

Motivation: History of the Concept

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Abstract

Originally, motivation was analyzed as a singular determinant of human thoughts, feelings, and actions. It was quickly recognized, however, that motivation operates in concert with other determinants (e.g., cognition, affect, habits). This insight has allowed the psychology of motivation to progress to a very sophisticated level to answer to the question as to which of the human needs are to be differentiated and how these needs manage to guide and energize people. It has also promoted considering the concept of goals (on top of incentives and expectations) which allowed a better understanding of action control; willpower is nowadays analyzed in terms of the effective (effortful and/or automatic) self-regulation of goal pursuit.

Evolutionary theory and the psychoanalytic study of mental illness always were committed to seeing motivation as a primary cause of behavior, and this is also true of behavioral biology and physiological psychology, as they prefer to think in terms of homeostasis (Cofer and Appley, 1964). When hunger occurs, for instance, behavior is instigated (e.g., finding and eating food) that is instrumental to rectifying the imbalance caused by tissue needs and deficits. The named theoretical perspectives have barricaded the simple insight that behavior can occur under externally applied forces as well (e.g., a shove). Even more importantly, the physical structure of the organism, its sensory and perceptual capacities, its cognitive and motor abilities, and so forth, qualify as causal factors. Even habits, once formed, can be seen as such.

Even though motivation has been considered to be the primary cause of people's thoughts, feelings, and actions in evolutionary theory, psychoanalytic theory, behavioral psychology, and physiological psychology, this is not true for the psychology of motivation. There, motivation is just one cause among others, and the focus is on analyzing aspects of thoughts, feelings, and actions conducive to a motivational analysis. These aspects relate to the energization of responses as well as to their selection and persistent implementation. Answers to these questions have changed over time in line with the adhered-to *metamodel* of human functioning. Starting out with mechanistic models (e.g., learning theory), the psychology of motivation moved on to cognitive models (e.g., attribution theory), and has now arrived at self-regulation models that characterize the human as a flexible strategist when it comes to translating motivation into action.

More specifically, the question of the facilitation and energization of certain responses has been analyzed most extensively by Clark L. Hull (1943, 1884–1952) and Kenneth W. Spence (1956, 1907–67), the classic proponents of learning theory. It was suggested that motivational processes as such (assumed to be rooted in general drive or arousal states) do not necessarily control or guide novel forms of behavior but only invigorate innate or learned associative tendencies. Later on, thoughts, feelings, and actions were often characterized as guided, directed, goal-oriented, persistent, or purposive. Such qualities relate to making different choices, but also to unique short-term or long-term efforts in implementing the choices

made. Researchers like John W. Atkinson (1957, 1923–2003) and David McClelland (1955, 1917–98) focused on this issue also suggesting a motivational analysis.

To demonstrate how the concept of motivation has changed in history, we describe how two central issues (i.e., basic needs and action control) have been addressed differently by the traditional and the modern psychology of motivation.

Basic Human Needs

Whereas learning theorists, following the lead of Hull, conceived of need as a general, content-free drive, personality psychologists were eager to put content into the concept of need. Sigmund Freud was rather parsimonious by only suggesting two basic needs, namely the life and the death instinct. William McDougall (1932, 1871–1938) listed 18 basic needs which he referred to as instincts (e.g., curiosity, self-assertion, submission). Henry Murray's *Explorations in Personality* (1938, 1893–1988) contains a catalog of 20 psychogenic needs (e.g., need for nurturance, need for succorance) and Abraham H. Maslow's *Motivation and Personality* (1954, 1908–70) proposed a hierarchy of needs whereby the lower need categories related to deficiency needs (e.g., hunger, safety) and the higher ones to growth needs (e.g., need to achieve, need to realize one's potential).

The named approaches excelled in generating sophisticated definitions and descriptions, but did not provide reliable instruments for need assessment. They also failed to answer the question of which of the many needs are activated in a given situation and how such activation processes run off. Moreover, they did not explore the origins of individual differences in the strength of these needs. In later years, Atkinson (1957) and McClelland (1985) addressed these problems with respect to the need for achievement and the power motive.

Still, the question remained: Which of the many conceivable human needs is the most basic? Baumeister and Leary (1995) have raised this issue by applying criteria such as universality, nonderivativeness, satiation, and substitution. According to their analysis, the need to belong in the sense of forming and maintaining strong, stable interpersonal relationships is suggested to be a most basic need. However, this need seems to be in tension with another basic need, the desire

to distinguish oneself and be different from others, as people are found to compete even with their intimates when it comes to performing well on dimensions that are of high personal relevance (Tesser, 1988). Indeed, the need for high self-esteem has been suggested as the ultimate human motive, because it buffers fear of death which is a consequence of humans being conscious of their mortality. Such awareness engenders abject terror that needs to be managed as it could paralyze the ability to act (Pyszczynski et al., 1997). Most recently, human needs have been explored that relate to the cognitive capabilities of a person: the need for competence and autonomy, the need of engaging in and enjoy effortful reasoning, or the need of finding firm answers to open questions (summary by Gollwitzer et al., 2011).

Other recent research on individual differences in terms of motivational orientations has replaced the need (motive) construct with constructs that describe a general goal orientation, such as personal projects, personal strivings, life tasks, or identity goals. Such personal strivings (Emmons, 1996; Gollwitzer and Kirchhof, 1998) are more limited in scope (e.g., to be a honest person) and can be characterized in terms of expectancies of success, complexity, high versus low level of abstraction, avoidance versus approach orientation, degree of conflict between each other, and integration versus fragmentation. The named parameters of personal strivings have been observed to relate to measures of psychological and physical well-being.

Action Control

Early theories portrayed the human as a machine-like reactive organism compelled to act by internal and/or external forces beyond our control (e.g., instincts, needs, drives, incentives, reinforcers, etc.). Prototypical theories are Hull's learning theory and the reformulations by his students. These theories imply that if one just pushed the right button, motivation would result. There is no room for conscious reflections and attempts toward self-regulation. Instead, motivational forces transmit their energy outside of awareness, establishing a state of balance or equilibrium (referred to as arousal reduction, self-preservation, or need satisfaction).

More modern theories have construed human beings as all-just and all-knowing final judges of their actions. For instance, expectancy-value theories (e.g., Atkinson, 1957) assumed that people choose goals in a rational way, based on the comprehensive knowledge of the probability of goal attainment and the goal's expected value. It is proposed that the subjective probability of success and the incentive value of having performed a task (i.e., pride or shame) conjointly affect task choice, both variables being influenced by the perceived difficulty of the task. Elaborations of this model by Heinz Heckhausen (1991, 1926–88) added further expectation-related concepts (e.g., situation-outcome expectancies), and differentiated various aspects of the incentive value (e.g., extrinsic side effects). Attribution theories (e.g., Weiner, 1992) even proposed that the motivational determinants of a person's behavior are causal explanations of prior action outcomes. People are seen as amateur scientists who systematically explore the causes of their behavior. The type of causes

discovered are expected to affect a person's readiness to engage in these or related behaviors by influencing affect and expectations.

The motivational importance of control beliefs has also been analyzed systematically. According to Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory individuals may hold the firm belief that they possess the potential to execute (i.e., control) the kinds of behaviors that a given task demands. People acquire such beliefs by reflecting on their own relevant past behaviors, observing the behavior of similar others, being evaluated by significant others (e.g., teachers), and observing their own physiological reactions when challenged by a given task. High self-efficacy beliefs are observed to be associated with choosing aspiring goals, exerting strong effort to attain these goals, and persisting in the face of obstacles and hindrances.

Present theories of motivation go beyond conceptualizing humans as all-just and all-knowing. Rather, human beings are construed as flexible strategists. The focus is on the different tasks a person has to perform when transforming wishes into actions (Gollwitzer, 1990, 2012). When choosing goals, people try to live up to the ideal of being an all-knowing and all-just person by processing all the available information in an impartial manner. However, when the implementation of an already set goal is at issue, people are determined to reach the goal and thus become partial, and the desirability and feasibility of a desired outcome are now seen in the most positive light.

Currently, most research on motivation makes use of the concept of goals (Bargh et al., 2010). One line of goal research focuses on the determinants and processes of goal setting, whereas the other line targets goal implementation. With respect to goal setting, for instance, it has been discovered that people who construe their self as an ideal which they intrinsically desire to attain, set themselves promotion goals focusing on establishing and keeping positive outcomes, whereas people who construe their self as an ought which they feel compelled to reach, set themselves prevention goals focusing on avoiding and getting rid of negative outcomes (Higgins, 2006). Moreover, people can regulate the process of goal setting in a more or less productive manner, by the way in which they think about the future outcomes they want to attain. When the desired future is mentally contrasted with negative aspects of impeding reality (e.g., effectively mastering a writing project is mentally contrasted with obstacles standing in its way), relevant expectations of successfully realizing one's fantasies become activated and used. As a consequence, people form goal commitments in a rational manner (i.e., they show strong goal striving when expectations of success are high but leave the field when probabilities of success are low). When people only dream about positive future outcomes or solely ruminate about the negative reality, however, the respective goal commitments stay moderate irrespective of the level of expectations of success (Oettingen, 2000, 2012).

Regarding the determinants of successful goal implementation, how goals are framed makes an important difference. For instance, when achievement goals are framed as learning goals (i.e., goals geared at trying to learn more about how one can successfully carry out the task at hand) as compared to performance goals (i.e., goals geared at trying to

find out how capable one is), failure experiences are coped with more effectively and thus people are more likely to ultimately reach their goals (Dweck, 1999). But it also matters how goal striving is regulated by the individual. For instance, people can protect an ongoing goal pursuit from distractions by making plans on how to deal with them, or they can plan the details (when, how, and where) of the initiation and execution of the goal-directed behavior ahead of time so that any potentially disturbing self-states (e.g., being tired) can no longer interfere (Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer and Oettingen, 2011). People can also step up their efforts when hindrances are encountered and turn to substitute goals if increased effort still fails to guarantee goal attainment. Other effective action control strategies relate to the regulation of one's emotions, the perceived attractiveness of the goal, and to creating an environment that offers good opportunities for making progress toward goal attainment (Kuhl and Beckmann, 1994).

This recent revival of research on the self-regulation of goal pursuit (Mischel et al., 1996) is reminiscent not only of the mentalists' analysis of willing (James, 1890, 1842–1910) but also of German will psychology (Ach, 1935, 1871–1946; Lewin, 1926, 1890–1947) before the heydays of behaviorism. William James pointed out that any self-regulation either has to do with strengthening a weak tendency to perform a desired behavior (i.e., issues of the obstructed will) or with weakening a strong tendency to perform an unwanted behavior (i.e., issues of the explosive will). William James' analysis of willing was based on the assumption that behavior can potentially be regulated by a person's resolutions (or intentions, subjective goals), even though in certain situations and at certain times this may be difficult.

Kurt Lewin's (1926) experimental work on the willful control of behavior also offers ideas on how such control may come about, and the same is true for the research of Narziss Ach (1935). Lewin suggested that goals assign a valence to objects and events in people's social and nonsocial surroundings. In Lewin's classic example of a person who intends to mail a letter, a mail box entices the person to deposit the letter much as food entices a hungry person to eat. As needs can be satisfied by various types of behaviors which may all substitute for each other in reducing need tension (e.g., eating fruit, vegetables), many different goal-directed behaviors qualify for satisfying the quasineed associated with a set goal. Lewin's tension state metaphor thus effectively accounts for the flexibility of goal striving.

However, Ach's approach to the analysis of willing was quite different. He assumed that the linking in one's mind of an anticipated situation to a concrete intended behavior creates what he called a 'determination' which in turn automatically triggers the intended action when the specified situation is encountered. The strength of the determination was not assumed to relate to the importance of the person's intention or goal but rather to the strength of the specified situation-response link. Ach's assumption that automatic processes may contribute much to a person's goal attainment is supported by recent findings that the self-regulation strategies of both mental contrasting (Oettingen, 2012) and implementation intentions (Gollwitzer and

Oettingen, 2011) unfold their beneficial effects on the basis of automatic processes, as well as the discovery that goal striving can be activated (i.e., primed) outside of a person's awareness by subliminally presenting goal-relevant cues (e.g., cues that relate to goal-relevant activities or goal attainment; Bargh, 2006).

See also: Attributional Processes: Psychological; Cognitive Psychology: History; Free Will and Action; Motivation and Actions, Psychology of; Motivation, Learning, and Instruction.

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