extent competence played a role in their various theories (Elliot & Dweck, 2005; See also Elliot, Dweck & Yeager, 2018). A review of the chapters shows that perception of competence plays a role in nearly every single explanation/theory of motivated behaviour. This makes (the desire for) *competence* a potential candidate as a starting point. But when teaching students, we cannot just start with *all* the theories that offer competence as an explanation for motivated behaviour. What we need is an exemplar theory/explanation that students (and here I include teachers as students) that allows understanding of the many other past and subsequent theories. The theory I suggest is Deci's (1975) theory of intrinsic motivation. His original theory incorporates the concepts of self-determination and competence with relatedness appearing in a later development of the theory (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985). For many readers of *PER*, these concepts are well known, but for those who are less aware, I will briefly explain and put the concepts into a historical context so I can make my case for "this is where we start".

The development of Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

We probably all have our favourite texts, and for me, it was Deci's (1975) seminal text on Intrinsic Motivation. One of the unanswered questions in motivational theory at that time (and through the history of motivation) was trying to explain the drivers of curiosity; Deci's theorising was the watershed. Deci (1975, p.23) cites Aristotle's (980) claim that "All men by nature desire to know") and in essence, this claim is fundamentally a statement about intrinsic motivation. For Deci, "*Intrinsically motivated activities are ones for which there is no apparent reward except*

the activity itself. People seem to engage in the activities for their own sake and not because they lead to an extrinsic reward." (Deci, 1975, p. 23). Definitionally, Deci and Ryan (1985, p. 30) suggest that self-determined actions are those actions which are perceived to be caused by the individual. Their ideas are drawn from deCharms (1968) who suggested that "*Man's [sic] primary motivational propensity is to be effective in producing changes in his environment. Man strives to be a causal agent, to be the primary locus of causation for, or the origin of, his behavior [sic]; he strives for personal causation*." (DeCharms, 1968, p. 328). For deCharms (*ibid*), when individuals see themselves as causes of their actions, they will be intrinsically motivated, but when they see themselves acting because of an external reason, they will [consider themselves to] be extrinsically motivated (see also Deci, 1975, pp. 57-59).

But how are self-determination and competence related? What was the driving force behind the need for self-determination? The answer for Deci came from White (1959) who offered a theory of effectance motivation, that is, the desire to be effective in one's environment. In other words, a reason for wanting to feel effectance was because effectance allowed the individual to experience competence (or efficacy) (see Deci, 1975, pp. 55-57). In this sense, self-determination and competence were fundamentally related.

Deci (1975, p. 19) suggests "*People perceive things differently, and it is the stimulus as it exists in their phenomenology to which they respond*." For Deci, motivation is all about beliefs. The claim that beliefs determine behaviour is elegantly explained in Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET, Deci, 1975, pp. 129-159) which proposes that individual evaluations of a context will undermine or support intrinsic motivation. For example, in Lepper, Greene and Nisbett's (1973) (seminal) study, children were rewarded for activities (drawing) they engaged in for no reward. Children were then offered rewards for drawing but in subsequent sessions, findings

showed that these children *decreased* their subsequent engagement in drawing (relative to non-rewarded children). Lepper et al. (ibid) labelled this the *overjustification* hypothesis and suggested that children (subconsciously) overjustified the reason for engagement with the activity as being because of the reward in the reward, and so when there was no reward, their intrinsic motivation was undermined. CET helps explain how different forms of messaging result in different behavioural outcomes. It is not competence that determines outcomes, it is how that competence is perceived.

By 1985, Deci and Ryan proposed that Self-Determination Theory (SDT) should be the organising over-arching theory with intrinsic motivation being one of the features of SDT. The core features of SDT were (perceptions of) autonomy, competence and although not developed in 1985, the concept of relatedness. Relatedness is currently defined as *"...feeling socially connected…feel(ing) cared for…belonging and feeling significant among others"* (Deci & Ryan, 2017, p. 11). Unlike Maslow's conception of belongingness, Deci and Ryan (*ibid*) go on to suggest that "*...relatedness is experiencing oneself as <u>giving or contributing to others</u>*" (my underline to denote the conceptual differentiation) (see also Deci & Ryan, 2014).

Fast-forward to contemporary SDT and we find SDT to be made up of six overlapping but distinct areas of research. These are (currently), cognitive evaluation theory (CET), organismic integration theory (OIT) which focuses on distinct forms of extrinsic motivation, causality orientations theory (COT) which examines the traits that underpin forms of autonomous and non-autonomous behaviour, basic psychological needs theory (BPNT) which examines how needs affect optimal functioning and well-being, goal contents theory (GCT) which focuses on aspirations and relationship motivation theory (RMT) which focuses on need satisfaction in close personal relationships (see Ryan & Deci, 2017). The point of mentioning

these theories is to exemplify how evidence leads to fine-tuning of theory. Buckler's (2025b) account of how Maslow has moved away from his original theorising is a concomitant testament to why we also need to think carefully about where we place our starting points.

What should we teach?

Taking the bodies of evidence, I have mentioned, the following are some core concepts we should start with. Foundationally, motivation is about beliefs. If we use autonomy and competence as grounding principles for those beliefs and SDT as an exemplar theory, this seems to me to be the starting point for explaining motivated behaviour. We can add in forms of relatedness (e.g., belongingness) though the operationalisation of belongingness needs careful definition. Whether we start with Aristotle (cited in Deci, 1975, p.23), James (1890), Murray (1938), Berlyne, Hunt, White (1959) or even Deci (1975), is just personal preference, but the underlying reason for the starting point is explaining the role of beliefs, and the importance of autonomy and competence. And according to these principles, you would exclude Maslow as your starting point.

What do I teach?

My personal tactic is to start with Murray (1938) because this was the first extensive empirical examination of potential basic needs. Of the many needs identified by Murray, I pick out "the need for achievement". I then discuss the work of McClelland et al (1953) and explain how Need for achievement (Nach) became an important predictor of performance in the workplace (e.g., performance and Nach were positively related). Having established that individuals are motivated by achievement, I then move on to SDT, starting with Deci's (1975) thesis on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and then moving on to CET and OIT. In educational contexts, OIT seems to be to be particularly relevant because (I contend) that students rarely

come to university unconcerned about external reasons for engaging with the tasks we give them (e.g., they work for grades and to get their degree). However, because OIT includes more and less adaptive forms of extrinsically-motivated behaviour, it is useful to show how students can be adaptively extrinsically motivated and get away from the intrinsic-good, extrinsic-bad dichotomy. The other theories I teach are expectancy-value theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2000, 2020), achievement-goal theory [AGT] (Elliot, Murayama & Pekrun, 2011) and control-value theory (Pekrun, 2006) because these can all be explained through the principles of SDT (especially competence) with some additional foci particular for each theory (e.g., approach and avoidance valences in AGT, the move from trichomous (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996), to 2 x 2 (Elliot & McGregor, 2001), to 2 x 3 (Elliot, Murayama & Pekrun, 2011)) versions of AGT; the potential addition of Cost to theories of EVT See Eccles & Wigfield for full argument, 2020). None of these developments change the basic structure of the original theorising. My list is selective based on a) depth and consistency of evidence and b) relevance to educational and workplace contexts, but you could substitute most other theories that inculcate competence, autonomy and/or relatedness.

In short, if we focus on autonomy and competence, we have the building blocks to discuss almost any contemporary theory and allow us to explain the development of our understanding of motivated behaviour more easily. This includes examining specific contexts e.g., cultural or sample variations, because in addition to the day-to-day individual differences from heterogeneous samples/contexts, motivation is about beliefs and beliefs can differ within and between contexts/samples. The important point is that these beliefs are driven by perceptions of autonomy and competence so start here.

Don't start with Maslow: Revisited

Returning to the responses, I hope that by outlining some of the rich history of motivational theorising (and I have barely scraped the surface), it now makes sense why we should not start with Maslow. Deci (1975) cites Maslow's work but suggests "…*in the hierarchy, no consideration of the basic, intrinsic need for competence and self-determination*." (p. 58). More compellingly, Deci states that "*Maslow asserted that man [sic] is motivated to actualize his unique potential, that is, to become all that he is capable of. This bears some similarity to the notion of effectance motivation, yet there are differences. Maslow has posited a hierarchical nature to needs, such that self-actualization is the salient need only after all other needs have been satisfied. This presumably would happen relatively late in life, if at all. Effectance motivation, however, is always present and motivates behavior from the time of birth."* (p. 58).

There is also a parsimonious reason to focus on perceptions of competence and autonomy as the building blocks for understanding motivated behaviour; they just lead effortlessly to most other contemporary and evidence-supported theories. There is no need to ask students to grapple with criticisms of Maslow's work, to find evidence for the hierarchy (which does not exist) or to compare and contrast Maslow's suggested needs with the plethora of alternative basic needs posited by so many other theorists. Ironically, *not* focusing on Maslow really does leave time to focus the core features of motivated behaviour.

A place for Maslow

I think Buckler's (2025b) response helps us understand where Maslow may be most usefully debated and employed. Indeed, his response helpfully explains how Maslow has developed his own thinking and where that thinking has gone. More broadly, mapping the correlates of various versions of peak experience (e.g., self-actualisation may help us understand

potential precursors and predictors of peak experience in all its forms, and that in itself, for researchers specifically interested in peak experiences). Indeed, Deci (1975) discusses the concept of a form of intrinsic motivation which developed a body of research called "Flow" (Csiksentimihalyi, 1975, 1990), a state of optimal experience characterised by features of intrinsic motivation and effectance motivation. Maslow's works sit well in the field of positive and humanist research and within the empirical and philosophical discussions on happiness/eudaimonia. However, as a foundation for our understanding of motivated behaviour, given even Maslow has moved on, it is probably time for us to do so as well.

More responses to my original paper

I read with considerable interest the thesis by Cildur (2025), which places Maslow's work in a sociological framework and offers a critique grounded in arguments similar to those for decolonisation (e.g., Bendix, Muller & Ziai, 2020). Cildur (*ibid*) concludes "…*its [Maslow's theory, my brackets] uncritical adoption risks reinforcing structural inequalities rather than addressing them."* This conclusion is more far-reaching than my suggestions that are more about evidence-relevance, and I will leave it to the philosophers and sociologists to judge the value of the claims made by Cildur.

Bainbridge and Scholes (2025) offer the analogy of 40,000 people still coming to see Black Sabbath I think misses the point. As I have argued, Maslow has value in some important domains of study, but Maslow falls short in the specific domain of explaining the drivers of motivated behaviour. Maybe a counter-analogy would be Black Sabbath playing at a book festival; some people might like it, but it is probably not the most appropriate use of Black Sabbath.

I did also want to respond to Buckler (2025) in his assertion that Dweck has failed to replicate her findings. The evaluation report by Folioano et al. (2019) indeed reports a failure to find differences in an intervention based on Mindset principles. However, this is not an example of Dweck's theory being undermined, it is an example of an intervention strategy not working. A review of the report reveals that teachers reported changes in students' attitudes, enthusiasms and perseverance and the suggestion that mindset changes may occur over a longer period of time than the intervention. In addition, qualitative statements suggested that potential intervention effects at school were subsequently undermined by parents at home (see p.36 of the report for a good example). I would encourage a thorough reading of this evaluation to see the whole picture. I agree the study failed to show that one particular intervention did not work, but there is considerable evidence that individuals with growth vs. entity mindsets differ in terms of relationship to motivation and performance (Dweck, 2006) which supports Dweck's claims. It may be intervention effects are patchier, but that is not refutation of Dweck's Mindset theory. In other criticisms, recent developments have begun to examine the contexts that explain where Mindset is most relevant (e.g., Yeager & Dweck, 2020; Yeager et al., 2022; Lou & Lie, 2023 in terms of country-level indices) but again, these criticisms represent a development of the theory rather than a refutation of the phenomenon of Mindset.

Final thoughts

The strength of any Open Dialogue is all about the quality of responses and in this regard, the breadth and depth show the passion and ideologies behind various readings of Maslow's work. I hope my arguments about why familiarity is not a reason for including Maslow, and that my suggestions for starting points give food for thought.

Our understanding of the drivers of motivation has progressed through a remarkable set of ideas and evidence, and we can expect more developments as we begin to piece together the emerging evidence. As with all developmental shifts, some earlier versions become less important. Maslow's work has its place on the motivational chronological bookshelf, but it is probably time to choose another book.

Author

Richard Remedios, Room 4017, Chaucer Building, Goldsmith Street, Nottingham, NG1 5LT, United Kingdom.

Correspondence

Email: richard.remedios@ntu.ac.uk

References

Bainbridge, A., & Scholes, S. C. (2025). Why are you still talking about Black Sabbath? Spotting the music buff charlatans in playlists of contemporary heavy metal music – A response to Dr Remedios. *Psychology of Education Review,* (this issue).

Bendix, D., Müller, F., & Ziai, A. (Eds.). (2020). *Beyond the master's tools: Decolonising knowledge orders, research methods and teaching.* Rowman & Littlefield. London https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2021.1957590

Berlyne, D. E. (1971). *Aesthetics and psychobiology.* Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Berlyne, D. E. (1963). Complexity and incongruity variables as determinants of exploratory choice and evaluative ratings. *Canadian Journal of Psychology, 17*(3), 274–290. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0092883

Berlyne, D. E. (1966). Conflict and reaction time: Reply to Kiesler. *Psychological Reports, 19*(2), 413–414. https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1966.19.2.413

Buckler, S. (2025a). A critique of Maslow from a teacher's perspective: A response to Dr Remedios. *Psychology of Education Review,* (this issue).

Buckler, S. (2025b). Maslow's greatest critic was…Maslow: A response to Dr Remedios. *Psychology of Education Review,* (this issue).

Cildur, G. Y. (2025). A pyramid or the Leviathan's corpus? A response to Dr Remedios. *Psychology of Education Review,* (this issue).

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975). *Beyond boredom and anxiety: Experiencing flow in work and play.* Jossey-Bass. New York.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience.* Harper & Row. New York.

DeCharms, R. (1968). *Personal causation: The internal affective determinants of behavior.* Academic Press.

Deci, E. L. (1975). Intrinsic motivation. Plenum Press

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior.* Plenum Press. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-2271-7

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2014). Autonomy and need satisfaction in close relationships: Relationships motivation theory. In N. Weinstein (Ed.), *Human motivation and*

interpersonal relationships: Theory, research, and applications (pp. 53–73). Springer Science + Business Media. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8542-6_3

Elliot, A. J., & Harackiewicz, J. M. (1996). Approach and avoidance achievement goals and intrinsic motivation: A mediational analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 70*(3), 461–475. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.3.46

Elliot, A. J., & McGregor, H. A. (2001). A 2 × 2 achievement goal framework. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 80*(3), 501–519. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.80.3.501

Elliot, A. J., Dweck, C. S., & Yeager, D. S. (Eds.). (2018). *Handbook of competence and motivation: Theory and application* (2nd ed.). The Guilford Press.

Elliot, A. J., Murayama, K., & Pekrun, R. (2011). A 3 × 2 achievement goal model. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 103*(3), 632–648. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023952

Folioano, F., Rolfe, H., Buzzeo, J., Runge, J. and Wilkinson, D. (2019). *Changing Mindsets: Effectiveness Trial (Evaluation Report).* London: The Education Endowment Foundation.

Hunt, J. M. (1965). Intrinsic motivation and its role in psychological development. In D. Levine (Ed.), *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation* (Vol. 13, pp. 189–282). University of Nebraska Press.

James, W. (1890). The principles of psychology (Vol. 1). Henry Holt and Co. https://doi.org/10.1037/10538-000

Jones, S. J. (2025). A need to begin: Unravelling psychological knowledge to find a suitable starting point – A response to Dr Remedios. *Psychology of Education Review,* (this issue).

Lepper, M. R., Greene, D., & Nisbett, R. E. (1973). Undermining children's intrinsic interest with extrinsic reward: A test of the "overjustification" hypothesis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 28*(1), 129–137. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0035519

Lou, N. M., & Li, L. M. W. (2023). The mindsets × societal norm effect across 78 cultures: Growth mindsets are linked to performance weakly and well-being negatively in societies with fixed-mindset norms. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 93*, 134–152. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12544

Maslow, A. H. (1953a). The instinctoid nature of basic needs. *Journal of Personality, 22(3*), 326–347. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-6494.1954.tb01136.x

Maunder, R, (2025). The ubiquity of Maslow: A Response to Dr Remedios. *Psychology of Education Review,* (this issue).

McClelland, D. C., Atkinson, J. W., Clark, R. A., & Lowell, E. L. (1953). *The achievement motive.* Appleton-Century-Crofts. New York.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness. The Guilford Press. https://doi.org/10.1521/978.14625/28806

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness.* The Guilford Press. https://doi.org/10.1521/978.14625/28806

Yeager, D. S., & Dweck, C. S. (2020). What can be learned from growth mindset controversies? *American Psychologist, 75*(9), 1269–1284. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000794

Yeager, D. S., Bryan, C. J., Gross, J. J., Murray, J. S., Cobb, D. K., Santos, P. H. F., Gravelding, H., Johnson, M., & Jamieson, J. P. (2022). A synergistic mindsets intervention protects

adolescents from stress. *Nature, 607*(7919), 512–520. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-04907-7