

## Topic Page: [Motivation](#)

Definition: **motivation** from *Collins English Dictionary*

- n*
- 1 the act or an instance of motivating
  - 2 desire to do; interest or drive
  - 3 incentive or inducement
  - 4 *psychol* the process that arouses, sustains and regulates human and animal behaviour
- > ,moti'venshl *adj*
- > 'moti,vative *adj*

### Summary Article: **Motivation**

From *Encyclopedia of Human Development*

Motivation is everywhere. Whether it is adults working 60-hour weeks, students studying for an examination, children playing a sport, or a baby crying for food, motivated behavior is ubiquitous. Psychologists are interested in a wide variety of motivations, ranging from behaviors that satisfy basic physiological needs (e.g., hunger, thirst) to those that lead us to play and explore as we attempt to master our environment. This entry provides a brief overview of different perspectives in the field of motivation and briefly examines the types of controversies studied by motivation researchers.

Motivation is defined as that which moves us to action and is evident in subdisciplines such as social, personality, developmental, experimental, industrial-organizational, physiological, and cognitive psychology. One critical theme in the study of motivation centers on identifying the underlying reasons for why a person is motivated to behave in a certain way. Consider why a college student eats at the school cafeteria. Is this student eating to reduce a physiological drive? Because it is a convenient way to socialize with friends? Because he has paid for a meal plan and feels obligated to eat? Because the food is so readily available? Because he associates a certain time of day with eating? Because he is taking part in an ice cream-eating contest? Or simply because he enjoys the taste of cafeteria food?

Consider why a college student plays basketball for the school team. Is this student playing in an attempt to master her environment? To satisfy social needs? Because basketball is associated with pleasant memories from her childhood? Because she enjoys the game of basketball? Because she hopes to find a career as a professional basketball player? In both examples, each possibility represents a different source of motivation and highlights the complex nature of human behavior.

### **BEHAVIOR = PERSONALITY × ENVIRONMENT**

Kurt Lewin, generally regarded as the father of social psychology, emphasized the roles of both personality and environmental factors when trying to determine the cause of a behavior. According to Lewin, a proper understanding of behavior requires both agent and circumstantial elements. In this respect, Lewin's theory is consistent with the nature-nurture distinction, an overarching theme in the field of psychology. As a result, it is critical that we account for both internal (e.g., genetic history,

personality) and external (e.g., environmental rewards) sources of motivation that cause behavior.

## **INTERNAL SOURCES OF MOTIVATION**

### *Drive Theory*

Drive theory, proposed by Clark Hull, posited that all motivated actions stem from attempts to reduce one of four basic drives: hunger, thirst, sex, and pain avoidance. According to this theory, drives stem from discrepancies between our desired and actual states in these four areas, and we are motivated to reduce these drives. Thus, if one is hungry, consuming a four-course meal should eliminate the hunger drive. All of these drives connect closely to what drive theorists argue is our primary motive: survival.

### *Evolutionary Psychology*

The evolutionary perspective of motivated behavior is closely related to these survival instincts and proposes that behaviors and psychological characteristics that promote survival and reproduction will be passed on to future generations. David Buss and others have published a number of studies that highlight how this perspective can aid our understanding of hunger, fear, and sexual motivation.

According to the evolutionary perspective, our primary goals are survival and reproduction. An example of a prediction that stems from this perspective is that although everyone has these same goals, attempts to attain them may lead to different behaviors in males and females. According to Buss, because females can have a limited number of children, females' best strategy is to invest heavily in each child and to find a mate who will provide resources for her and the children to ensure their survival. Males, on the other hand, can have an unlimited number of children (at least theoretically) and would be best served by mating with as many females as possible, maximizing the number of their offspring.

Although controversial, there is a burgeoning body of evidence that provides support for this perspective. Across cultures, there are indeed clear and consistent differences between males and females in their mating behavior. Buss has found that females do tend to seek out older males who will be able to provide more resources, whereas males tend to look for younger, attractive females with whom to mate. Youth and attractiveness are both perceived by males as correlates of an increased probability of successful reproduction, and it is in males' best interests to find women who have the greatest potential of successfully bearing children. This perspective is not without its critics, who point out the powerful role social factors play in motivating behavior. In support of this, Alice Eagly has found that in cultures without gender stereotypical roles, males and females tend to adopt similar mating strategies.

### *Intrinsic Motivation*

Although there is appeal in theories that explain human behavior solely in terms of survival motives, it is important to consider that not all behaviors aim to reduce these basic human drives that directly promote our survival. Behavior marked by curiosity or play, for example, stumped drive theorists because these behaviors did not appear to reduce any of the four drives. As a result, researchers undertook the study of intrinsic motivation. This type of motivation is marked by a desire to take part in an activity purely for its own sake, as opposed to extrinsic ends such as money, rewards, or praise. Intrinsically motivated activities (which vary widely across individuals) are those activities that one would freely choose to engage in on a day off and are pleasurable, inspiring, and involving.

### *Personality Psychology*

Another internal source of motivation, and one that is constantly affecting our motivation, stems from the web of personality traits we possess. Personality psychologists examine the structure of personality and the behaviors that correlate to personality traits. The five-factor model of personality proposes that all personality traits fit into one of the following categories: openness to new experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Each of us has a personality that is a unique combination of these five factors. What is important in the study of motivation is to consider how these personality factors interact with each other and with environmental factors to help us predict an individual's motivation.

Clearly, all of these internal sources of motivation can be related to one another. Our genetic makeup contributes to our personality, our personality influences the extent to which we engage in intrinsically motivated activities, and so on. Thus, one may be predisposed genetically to take risks, and this predisposition may subsequently lead to the development of an intrinsic motivation for skydiving. Taken together, all of these internal sources of motivation can be powerful predictors of behavior.

## **EXTERNAL SOURCES OF MOTIVATION**

The nature-nurture question in psychology emphasizes that external sources of motivation also play an important role in motivated behavior. It is generally accepted that changes in one's environment affect motivation. Whether it is a student working for a grade, a salesperson trying to earn a commission, or a child cleaning up the kitchen to receive praise from parents, external factors clearly affect motivation. Whether these environmental factors affect motivation positively or negatively is a more complex issue.

## **THE INTERACTION BETWEEN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS**

Recall that to predict behavior, one must consider both internal and external factors, as well as the potential interaction between these two broad sources of motivation. For example, take the use of rewards as motivators. Most young children have been offered rewards for behaviors such as eating their vegetables, reading books, or being quiet at the appropriate time. Are these rewards effective? The answer appears to be yes and no.

Do rewards work in the short term? Absolutely. Offer a child a candy bar to be quiet for 5 minutes and there is a good chance the child will become silent. Offer a third grader a pizza party for reading 10 books and the books will be read (assuming the child likes pizza). However, although rewards may sufficiently motivate individuals in the short term, they may be less effective in the long term, particularly when the reward is no longer available. Will that same student freely choose to read over the summer, when there is no chance of a reward?

To explore this question, Mark Lepper and his colleagues conducted a classic study that demonstrated the danger of providing an external reward for a behavior that is already intrinsically motivated. Children who were promised a reward for drawing a picture with magic markers (an activity they found enjoyable) were subsequently found to be less likely to play with the markers on their own than children who were not rewarded. Children who were offered a reward saw their behavior as a means to an end, rather than as an end in itself. Thus, when an activity is enjoyable, external controls (e.g., rewards, money, and even praise) may be successful at producing the desired response in the short term, but harmful to long-term motivation.

## **THE REWARDS CONTROVERSY**

Rewards continue to be a hot topic in schools, with parents, and in the workplace. Recently, separate teams of researchers have published meta-analyses that provide different accounts of the potential benefits and drawbacks of rewards. This rewards debate becomes even more complex when one considers that rewards can take on many different forms. They may be given simply for engaging in a task (task-contingent reward) or for completing a task with a high level of quality (performance-contingent reward). Other research has examined the motivational effectiveness of unexpected compared with expected rewards. Finally, consider the dilemma of a teacher tempted to use rewards while working with a student who simply does not like to read. In this case, an external reward may be one method of initially motivating the student to read, with the hope that the student will eventually develop intrinsic motivation for the task.

Although the results of these meta-analyses are somewhat discrepant, overall rewards appear to have their most negative effects when they are (a) task contingent, (b) tangible, (c) expected, and (d) offered to an individual who already has a high level of intrinsic motivation. As a result, rewards may be a double-edged sword, proving very effective at motivating in the short term, but discouraging intrinsic motivation over a longer period of time.

## SUMMARY

Motivation helps initiate, guide, and regulate our behavior and is involved in all of our actions. The challenge of the study of motivation is that humans are incredibly complex individuals, and a consideration of internal and external factors is necessary to understand the motivation behind behavior. As we reflect back on the examples of the student eating in the cafeteria and the athlete playing basketball, they demonstrate that to understand motivation, one must consider a complex web of physiological, psychological, and environmental factors.

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