

Reframing Human Needs in the Context of Negative Societies: From Maslow's Hierarchy to the Hierarchy of Deprivation

Kheloufi Soufyane (1,*)

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¹ Department of Management Sciences, Faculty of Economics, Business and Management Sciences, University of Mujahid Abdelhafid Boussouf, Mila, Algeria

* Corresponding author. E-mail: kheloufi.s@centre-univ-mila.dz

Reframing Human Needs in the Context of Negative Societies: From Maslow's Hierarchy to the Hierarchy of Deprivation

Abstract:

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is widely regarded as a classical framework for explaining human motivation, assuming an upward progression from basic physiological needs to self-actualization. However, its explanatory relevance diminishes in contexts characterized by structural inequality, oppression, and chronic deprivation. This study argues that under such conditions, deprivation not only obstructs human development but actively reverses it, resulting in a gradual erosion of psychological and social functioning.

Through a critical reassessment of Maslow's model, the paper introduces an alternative framework termed the Hierarchy of Deprivation, conceptualized as an inverted pyramid representing a downward human trajectory in oppressive environments. This model comprises five interrelated stages: physiological deficiency, threat to safety and stability, social isolation, despair marked by the denial of dignity and self-worth, and finally existential collapse characterized by psychological disengagement from life. The framework offers a theoretical reorientation of classical needs theory and a practical lens for analyzing the psychosocial consequences of prolonged deprivation.

Keywords: *Human Needs, Maslow's Hierarchy, Deprivation, Negative Societies, Inverted Pyramid.*

JEL Classification: *I31, I32, Z13, D63, Y80.*

Introduction:

The study of human needs has long relied on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a dominant framework for understanding human motivation, proposing a universal progression from physiological necessities to safety, belonging, esteem, and ultimately self-actualization (**Maslow, 1943, pp. 370–396**). While this model has been widely applied across psychology, education, and management—particularly in stable and supportive contexts—its assumptions become increasingly problematic in societies marked by structural inequality, systemic oppression, and chronic deprivation. In such environments, often described as “negative societies,” survival, security, and dignity are persistently threatened, undermining the linear, growth-oriented trajectory assumed by Maslow's hierarchy and calling into question its relevance for explaining lived experiences shaped by sustained deficiency rather than upward development.

This study therefore calls for a reframing of human needs in contexts where deprivation dominates. In such environments, the pursuit of survival overrides higher aspirations, while threats to safety, belonging, and self-worth suppress or distort motivational priorities. The resulting inversion underscores the need for an alternative model that shifts analytical focus from development to decline, acknowledging the pervasive psychological impact of chronic hardship.

To address this gap, the paper introduces the **Hierarchy of Deprivation**, an inverted pyramid that traces the downward spiral of unmet needs: from the failure to satisfy physiological necessities, to insecurity and instability, enforced social isolation, denial of esteem and recognition, and finally, profound hopelessness culminating in existential collapse. By situating deprivation at the center of analysis, this framework provides a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of motivation under oppressive and unstable conditions.

Research Problem

The limitations of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in explaining human motivation and behavior within contexts of profound and systemic deprivation necessitate an alternative conceptualization. The central research problem guiding this study is: How can the understanding of human needs be re-conceptualized and reframed within the specific context of negative societies, where individuals experience chronic forms of structural inequality, oppression, and systemic deprivation, moving beyond Maslow's optimistic trajectory to a framework that more accurately reflects the lived realities of decline and the desire for termination? This overarching question leads to several sub-questions:

- How do the limitations of Maslow's Hierarchy in negative societies reveal an inverted structure of human needs shaped by chronic deprivation, threat, isolation, and despair?
- What are the theoretical implications of shifting the analytical focus from a progression of growth (Maslow) to a trajectory of decline (Hierarchy of Deprivation) in understanding human motivation and well-being?
- What practical insights can the Hierarchy of Deprivation offer for understanding human behavior, resilience, and vulnerability in oppressive and unstable environments?

Significance of the Study

This study underscores the limitations of Maslow's hierarchy in contexts of systemic oppression and chronic deprivation, proposing instead the **Hierarchy of Deprivation** as a more context-sensitive model. The framework captures the downward spiral from unmet physiological needs to profound hopelessness, highlighting how negative societies distort motivational priorities. Theoretically, it advances social psychology and sociology by re-evaluating human needs through the lens of structural inequality, offering scholars a tool to explore resilience and vulnerability under existential threats. Practically, it provides policymakers, humanitarian organizations, and mental health professionals with a clearer understanding of deprivation-driven decline, enabling the design of targeted and humane interventions that address urgent survival needs rather than misapplying growth-oriented frameworks.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this research are:

1. To critically analyze the theoretical underpinnings and practical limitations of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, particularly its applicability in societies marked by structural inequality and systemic deprivation.
2. To conceptualize and articulate an alternative framework, the Hierarchy of Deprivation, which models human needs as an inverted pyramid reflecting a trajectory of decline from deficiency to termination.
3. To explore the theoretical implications of the Hierarchy of Deprivation for understanding human motivation, psychological states, and behavioral responses in contexts of chronic societal adversity.
4. To discuss the potential practical applications of the Hierarchy of Deprivation in informing strategies for intervention, support, and advocacy for individuals in negative societies.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretivist methodology grounded in inductive reasoning, analytical critique, and descriptive synthesis. It begins with an inductive re-examination of psychological and sociological theories of human needs, with particular focus on Maslow's hierarchy, to expose its assumptions and limitations in the context of "negative societies." Through analytical critique, informed by critical theory, trauma studies, and socio-economic analyses of inequality, the research deconstructs the traditional framework and identifies its inadequacies in capturing lived experiences under systemic oppression and deprivation. Building on this critique, a descriptive synthesis is employed to articulate the proposed **Hierarchy of Deprivation**, outlining its inverted structure and progressive stages—deficiency, threat, isolation, despair, and termination—while advancing the theoretical propositions that define each stage. This approach provides a comprehensive and context-sensitive reconceptualization of human needs.

Previous Studies

The academic discourse on human needs and motivation has predominantly revolved around Maslow's seminal work, yet a growing body of literature critiques its universality and applicability in adverse conditions:

- 1- Study: (Doyal & Gough, 1984, pp. 6-38): Doyal and Gough offer a comprehensive theory of human need, identifying two universal basic needs (physical health and autonomy) and several intermediate needs (e.g., adequate nutritional food and water, protective housing, and significant primary relationships). Their work emphasizes the objective nature of needs and the societal conditions required for their satisfaction. While providing a more nuanced and less individualistic account than Maslow, their framework remains focused on *satisfaction* and fulfillment rather than exploring a structured process of deprivation and its potential for an inverted hierarchy.
- 2- Study: (Frankl, 1985, pp. 1-69): Frankl's work, particularly his experiences in concentration camps, offers profound insights into the human spirit's capacity to find meaning even in extreme suffering. His concept of "will to meaning" suggests that meaning-seeking is a primary human motivation that can transcend even the most basic physiological and safety deprivations. While not directly a critique of Maslow, Frankl's observations implicitly challenge the idea that self-actualization or meaning can only be pursued once lower needs are met. However, Frankl's focus is on spiritual resilience and meaning-making, rather than the psychological structuring of needs when faced with a systematic, inverted process of deprivation. He highlights a transcendence of deprivation, not a description of its hierarchy.
- 3- Study: (Galtung, 1990, pp. 291-305): Galtung's work on "cultural violence" and "structural violence" provides a theoretical lens for understanding systemic oppression and its impact on human well-being. He argues that violence is often embedded in social structures and cultural norms, leading to preventable suffering and deprivation. While not directly proposing a new hierarchy of needs, Galtung's work underscores the pervasive nature of deprivation in "negative societies" and provides a robust conceptual basis for why Maslow's individualistic, growth-oriented model might be insufficient. It highlights the *source* of deprivation but doesn't map its psychological progression.
- 4- Study: (Max-Neef, Elizalde, & Hopenhayn, 1991): Max-Neef's framework for Human Scale Development proposes nine fundamental human needs (subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity and freedom) which he argues are universal, few, finite, and classifiable. He distinguishes between needs and satisfiers, suggesting that satisfiers vary across cultures and time. Max-Neef's model offers a more holistic and less hierarchical view of needs, emphasizing their interconnectedness and simultaneity. However, like Doyal and Gough, his primary focus is on how needs can be satisfied and how development should cater to them, not on a structured descent into deprivation.
- 5- Study: (Tay & Diener, 2011, pp. 354–365): This empirical study surveyed 166 countries, finding that while basic needs (food, shelter) predicted life satisfaction, the fulfillment of higher needs (social support, respect) also contributed to positive feelings, even when basic needs were unmet. This research challenges the strict hierarchical progression of Maslow, suggesting that needs can be pursued simultaneously or in different orders

depending on context. However, it still largely operates within Maslow's categories and does not propose an inverted framework for extreme deprivation.

6- Study: (Ghaleb, 2024, pp. 1028–1046): This recent study offers a direct and critical analysis of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, arguing for a more dynamic model that accounts for the continuous interplay of needs and external factors. It highlights criticisms regarding Maslow's biographical approach, cultural biases, and the lack of strong empirical support for a rigid hierarchical structure, particularly in diverse societal contexts. This research reinforces the argument for the necessity of alternative frameworks that can better explain human motivation beyond Maslow's largely Western-centric and individualistic assumptions.

7- Study: (Hao & Weihong, 2025, pp. 1-17): This very recent empirical study investigates the relationship between relative deprivation in consumption and its impact on mental health. It finds that reductions in hedonic consumption negatively affect mental well-being, especially when involuntary, and that consumption inequality exacerbates mental health issues. This research provides contemporary empirical evidence for the profound psychological consequences of deprivation, particularly how the experience of "lacking" relative to others can lead to negative affective states and distress, aligning with the "despair" stage of the proposed Hierarchy of Deprivation.

8- Despite the valuable contributions from these scholars, including recent critiques and empirical insights into the psychological impacts of deprivation, a significant research gap persists concerning the systematic conceptualization of human needs within environments of chronic and systemic deprivation. While Doyal and Gough (1984), Max-Neef et al. (1991), and Tay and Diener (2011) offer robust theoretical frameworks for understanding societal deprivation and objective needs, they primarily focus on the satisfaction of needs or the non-linear nature of fulfillment, not on a structured process of decline. Galtung (1990) provides a crucial lens for structural violence but doesn't map its psychological progression as an inverted hierarchy. Ghaleb (2024) offers a strong critique of Maslow's static nature, advocating for dynamic models, and Hao and Weihong (2025) empirically link relative deprivation to mental health, providing contemporary evidence for the psychological toll of lacking. Frankl (1985) offers profound insights into coping with extreme deprivation through meaning-making, but his work highlights a transcendence of deprivation, not a description of its systematic inversion.

Crucially, none of these preceding works offer a comprehensive framework that explicitly models an inverted hierarchy of needs or a "Hierarchy of Deprivation" that details the progression of needs as they are systematically denied and inverted in "negative societies," ultimately leading to a potential desire for termination. Existing models, while critical and insightful, still largely assume a baseline of relatively stable conditions or focus on the impact of deprivation rather than proposing a structured progression of needs as they are systematically inverted and degraded.

This study directly addresses this gap by proposing and elaborating the "Hierarchy of Deprivation." It moves beyond merely acknowledging the limitations of Maslow's hierarchy in adverse contexts or discussing the impact of deprivation. Instead, it offers a novel, inverted framework that systematically outlines how needs transform and degrade under continuous oppression, from physiological deficiency to the profound despair and desire for termination. This unique contribution shifts the analytical paradigm from growth and fulfillment to decline and the psychological consequences of persistent lack, providing a vital tool for

understanding the most challenging aspects of the human condition in societies where life itself is a daily struggle against systematic erosion.

In light of these limitations, this paper advances an alternative conceptual framework designed to capture human experience under conditions of sustained deprivation. Rather than assuming a linear progression toward growth and self-actualization, the study proposes the Hierarchy of Deprivation as an inverted model that traces the cumulative deterioration of human needs in negative social environments. By shifting the analytical focus from fulfillment to erosion, this framework seeks to provide a more accurate lens for understanding motivation, behavior, and psychological states in contexts marked by chronic inequality, oppression, and deprivation.

1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs: A Critical Reappraisal

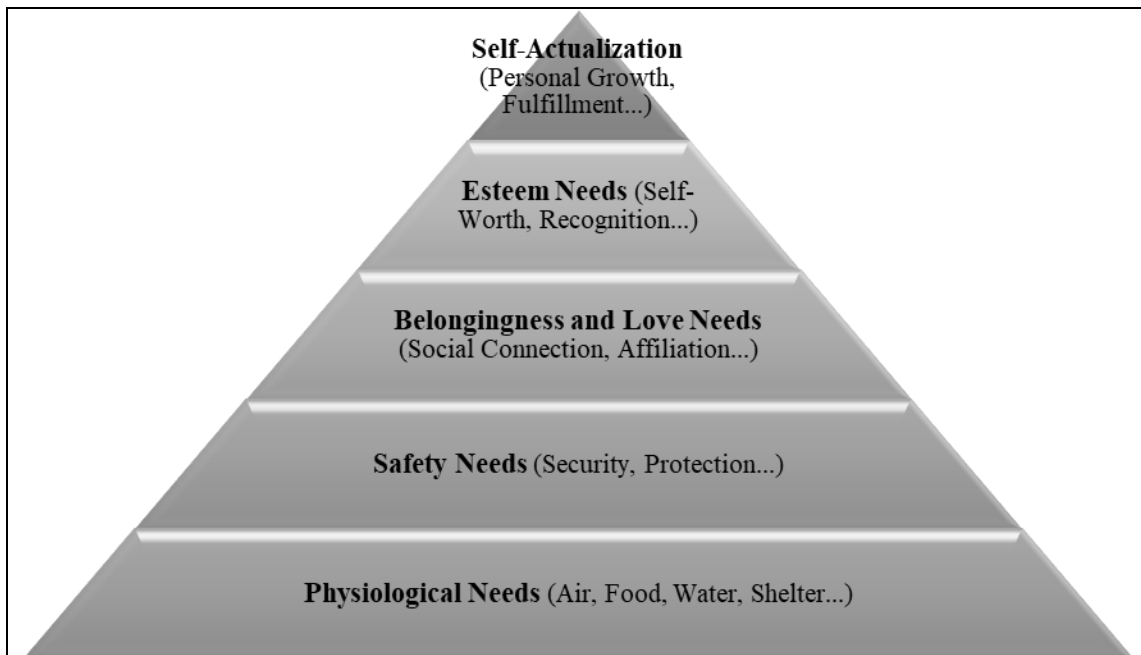
This section delves into Abraham Maslow's seminal contribution to understanding human motivation, his Hierarchy of Human Needs. While foundational in psychological thought, this model warrants rigorous examination, particularly when considering its applicability and limitations within the complex dynamics of what we term "negative societies." By first outlining its historical development and core tenets, we then critically assess its scientific and practical merits, ultimately dissecting the criticisms that necessitate a re-evaluation of human needs beyond its original framework:

1.1. Historical and Intellectual Background on the Emergence of the Hierarchy:

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs, first conceptualized in 1943 (Maslow, 1943, p. 370), emerged as a pivotal contribution to the nascent field of humanistic psychology. At the time, the dominant psychological paradigms were behaviorism (focusing on observable behaviors and external stimuli) and psychoanalysis (emphasizing unconscious drives and early childhood experiences). Maslow, alongside other humanistic thinkers like Carl Rogers, found these approaches to be overly deterministic, reductionistic, and pessimistic in their view of human nature (Goble, 1970, pp. 20-25). They posited that these frameworks failed to adequately account for the uniquely human capacities for growth, self-determination, and the pursuit of meaning.

Maslow's intellectual journey was driven by a desire to understand human potential and well-being, shifting focus from pathology to **eupsychia**, a term he coined to describe a psychologically healthy society (**Maslow, 1968, p. 34**). His work was influenced by various intellectual currents, including Gestalt psychology, organismic theory (particularly Kurt Goldstein's concept of self-actualization), and existential philosophy (**Frick, 1991, pp. 45-50**). Maslow observed individuals he considered exemplary, studying their traits and motivations to construct a model that described the progression of human needs towards the ultimate goal of self-actualization. This hierarchical model proposed a staged, sequential progression, suggesting that lower-level, more fundamental needs must be largely satisfied before individuals can attend to higher-level growth needs.

1.2. Basic Components of the Hierarchy: Maslow's hierarchy is typically represented as a pyramid, categorizing human needs into five sequential levels, moving from the most fundamental to the most advanced:



Source: (Maslow, 1954, p. 33)

Figure1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs

This visual representation illustrates the foundational premise of Maslow's theory: that needs at the base of the pyramid must be largely met before individuals are typically motivated to pursue needs at higher levels. This sequential progression is central to understanding the dynamics of human motivation within his framework:

- **Physiological Needs:** These constitute the most basic and powerful needs essential for survival. They include requirements for air, water, food, shelter, sleep, and warmth. Until these foundational needs are met, other needs remain largely secondary in motivational salience (**Maslow, 1954, pp. 35-47**).
- **Safety Needs:** Once physiological needs are reasonably satisfied, the motivation shifts towards security and safety. This encompasses personal security, financial security, health and well-being, and protection from harm, instability, and fear. It also includes the need for order and law within a society (**Maslow, 1954, pp. 48-55**).
- **Belongingness and Love Needs:** With physiological and safety needs addressed, individuals seek social connection and affiliation. This level involves the need for friendships, romantic relationships, family bonds, community involvement, and a sense of acceptance and belonging within a group. Loneliness and social isolation can significantly impact well-being at this stage (**Maslow, 1954, pp. 55-56**).
- **Esteem Needs:** These needs relate to an individual's sense of self-worth and recognition from others. Maslow differentiated between two types of esteem needs: self-esteem (dignity, achievement, mastery, independence) and esteem from others (status, prestige, reputation, respect). Satisfaction of these needs leads to feelings of confidence, value, and capability (**Maslow, 1954, pp. 66-73**).

• **Self-Actualization Needs:** Representing the pinnacle of the hierarchy, self-actualization refers to the drive to achieve one's full potential and become the most complete version of oneself. This involves personal growth, the pursuit of knowledge, aesthetic experiences, peak experiences, and a deeper understanding of the self and the world. Maslow described self-actualizers as individuals who are problem-centered, creative, spontaneous, and concerned with the well-being of humanity (**Maslow, 1954, pp. 74-95**). It is important to note that Maslow viewed self-actualization as an ongoing process rather than a static state.

1.3. Scientific and Applied Advantages of the Hierarchy:

Despite subsequent criticisms, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has exerted profound and lasting influence across various disciplines. Its primary scientific advantage lies in offering an intuitively appealing and optimistic framework for understanding human motivation. By positing a progressive structure, it provides a heuristic for conceptualizing how diverse human aspirations are interconnected and unfold (Wicker, 1969, pp. 41-78). It moved psychology beyond purely deficit-based models, highlighting the human capacity for growth and the pursuit of higher, intrinsic goals.

In practical application, the hierarchy has found widespread utility. In organizational psychology and management, it informs leadership strategies, employee motivation programs, and human resource policies by suggesting that managers must address lower-level needs (e.g., fair wages, safe working conditions) before employees can be motivated by higher-level needs (e.g., recognition, challenging work, opportunities for growth) (**Miner, 2003, pp. 250-268**). In education, it underscores the importance of a supportive and safe learning environment where basic student needs are met before complex cognitive development can occur (**Taormina & Gao, 2013, p. 160**). Moreover, in counseling and therapy, it provides a valuable diagnostic tool for identifying unmet needs that may be contributing to psychological distress, guiding interventions toward fundamental well-being before addressing self-fulfillment. The model's simplicity and generalizability have also made it accessible to the public, offering a common language to discuss human aspirations.

1.4. Criticisms Directed at the Hierarchy:

Although Maslow's hierarchy of needs remains highly influential, it has faced extensive academic scrutiny regarding its **universality, cultural validity, and empirical support**. Multiple systematic reviews conclude that only limited evidence supports a strict hierarchical sequence of needs (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976, p. 213), and contemporary findings have called for reformulations of the model:

- **Individualistic Bias:** A central critique is the **ethnocentric orientation** of the hierarchy, particularly the construct of *self-actualization*, which reflects Western, individualistic values emphasizing autonomy, independence, and personal achievement (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, pp. 227-229). demonstrate that in collectivist societies, the "interdependent self" is dominant, and needs for belongingness or communal esteem are often prioritized over autonomy. Similarly, Neher (1991, p. 92) argues that Maslow's portrayal of self-actualization resonates primarily with Western, middle-class ideals rather than universal human motivations.

- Neglect of Social and Political Context: Another criticism is the **limited consideration of structural and systemic factors** _such as poverty, inequality, discrimination, or political oppression_ that profoundly determine whether individuals can satisfy basic needs (Galtung, 1969, pp. 171-173). introduces the concept of “structural violence” to explain how deprivation results from systemic conditions rather than personal shortcomings (Neher, 1991, pp. 98-100). similarly criticizes Maslow’s model for individualizing need satisfaction and neglecting the sociopolitical environment that constrains access to resources.
- Weak Relevance to Vulnerable Societies: Perhaps the most significant critique concerns the questionable linearity of the model in vulnerable or deprived contexts (Tay & Diener, 2011, pp. 356-359). provide cross-national evidence that people pursue higher-order needs (e.g., belonging, esteem, meaning) even when lower-order needs remain unmet (Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller, 2010, pp. 296-298). also propose an updated “renovated pyramid” where needs are flexible, overlapping, and shaped by evolutionary and contextual demands. These findings highlight that in conflict zones, refugee camps, or impoverished communities, individuals may prioritize solidarity, dignity, or creativity despite lacking physiological or safety needs—a phenomenon Maslow’s strict hierarchy struggles to explain.

2. The Need for an Alternative Model in Negative Societies:

Before addressing definitions and limitations, it is crucial to clarify why traditional models such as Maslow’s hierarchy prove inadequate in negative societal contexts. Societies shaped by systemic oppression, injustice, and institutionalized marginalization fundamentally disrupt motivational dynamics, undermining the sequential progression of needs and often compressing or inverting the expected trajectory. These distortions highlight the necessity of alternative frameworks that are dynamic, context-sensitive, and explicitly attentive to the pervasive influence of sociopolitical structures.

2.1. Defining Negative Societies:

Negative societies are defined as socio-political systems in which **systemic oppression, authoritarianism, structural marginalization, and the absence of justice** prevail. Within these societies, institutional mechanisms—such as repressive governance, discriminatory laws, and punitive social norms—actively hinder individuals’ capacities to satisfy basic needs. Galtung’s foundational concept of **structural violence** underscores how deprivation is embedded in institutions rather than emerging from individual shortcomings (Galtung, 1969, pp. 171-173). Amartya Sen’s **capability approach** further frames oppression as a deprivation of substantive freedoms, emphasizing that restricted agency—not merely insufficient resources—is central to human suffering (Sen, 1999, pp. 87-89). Recent ethnographic studies—such as those on Indigenous communities—underscore that culturally-specific social structures (e.g., Ubuntu) offer alternative, resilience-based models of well-being that are fundamentally communal rather than hierarchical (Choate & Lindstrom, 2022, pp. 30-41).

2.2. Manifestations of Human Deprivation in Negative Societies:

Deprivation in negative societies is **multidimensional**, spanning material, psychological, communal, and identity-based domains. Chronic exposure to political violence, exclusion, and economic deprivation results not only in hunger and insecurity but also in lost hope, community disintegration, and the erosion of dignity (Farmer, 2004, pp. 305–325). Institutionalized marginalization—ranging from restricted education and healthcare access to normative devaluation of entire groups—exacerbates psychological suffering and identity fragmentation (Young, 2016, pp. 553–557). Research in conflict-affected environments consistently documents how **trust, belonging, and agency** suffer profoundly, leading to cycles of collective despair and disintegration (Das, 2007, pp. 16–17). All these dynamics lie outside the explanatory scope of linear, individual-centered theories of motivation.

2.3.1. Linearity Assumption Breaks Down:

Empirical research—especially in deprived or collectivist contexts—shows that individuals frequently pursue belonging, meaning, or solidarity even when physiological or safety needs remain unmet (**Tay & Diener, 2011, pp. 356–359**). Contemporary models such as that proposed by **Kenrick, Giskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller (2010, pp. 296–298)** emphasize iterative, dynamic, and overlapping motivations, rather than a one-way progression.

2.3.2. Absence of Structural Context: Maslow's pyramid situates need satisfaction at the individual level, ignoring how structural barriers—poverty, repression, discrimination—actively prevent need fulfillment. Neher (1991, p. 92) criticizes the theory for individualizing structural failure, while critiques like Galtung's (1969) foreground institutional responsibility for deprivation.

2.3.3. Cultural and Contextual Blindness:

The model's Western origin makes it ethnocentric—it privileges individual independence and achievement. Modern decolonial and indigenous critiques argue that needs should be understood as **relational, cultural, and communal**, rather than hierarchical and exclusively individual (**Bear, Choate, & Lindstrom, 2022, pp. 30–41**). For instance, in Ubuntu-informed societies, individual flourishing is inseparable from communal well-being and shared identity (**Udosen, 2025**).

2.4. Contemporary Evidence for Alternative Frameworks:

Multiple recent studies and theoretical advances have proposed motivational frameworks better suited to the realities of negative societies:

- **Dynamic, Networked Needs Models:** **Kospov (2023) proposes an updated model of needs as interdependent clusters that circulate dynamically; context, culture, and technology all shape need activation (Belal, 2024, pp. 1028–1046)**
- **Alternative Cultural Perspectives:** Choate & Lindstrom et al. (2022) argue that Indigenous approaches don't follow a strict pyramidal order but reflect **ethical relational spaces** that embed needs within communal and cultural emergence (**Bear, Choate, & Lindstrom, 2022, pp. 30–41**).
- **Decolonial Critiques:** Udosen (2025) presents a **relational, cyclical conception of needs**, where community, spirituality, and connection often precede—even enable—survival in socially oppressive environments (**Udosen, 2025**).

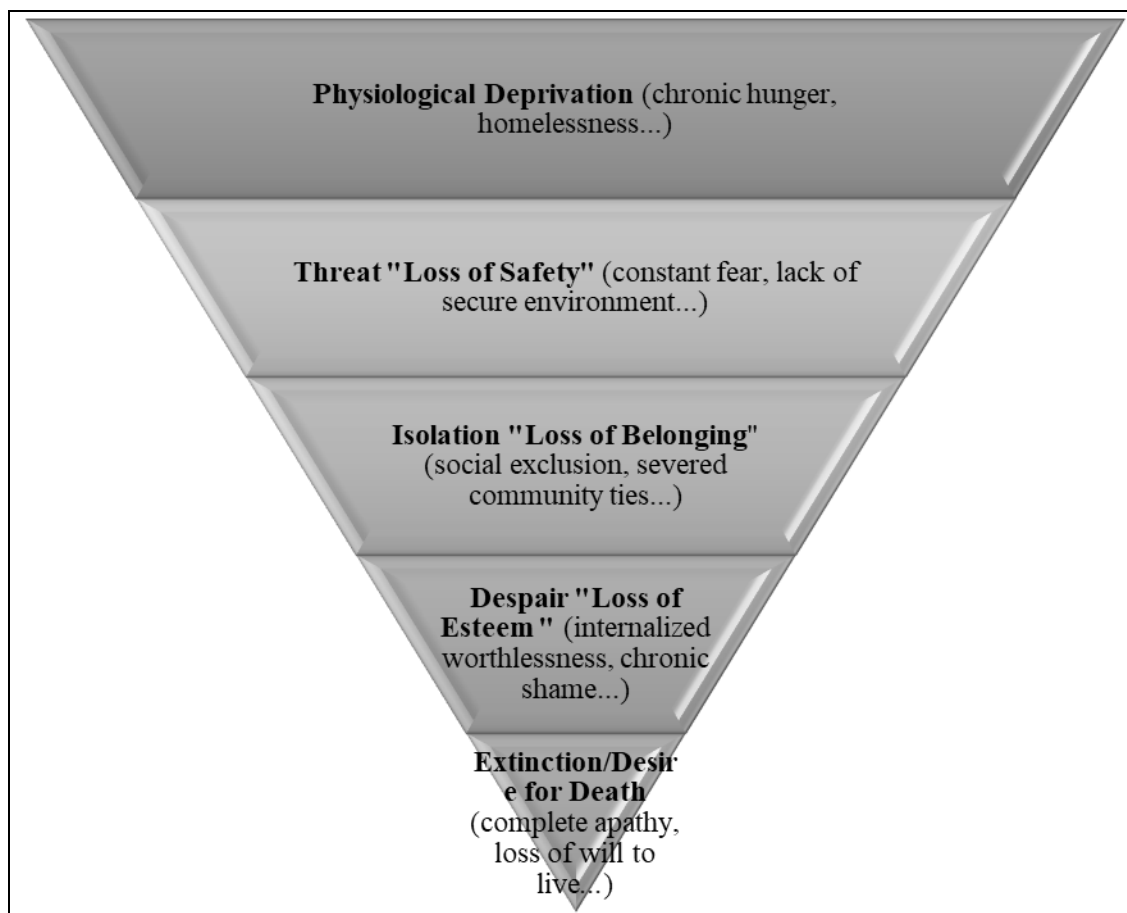
- Psychological Theories of Systemic Context: Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000, pp. 227-268) asserts that needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are intrinsically social and cannot be disentangled from the cultural context—making SDT more adaptable to collectivist or oppression-experiencing populations. Alderfer's ERG theory likewise allows simultaneous activation of multiple need categories and recognizes "frustration-regression," where thwarted higher-level needs accentuate lower-level ones (Alderfer, 1969, pp. 142-175).

3. The Human Deprivation Hierarchy: A Proposed Conceptual Model

While Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides a foundational framework for understanding human motivation and flourishing, its application is primarily centered on contexts of stability and resource availability. However, in environments characterized by chronic adversity, systemic violence, and severe deprivation—what have been termed "negative societies" (Drenth, 1999)—the traditional ascent toward self-actualization is not the prevailing motivational dynamic. Instead, a reverse trajectory can be observed, wherein the inability to meet basic needs leads to a progressive and debilitating psychological decline. The following model, the Human Deprivation Hierarchy, is a conceptual framework that inverts Maslow's paradigm to account for this descent.

3.1. The Theoretical Hypothesis: The Inverted Pyramid :

The Human Deprivation Hierarchy is a conceptual model proposing that under conditions of chronic deprivation, human motivation and well-being do not follow an upward, but rather a downward, trajectory. Instead of a prepotent need for self-actualization emerging only after lower-level needs are met, this model suggests that the frustration or thwarting of basic psychological needs drives a descent into increasingly severe states of psychological and existential distress (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). This inverted pyramid, beginning with the loss of the most fundamental needs, culminates in a state of complete existential disengagement, or "extinction," reflecting the total collapse of human agency and purpose. The following figure illustrates this:



Source: Prepared by the Researcher (Proposed) based on the foregoing.

Figure 2: The Human Deprivation Hierarchy (Proposed Model)

Figure 2, presented above, graphically delineates the proposed Human Deprivation Hierarchy. This visual representation systematically illustrates the downward trajectory of psychological deterioration experienced by individuals within environments characterized by chronic deprivation, frequently observed in what are termed 'negative societies.' This depiction aims to enhance conceptual clarity and consistency in understanding this inverse motivational process.

3.2. Levels of Deprivation:

The model outlines five progressive levels of deprivation, each corresponding to the frustration of a basic human need:

3.2.1. Physiological Deprivation:

The foundational level of the hierarchy, this state represents the most elemental form of deprivation—the chronic inability to secure food, water, and shelter. This is not a temporary hunger but a persistent and life-threatening condition that consumes all cognitive and physical resources. It is characterized by an existential threat to survival itself, a condition that overrides all other motivational drives.

3.2.2. Threat (Deprivation of Safety and Security):

When an individual's environment is marked by violence, instability, or unpredictability, their sense of safety is chronically thwarted. This level of deprivation is defined by persistent fear, hypervigilance, and an inability to form a secure attachment to one's surroundings. It is a

state of perpetual psychological and often physical peril, where the basic need for security is systematically denied, leading to a state of complex trauma. (Herman, 2015)

3.2.3. Isolation (Deprivation of Belonging and Relationships):

This level manifests when individuals are socially excluded, ostracized, or severed from their communal ties due to displacement, conflict, or systemic neglect. The need for belonging is a fundamental human drive (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, pp. 497-529), and its deprivation leads to profound feelings of loneliness, alienation, and social disaffiliation. In environments of conflict or poverty, the breakdown of community bonds is a core source of psychological distress.

3.2.4. Despair (Deprivation of Esteem and Recognition):

When an individual is subjected to chronic humiliation, shame, or a complete lack of recognition for their worth and contributions, they descend into a state of despair. This is more than a simple lack of external validation; it is an internalized sense of worthlessness and learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972, pp. 407-412) that erodes self-efficacy and personal identity. In many marginalized communities, this despair is a direct result of institutional and systemic oppression (Tay & Diener, 2011, pp. 354–365).

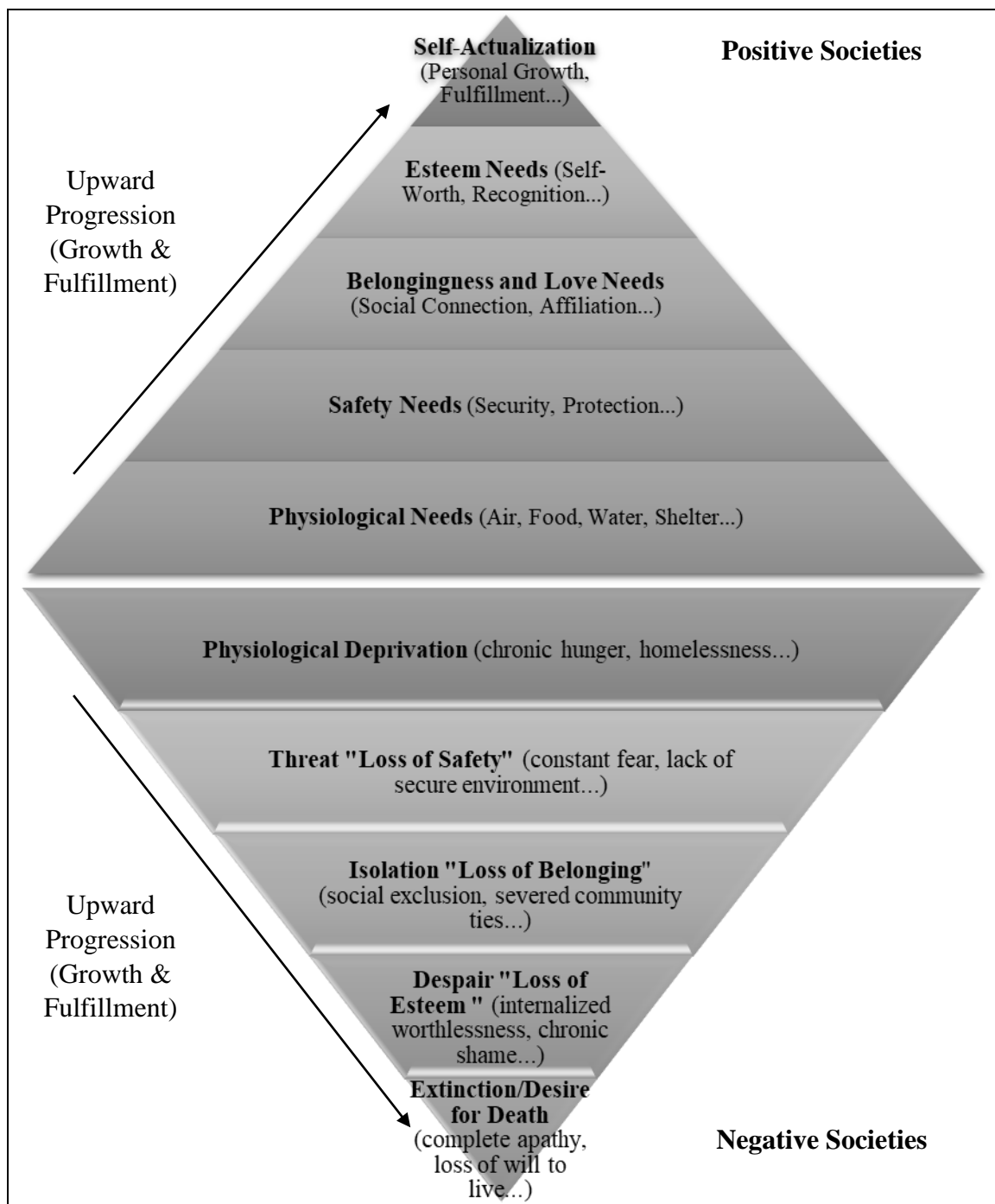
3.2.5. Extinction/The Desire for Death:

The final and most extreme level of the hierarchy, this state represents the total collapse of human spirit and the loss of the will to live. It is a condition of complete apathy and hopelessness, where the individual has exhausted all psychological resources and sees no path to recovery or meaning. This can manifest as a deep-seated desire for an end to suffering, a state of psychological non-being that transcends mere depression and represents the complete negation of the human condition.

3.3. Comparison with Maslow's Hierarchy:

From Self-Actualization to Extinction: While Maslow's hierarchy operates as a growth-oriented model suited to stable and affluent contexts, the proposed **Human Deprivation Hierarchy** functions as a pathology-oriented framework that explains psychological collapse under systemic and chronic adversity. The key distinction lies in their trajectories: Maslow's model depicts an upward progression from need fulfillment toward self-actualization, whereas the Human Deprivation Hierarchy illustrates a downward spiral from being to non-being, culminating in extinction. In "negative societies," motivation is reframed not as the pursuit of higher needs but as the struggle to resist further descent into deeper states of deprivation.

This model is not an outright rejection of Maslow's work but rather a complementary perspective that addresses a fundamental limitation: its inability to fully explain the human experience in contexts of severe hardship. Empirical evidence from conflict zones and impoverished communities has shown that individuals may prioritize higher-level needs like belonging (communal solidarity) or esteem (heroism) despite the lack of physiological or safety needs (Tay & Diener, 2011, pp. 354–365). However, the Human Deprivation Hierarchy accounts for the psychological toll when these efforts are futile, and the constant thwarting of needs leads to a spiral of disengagement and despair. It thus provides a lens for understanding the profound psychological trauma experienced when the traditional path to human flourishing is not only blocked but actively reversed. The following figure illustrates this:



Source: Prepared by the Researcher (Proposed) based on (Maslow, 1943) and the foregoing.

Figure 3: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and the Human Deprivation Hierarchy: A Combined Perspective

Figure 3 presents an integrated framework that juxtaposes Maslow's hierarchy of needs, representing an upward trajectory of human growth, with the proposed Human Deprivation Hierarchy, depicting a downward trajectory of psychological decline. This dual perspective underscores a pivotal point of convergence or divergence, where the fulfillment or persistent frustration of basic needs determines the individual's movement toward either self-actualization or progressive existential deterioration. Within this unified model, the transition from physiological and safety needs to their corresponding states of deprivation signals a fundamental shift in motivational dynamics—from a pursuit of flourishing to a struggle against psychological collapse. Consequently, the model advances the understanding of human motivation by capturing both optimal development and profound adversity within a single conceptual framework.

4. Theoretical and Practical Implications of the Model:

The proposed Human Deprivation Hierarchy presents profound theoretical and practical implications, offering a more precise and contextually sensitive framework for understanding human experiences within "negative societies" characterized by pervasive adversity and systemic challenges. This model provides a nuanced and scientifically rigorous lens through which to examine the cascading impact of deprivation on individual and collective well-being:

4.1. Understanding Humanitarian Crises in Negative Societies:

The Human Deprivation Hierarchy furnishes a robust analytical framework for comprehending the intricate and multidimensional nature of humanitarian crises, moving beyond a simplistic enumeration of unmet needs to a systematic understanding of psychological deterioration. In contexts persistently marked by armed conflict, forced displacement, protracted crises, and profound economic collapse, individuals frequently endure a systematic and observable descent through the distinct levels of deprivation (Vigh, 2008, pp. 5-24) (KHRAISHA & et al., 2024). For instance, forced migration, a cardinal feature of contemporary humanitarian emergencies, invariably precipitates acute physiological deprivation (e.g., chronic hunger, lack of potable water, inadequate shelter), rapidly followed by severe threats to personal and collective safety (e.g., exposure to violence, exploitation, absence of legal protection), and subsequently, profound isolation (e.g., loss of community, family separation, and the systemic disruption of crucial social networks) (UNHCR, 2021) (Miller & Rasco, 2004).

This model rigorously elucidates how these experiences are not merely discrete adversities but rather interconnected and dynamically progressive stages in a downward psychosocial spiral, profoundly compromising psychological well-being, eroding adaptive capacities, and instigating long-term mental health sequelae. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of this progressive erosion of fundamental needs is critically imperative for the design and implementation of humanitarian interventions that transcend immediate material requirements to address the complex and compounding psychological trauma inherent at each successive level of deprivation (Hobfoll & et al., 2008, pp. 283-315).

This framework thus empowers practitioners to more accurately anticipate, diagnose, and mitigate the psychological ramifications of prolonged crises, thereby fostering the development of more holistic, empirically informed, and trauma-sensitive aid delivery mechanisms.

4.2. Implications for Social Psychology and Sociology:

This model offers a substantial theoretical contribution to both social psychology and sociology by providing a sophisticated framework for the rigorous study of the psychological effects of prolonged societal stress, collective trauma, and structural violence. It crucially shifts the analytical focus from individual psychological deficits to the profound and pervasive impact of systemic factors, rigorously demonstrating how macro-level societal conditions fundamentally shape and often distort micro-level psychological processes (Kira, Shuwiekh, Rice, Al Ibraheem, & Aljakoub, 2017, pp. 176-190). For social psychology, the model establishes a vital empirical basis to investigate how collective experiences of existential threat, social isolation, and pervasive despair directly impact social cohesion, exacerbate intergroup conflict, and critically influence the formation and transformation of collective identity within severely adverse environments. For example, the pervasive experience of systemic marginalization, conceptualized as a continuous thwarting of esteem and belonging needs, can demonstrably lead to widespread collective despair, significantly impairing collective action and hindering the efficacy of resistance movements (Sidanius & Pratto, 2004, pp. 315-332) (Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 2001).

In sociology, the Human Deprivation Hierarchy serves as an indispensable tool for understanding the social stratification of suffering, empirically revealing how ingrained systemic inequalities (e.g., economic disparities, racial discrimination, political disenfranchisement) perpetuate and intensify cycles of deprivation across generations and social strata (Massey, 1990, pp. 329-357) (Sá, Waikamp, Freitas, & Baeza, 2022, pp. 933-953).

It rigorously compels a deeper analysis of how power structures, institutional governance failures, and discriminatory practices are intricately linked to and actively contribute to the various, systematically imposed levels of deprivation, thereby establishing a critical nexus between individual psychological states, broader societal dynamics, and pressing social justice concerns (Haslam & Reicher, 2005, pp. 44-51). Furthermore, this framework can significantly inform sociological studies on the breakdown of social order, the emergence of novel social structures, and the resilience or collapse of communal bonds in the face of extreme and persistent adversity.

4.3. Explanatory Potential for Societal Trauma, Violence, and Forced Migration:

The Human Deprivation Hierarchy possesses substantial and compelling explanatory power for examining critical societal phenomena such as diffuse societal trauma, endemic systemic violence, and the complex drivers of forced migration.

4.3.1. Societal Trauma:

The model significantly refines the conceptualization of societal trauma, moving beyond a mere aggregation of individual traumatic experiences to define it as a collective psychological and social state resulting from widespread, sustained, and prolonged deprivation. The systematic progression through physiological deprivation, acute threat, enforced isolation, and pervasive despair can rigorously be demonstrated to culminate in a profound, collective sense of helplessness, a severe erosion of collective efficacy, and a disintegration of shared meaning and cultural narratives, which are all empirically verifiable hallmarks of deep-seated societal trauma (Gilligan, 2013) (Volkan, 2014). This framework is instrumental in comprehending the intricate mechanisms of transgenerational trauma transmission within communities subjected to continuous and structural deprivation.

4.3.2. Violence:

This model offers critical insights into the complex and often multi-causal roots of violence, positing that cycles of violence function as both a devastating consequence and a perpetuating cause of deprivation. The relentless experience of threat, dehumanization, and despair can be empirically linked to heightened aggression, diminished empathy, and the creation of fertile ground for both individual and collective violence. Such violence can manifest as a desperate coping mechanism, a profound expression of existential depletion, or a pathway towards radicalization and extremist ideologies (**Žižek, 2007**) (**Moghaddam, 2011**). Consequently, the model robustly implies that effective interventions against violence necessitate not solely punitive measures but, more fundamentally, comprehensive approaches that meticulously tackle the underlying, systematically denied levels of deprivation, aiming to restore human dignity, ensure basic needs fulfillment, and rebuild trust.

4.3.3. Forced Migration:

The Human Deprivation Hierarchy is exceptionally relevant for a rigorous understanding of the complex and involuntary dynamics of forced migration. Individuals are often compelled to migrate when their physiological and safety needs are severely and chronically unmet, experiencing "threat" and "physiological deprivation" as primary, life-altering, and unavoidable drivers (**UNHCR, 2023**). The perilous journey itself frequently entails further profound isolation, heightened exploitation, and systemic dehumanization, inexorably pushing migrants further down the deprivation hierarchy. The model therefore critically underscores the paramount importance of addressing the root causes of deprivation to prevent involuntary displacement and to provide comprehensive, culturally sensitive, and psychologically informed support for those who are displaced. This approach acknowledges their profound psychological journey through the hierarchy of deprivation, rather than merely focusing on their physical movement or economic status (**Watters, 2001, pp. 1709-1718**) (**Tay A. K., 2022, pp. 398-399**).

By rigorously shifting the analytical focus from a presumption of growth to the empirically observable reality of decline, the Human Deprivation Hierarchy provides a critical and indispensable tool for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners alike. This enables the development of more effective, humane, and context-sensitive approaches to alleviating human suffering in a world increasingly characterized by complex and persistent crises.

Conclusion

This paper advances the central argument that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, while influential, fails to adequately account for human motivation and psychological experience in contexts defined by chronic deprivation and structural adversity. In societies where survival, security, and dignity are persistently undermined, the assumption of a linear and upward progression of needs becomes untenable. Instead, human experience in such environments is more accurately characterized by regression, erosion, and decline rather than growth and self-actualization.

Building on this premise, the study introduces the Hierarchy of Deprivation as an alternative conceptual framework that inverts Maslow's traditional model. This framework captures how continuous deprivation initiates a downward and cumulative process whereby unmet physiological needs give rise to persistent threat, social isolation, and deepening despair, ultimately leading to a state of existential collapse. By reframing human needs

through the lens of deterioration rather than fulfillment, the model aligns more closely with the lived realities of individuals and communities exposed to systemic oppression and prolonged hardship.

The theoretical contribution of this work lies in its challenge to the presumed universality of Maslow's hierarchy, which is grounded in relatively stable and resource-rich social contexts. The Hierarchy of Deprivation shifts the focus toward a pathology-oriented understanding of motivation, emphasizing how deprivation actively restructures psychological states and behavioral patterns. In doing so, it provides a structured and coherent framework for analyzing human suffering that extends beyond the explanatory limits of growth-centered theories.

Moreover, this study underscores that deprivation should not be understood merely as the absence of need satisfaction but as a dynamic and compounding process that progressively erodes agency, meaning, and social connectedness. Each stage of deprivation intensifies the next, producing a self-reinforcing downward spiral that conventional motivational models are ill-equipped to explain.

In an era marked by escalating humanitarian crises, forced displacement, and enduring global inequalities, the need for context-sensitive theoretical frameworks is increasingly urgent. Accordingly, this paper calls for future empirical research to examine the validity and applicability of the Hierarchy of Deprivation across diverse settings. Such research should integrate qualitative approaches that foreground lived experiences with quantitative analyses that explore the psychological consequences of sustained deprivation. Advancing this line of inquiry is essential for developing interventions and policies that are not only effective but also grounded in a realistic and humane understanding of human suffering under conditions of profound adversity.

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