

NEEDS PERCEPTION, POSITION, AND CONTENTMENT: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF MYANMAR IMMIGRANT WORKERS IN THAILAND

Kevalin Puangyoykeaw

PhD Candidate, Graduate School of Economics and Management, Faculty of Economics, Tohoku University, Japan. Email: kevalin.p@gmail.com
27-1 Kawauchi Aoba-ku Sendai 980-8576

Yuko Nishide

Associate Professor, Graduate School of Economics and Management, Faculty of Economics, Tohoku University, Japan. Email: ynishide@econ.tohoku.ac.jp
27-1 Kawauchi Aoba-ku Sendai 980-8576
<http://www.econ.tohoku.ac.jp/~ynishide/toppage.html>

ABSTRACT

Is Maslow's hierarchy of needs universal? This research tries to answer the aforementioned question by conducting an empirical study of low-skilled Myanmar workers in Thailand. Despite the hierarchy's popularity, little evidence has found to support the proposed theory – especially in relation to low-skilled workers. This paper was designed to explore the need ranking, need importance and need satisfaction perceived by Myanmar workers along with their level of overall life satisfaction. The sample consisted of 400 Myanmar immigrant workers in 13 selected seafood-processing factories in Samutsakhon province. Descriptive analysis, correlation, a t-test and ANOVA were employed for the investigation. The ranking result provides supportive evidence for Maslow's proposal on the order of needs in the hierarchy. Differences in the demographic data influenced respondents' need importance and need satisfaction differently. The researcher hopes that the finding will help in tailoring an effective motivation programme suitable for Myanmar low-skilled workers in Thailand.

Keywords: Immigrant, Low-Skilled, Needs, Maslow's Hierarchy, Motivation

JEL Classification: M540

1. Introduction

Is Maslow's hierarchy of needs truly universal? Maslow's hierarchy of needs has been an issue of discussion for many decades in relation to its validity and reliability. Many controversies regarding the truthfulness of Maslow's hierarchy of needs are still in question. Despite the hierarchy's popularity, it is rather odd that there is little empirical evidence to support the model. Does it truly apply to all humans, regardless of their culture, beliefs and background? Ramlall (2004) suggested that needs can change over time and place, depending on the current and desired economic, political and social status, as well as other factors. This paper attempts to verify whether or not employees' needs in the case of Myanmar workers in Thailand follow the pattern that Maslow suggested.

Thailand, with its rapid economic development, has experienced changes in its economic structure and internal labour market. Just like many other developing countries, and most developed countries, it is now facing a low-skilled labour shortage, especially in labour-intensive industries. More and more entrepreneurs are starting to employ immigrant workers. The main reasons are the scarcity of local Thai workers joining the industry, the lower cost of employing immigrant workers and the diligence of immigrant workers (Manoonkittikorn et al, 2010). It is always in the interest of companies to seek out cheap labour to reduce their costs; therefore, the presence of immigrant workers to fulfil jobs that are neglected by locals is not surprising. Because of its close proximity, Myanmar is a main source of immigrants coming to Thailand. It is estimated that more than 2.3 million Myanmar workers are now residing in Thailand, mainly employed in low-skilled occupations, especially the fishery and fishery-related industries. Thailand Development Research Institute (2007) found that the industries are heavily dependent on immigrants as their main source of workforce. Interestingly, studies on how to manage low-skilled immigrant workers are rather limited and scarce, not only in Thailand but also around the world. A small number of studies on Maslow's model have been conducted on low-skilled workers. With low-skilled immigrant workers' limited skill and competency, wage increases as well as promotion opportunities are rare.

The aim of this paper is to determine whether or not Maslow's hierarchy of needs applies to Myanmar immigrant workers in Thailand. Exploring the needs of immigrant workers provides useful insights for managers and business owners in tailoring effective motivation programmes that are most desired by low-skilled workers. Dickson (1973) found that employees are not solely motivated by money and that employees' behaviour is linked to their attitudes. By understanding what employees need, their need satisfaction can be improved, and need satisfaction can drive the work attitude of employees to achieve their goals (Rajasekhar & Vijayasree, 2012). A successful motivation programme can improve the levels of productivity and employee satisfaction and ultimately reduce the turnover. As suggested by Toder et al (1977), the success or failure of motivation rests not only on the technique itself but also on the management's ability to match people's needs with appropriate rewards.

2. Literature Review

Maslow first introduced his famous hierarchy of needs in 1954. According to Maslow, there are five fundamental steps, and unless these needs are met, a person cannot progress to achieve a higher level (Freitas & Leonard, 2011; Hamel et al, 2003). The five needs are physiologic needs, safety and security needs, love and belonging needs, self-esteem needs and self-actualization needs. The hierarchy starts from the basic survival needs, such as food, shelter and air, to more social development needs, whereby persons start to be concerned not only about themselves but also about giving back to the community. Maslow's needs can be classified into physical and psychosocial needs. The physical needs include physiologic and safety and security needs, while the psychosocial needs include love and belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization (Maslow, 1954, 1968).

An individual will be motivated by a need until it is satisfied. More than one need could be motivators at a given point in time until those needs are fulfilled (Betz, 1984) but the strongest motivator remains the lowest unsatisfied need (Aworemi et al, 2011). Maslow (1968) suggested that a negative correlation exists between need importance and need fulfilment. Needs that are fulfilled will fade in importance, activating higher-level needs. Maslow further suggested that a positive relationship exists between life satisfaction and need fulfilment. Individuals whose needs are all gratified will enjoy life more than those whose needs are not.

3. Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore the perception of need importance and need satisfaction of Myanmar immigrant workers in Thailand. In addition, the study seeks to describe the ranked importance of Maslow's needs perceived by low-skilled workers. The aim is to investigate further the validity of Maslow's hierarchy of needs by ultimately answering the question "Are needs universal and fulfilled in the order predicted by Maslow's (1954) motivation theory?"

In the light of the above-mentioned literature, the following hypotheses were framed for the investigation of this research:

- (1) Need importance is negatively correlated with need satisfaction; and
- (2) Need satisfaction is positively correlated with life satisfaction.

This paper hopes to shed light on and improve the understanding of low-skilled workers' needs and anticipates that the result may be of use in shaping effective motivational programmes.

4. Methods

The method followed to obtain data from the respondents was to conduct a fieldwork questionnaire. The questionnaire was translated into the Myanmar language. The target population for this study included all Myanmar immigrant workers at 13 randomly selected seafood-processing companies in Samutsakhon province. A total of 400 questionnaires were obtained using an easy random sampling technique.

The questions used in this questionnaire were selected from previous studies and through an extensive review of the literature. The questionnaire consisted of five sections. First, the basic demographic information of the respondents was collected, including their gender, age, marital status, education level, employment position, length of service in the factory and total length of stay in Thailand. Second, the questionnaire explored the respondents' level of life satisfaction. A five-point Likert scale was used, ranking from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). This was ascertained by using a single statement: "I am very satisfied with my life as it is at the moment". This question, developed by Campbell et al (1976), has been proven and justified to be an adequate question to ask to determine an individual's life satisfaction. Third was the need importance section. This section asked how important each need was to the respondent. Ten items representing Maslow's hierarchy of needs – two questions for each step – were selected (Table 1). A Likert scale, with 5 as very important and 1 as not at all important, was used. The fourth section asked about the level of need satisfaction. The same 10 items and a Likert scale ranging from 5 (very satisfied) to 1 (very dissatisfied) were used. Last was the need ranking section. This section asked the respondents to rank those 10 items (1–10) by allocating 1 to the most important need and 10 to the least important need.

5. Results

5.1 Descriptive Analysis

The measure of need importance and need satisfaction reveals good internal consistency, with Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients of .82 and .73, respectively. Out of 400 respondents, 61.75% are male and 38.25% are female. Regarding age, 82% of the respondents are between 20 and 35 years old. A total of 44.75% are single, followed by those who are married with children and married without children, with 27.75% and 24.75%, respectively. The majority are part-time workers, 78.25%, who are paid only when they show up for work. Great numbers of respondents have literacy skills, with only 7.5% being illiterate. More than 30% of the respondents have worked for around 2–3 years in their current factory and their total length of stay in Thailand is around the same time frame.

When asking about the respondents' life satisfaction as it is at the moment, the average mean of 3.46 was obtained, which lies between neutral and satisfaction. Most of the needs were also selected as moderately important (3 on the scale) and the respondents feel neutral in meeting those needs (3 on the scale). Further analyses show no significant difference in means for the respondents' life satisfaction among any of the demographic data.

One of the objectives of this paper is to discover the ranking of needs perceived by Myanmar workers in Thailand. Table 3, showing the needs' ranking, suggests that the pattern of needs of low-skilled Myanmar workers in Thailand follows those of Maslow's hierarchy.

The physiologic needs come first, followed by safety and security needs, love and belonging needs, self-esteem needs and self-actualization needs. One exception is "The ability to achieve a sense of accomplishment", a need on level 4 of the hierarchy, which comes before "The opportunity to feel part of a team/group/society", a need on level 3, for this research sample group. This may be due to the nature of the work carried out by immigrant workers, which does not require teamwork to finish the job.

5.2 Correlations among Variables

There were no significant or strong relationships between life satisfaction, need importance and need satisfaction for any of the demographic data. To investigate the relationship among variables further, a correlation matrix was computed, as presented in Table 4. There was a weak positive relationship between need importance and need satisfaction, all showing positive results except for three negative values: -.001, -.116 and -.077. The negative values are very close to 0 and can be concluded as very small in significance. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis for hypothesis (1). Need importance and need satisfaction are positively correlated

The Pearson correlation coefficient between life satisfaction and need satisfaction revealed that all the positive relationships varied from 0.001 to 0.263. The strength is, however, quite weak (less than .3) according to Cohen's (1988) guidelines. Multiple regression between the two suggested a correlation coefficient (R) of .35 ($F(10,389) = 5.584, p < .01$), accounting for 12.6% of the total variance. All the correlations were significant at the 0.01 confidence level, except for need satisfaction item nos. 5, 6 and 10. Therefore, need satisfaction is positively related to overall life satisfaction. Hypothesis (2) is accepted.

5.3 Differences between Variables

The parametric analysis shows no significant difference in need importance and need satisfaction among gender, employment position and marital status. However, when comparing the means of need importance and need satisfaction among other demographic data – age, education, length of service in the factory and length of stay in Thailand – the analysis yields very interesting results.

A t-test and one-way ANOVA were conducted to explore the impact of age, education, length of service in the factory and length of stay in Thailand on need importance and need satisfaction. There was a statistically significant difference at the $p < 0.05$ level for need importance items 2, 3 and 7 for the age groups ($p = 0.001, 0.00$ and 0.018 , respectively), with a moderate effect size (eta squared = $0.06, 0.06$ and 0.04). The post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score of the age group 36–40 is significantly different from that of the other age groups. For need satisfaction, item no. 9 yielded significantly different means among age groups: $F(6, 393) = 5.271, p = 0.00$, eta squared = 0.07 . The satisfaction of people aged 20–25 with the opportunity to contribute to society is significantly different from that of people aged 26–30 and 31–35. There is a difference in need satisfaction item no. 3 for those holding different educational backgrounds: $F(4, 395) = 4.735, p = 0.001$, eta squared = 0.05 . The post hoc comparisons showed that those who did not attend school are more satisfied with their ability to ensure a safe home environment than those who obtained middle and high school degrees.

Need importance item no. 5, the ability to feel loved by your significant others, is the only item that showed a significant difference when comparing the immigrants' length of service in the current factory. Those who had spent 3–5 years in their current factory found item no. 5 to be less important to them than the 1–2 and 2–3 years groups: $F(5, 394) = 3.902, p = 0.002$, eta squared = 0.05 . A similar result can be seen in the total length of immigrants' stay in Thailand. There was a statistically significant difference at the $p < 0.05$ level for need importance item no. 5 ($F(5, 394) = 2.98, p = 0.012$), with a moderate effect size (eta squared = 0.04). The pair that showed a significant difference was those spending less than a year in Thailand and those spending more than 10 years.

N.B: The data show a significant difference with effect size; an eta squared less than 0.04 is considered to be significantly too small. As a result, the author did not mention such a difference in this paper.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

Low-skilled immigrants are a main source of workers for labour-intensive industries in Thailand. Their presence in many industries is undeniable, especially in the seafood-processing sector. Ignorance in understanding low-skilled immigrants' needs has been shown in the small number of studies and/or journals on this particular topic. Employee motivation techniques tend to focus more on skilled labour. However, motivating low-skilled workers can be beneficial to the firm as happy individuals tend to stay longer and thus accumulate experience and increase productivity. This paper attempts to verify the validity of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory regarding whether or not low-skilled workers' needs follow such steps and which variables could affect the differences.

The finding of this study gives some strong support to Maslow's proposals regarding the order of needs in a needs hierarchy. The hierarchy of Myanmar low-skilled migrant workers is very close to Maslow's anticipated order of needs, with physiologic needs being the lowest and self-actualization being the highest. However, there is a notable departure in that the need for self-accomplishment was ranked higher than the need to be part of a team/group/society. This could be explained by the immigrants' nature of work, which is mostly individual-based with a pay-for-performance payment system. Therefore, after providing the basic needs, e.g. money for food and clothes and a safe home and working environment, employers should recognize individual achievement, e.g. by implementing an employee of the month programme or by providing extra benefits after achieving goals, before emphasizing team-building.

The result shows that there is a positive relationship between life satisfaction and need satisfaction. Immigrants whose needs are satisfied tend to be more satisfied with their overall life. Moreover, need satisfaction is also positively related to need importance. The greater the importance of the needs, e.g. food, clothing and shelter, the more the respondent feels satisfied with such needs. This is, however, in contrast to

Maslow's assumption that need importance should be negatively related to need satisfaction. Needs that are fulfilled will fade in importance, activating higher-level needs. This does not seem to be the case for this study. Needs that had been fulfilled still remained important to the immigrants. Therefore, needs should be satisfied according to Maslow's hierarchy and employees should continue to meet those needs.

The needs of immigrant labourers, in this study, are not affected by differences in gender, employment position and marital status. Age, education level, length of service in the factory and total length of stay in Thailand do, however, influence differently how immigrants perceive their needs. From the analysis, respondents aged 36–40 see physiologic needs, safety needs and self-esteem needs as less important than the other age groups. The reason behind this particular age group's difference is beyond the scope of this study. However, it presents a very interesting topic for future research. The study found that members of the younger age group, 20–25, are not as satisfied with their chance to contribute to society compared with older individuals, aged 26–35 years. From this we can see that younger people are more interested in and love to participate more in social work and by providing this one can help boost their satisfaction. Regarding the education level, those who did not attend school feel more satisfied with their ability to provide a safe home environment for themselves and their significant others compared with those with middle school and high school degrees. With a degree comes greater expectation. Those who have served in their current factory for 3–5 years feel that love is not as important as those who have just joined the company. The result of the importance of love is later strengthened by respondents who have stayed for more than 10 years in Thailand, who reported that love is less important than those who have stayed in Thailand for less than a year. The reason behind this result could be that the longer immigrants stay away from their hometown and their family, the less they see the ability to feel loved by that significant other as important.

The limitation of this study is that it only covers 400 Myanmar immigrant workers in 13 seafood-processing factories in Samutsakhon province. Conducting research on Myanmar immigrants in Thailand is a difficult task. Language and collaboration issues exist. Some Myanmar workers are unregistered and they are afraid to cooperate in answering the questionnaire. Moreover, even though the questionnaire is in the Myanmar language, some respondents are illiterate. Translation by their friends helps to overcome this problem.

Table 1: Importance and Satisfaction of Need Items

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1. The ability to provide food, clothing and shelter for you and your significant others
 2. The opportunity to be financially independent
 3. The ability to ensure a safe home environment for you and your significant others
 4. The opportunity to be in a safe working environment
 5. The ability to feel loved by your significant others
 6. The opportunity to feel part of a team/group/society
 7. The ability to achieve a sense of accomplishment
 8. The opportunity to achieve personal satisfaction
 9. The opportunity to contribute to society
 10. The capacity to inspire members of society
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Source: Dillman (2000); Freitas and Leonard (2011); Maslow (1954)

Table 2: Sample Characteristics

Variables	%	Variables	%
N = 400		N = 400	
Gender		Education	
Male	61.75	Did not attend school	7.50
Female	38.25	Primary education	20.75
Age		Middle school	57.25
Less than 20 years old	6.00	High school	12.25
20–25 years old	26.75	Bachelor degree	2.25
26–30 years old	35.25	Length of service in the factory	
31–35 years old	21.00	Less than a year	8.75
36–40 years old	8.23	1–2 years	26.25
41–45 years old	0.75	2–3 years	37.00
46–50 years old	2.00	3–5 years	17.5
More than 50 years old	0.00	5–10 years	9.50
Marital Status		More than 10 years	1.00
Single	44.75	Length of stay in Thailand	
Married with children	27.75	Less than a year	4.25
Married without children	24.75	1–2 years	16.50
Divorced	2.75	2–3 years	33.00
Position		3–5 years	18.50
Full-time	21.75	5–10 years	23.50
Part-time (daily employment)	78.25	More than 10 years	4.25

Table 3: Needs' Ranking

Needs	Mean	SD	Rank	Needs	Mean	SD	Rank
① The ability to provide food, clothing and shelter	1.99	1.55	1	⑥ The opportunity to feel part of a team/group/society	6.48	1.38	7
② The opportunity to be financially independent	2.14	1.15	2	⑦ The ability to achieve a sense of accomplishment	6.39	1.64	6
③ The ability to ensure a safe home environment	4.01	1.58	4	⑧ The opportunity to achieve personal satisfaction	7.05	1.64	8
④ The opportunity to be in a safe working environment	3.62	1.74	3	⑨ The opportunity to contribute to society	8.81	1.07	9
⑤ The ability to feel loved	5.15	1.5	5	⑩ The capacity to inspire members of society	9.37	1.72	10

Table 4: Correlation between Life Satisfaction, Need Importance and Need Satisfaction

	Life Satisf action	<i>Need Satisfaction</i>										
		①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨	⑩	
Life Satisfaction	1.00	.220*	.263*	.203*	.165*	.060	.042	.146*	.159*	.178*	.001	
<i>Need Importance</i>	① The ability to provide food, clothing and shelter	.297**	.215*	.333*	.242*	.203*	.069	.094	.161*	.113*	.154*	.073
	② The opportunity to be financially independent	.162**	.071	.218*	.202*	.115*	.082	.076	.126*	.105*	.092	.050
	③ The ability to ensure a safe home environment	.143**	.071	.221*	.193*	.139*	.201*	.171*	.194*	.159*	.156*	.089
	④ The opportunity to be in a safe working environment	.131**	.001	.115*	.192*	.187*	.129*	.193*	.159*	.104*	.098*	.053
	⑤ The ability to feel loved	.014	-.116*	.087	.115*	.122*	.144*	.177*	.103*	.090	.036	.079
	⑥ The opportunity to feel part of a team/group/society	.024	-.001	.136*	.201*	.079	.142*	.239*	.127*	.152*	.245*	.182*
	⑦ The ability to achieve a sense of accomplishment	.146**	.128*	.161*	.180*	.225*	.118*	.189*	.234*	.207*	.244*	.184*
	⑧ The opportunity to achieve personal satisfaction	.150**	.048	.205*	.227*	.230*	.140*	.114*	.204*	.268*	.268*	.301*
	⑨ The opportunity to contribute to society	.171**	.068	.160*	.190*	.121*	.188*	.192*	.215*	.260*	.281*	.283*
	⑩ The capacity to inspire members of society	.030	-.077	.086	.213*	.070	.183*	.261*	.171*	.180*	.234*	.299*

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

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