

Human MOTIVATION

*Metaphors,
Theories,
and Research*



**Bernard
WEINER**

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Preface

This is my third textbook on motivation, the first being *Theories of Motivation* (1972), and the second *Human Motivation* (1980). Hence I fortunately have been able to contribute motivational texts in three different decades and, like a marathon runner who has accomplished his long-term goal, I feel proud, tired, and committed never again to repeat this rewarding masochism.

I honestly did not anticipate writing another motivational text, but I found I was becoming increasingly dissatisfied when using *Human Motivation* in my course. First of all, the material on attribution theory, my personal field of study, was badly dated, resulting in some embarrassment at focusing on an early period of its development. Second, my prior book included material that now seems irrelevant, in that it did not produce any lasting empirical or theoretical contribution. Third, emotion had been badly neglected in the prior text; writing a new book provided me an opportunity to give emotion some of its rightful credit in the understanding of motivation. And finally, the idea of organizing this field around two major metaphorical themes gave me increased understanding and insight about the history and study of motivation. I wanted to impart this information to others and use this as an organizing theme in the course that I teach.

There are a number of other features that I consider positive that have been incorporated into this book. I have included 12 experiments for students to complete (I guarantee that all will “work”), each of which captures a key prediction of the theory or idea under consideration. Second, a box at the beginning of each chapter provides a brief biography of the theorist being discussed. Third, the material has been organized in what is, I hope, a pleasing symmetry; the contents present an unfolding story, with plot and characters. After an introduction to metaphors and their

usefulness, I offer a historical context for the machine metaphor in motivation, followed by the theories (Freudian, Hullian, Gestalt) guided by this metaphor. An epilogue summarizing the contributions that the machine metaphor has made to the understanding of motivation comes next. There is then a transitional section revealing why the metaphor was abandoned, followed by a historical context for the next (Godlike) metaphor. Again, this precedes the pertinent theories (expectancy-value and attribution) and an epilogue. Continuing this flow, there is another transitional section revealing why the rationality aspect of the Godlike metaphor is being questioned, followed by a presentation of the growing "judge" metaphor. Finally, a concluding chapter examines various phenomena from different theoretical perspectives, compares the theories that have been reviewed, and provides suggestions for future theoretical development.

Throughout the book, I have endeavored to give the "big picture" rather than small experiments; to highlight the positive contributions of each approach, rather than being too critical; and to portray the field of motivation as an evolving scientific enterprise searching for general laws of behavior, rather than as a static topic focusing on the specific. Readers should come away with the sense of the difficulty of the field, the progress that has been made, the competence of the scientists trying to understand human behavior, and the fun and value of this work.

This book, like the previous two, is aimed toward upper-division psychology majors and graduate students. I supplement the book in my undergraduate course with original excerpts from Freud, Spence, Miller, Heider, and others, thus maintaining the historical focus while providing firsthand commerce with the shapers of the field. I have ignored the physiology of motivation, for it is not possible to capture all aspects of motivation under one cover while presenting a coherent story. I have provided some examples of applications of the theoretical principles to personal functioning, but that has not been my focus. It is, however, a good avenue to pursue with thought questions and student essays.

I want to thank my many students over the years, particularly Sandra Graham and the "attribution elders," for contributing to my thinking; various agencies for grant support; the University of California, Los Angeles, for fostering an environment where both research and teaching are possible; and Amy Hofstein and Chris Williams for their help with this manuscript.

BERNARD WEINER

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Introduction and Overview

CHAPTER

1

*Poetry is more philosophical and a higher thing than history,
for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.*

ARISTOTLE

The concept of motivation appears in many fields of psychology. We read, for example, about the need to be motivated in order to *learn*, the innate motivation of the child to master the environment in order to *develop*, the motivated selectivity in the processing of environmental stimuli in order to *perceive*, the motivation to improve in order to benefit from *clinical intervention*, and so on. Hence motivation lies at the heart, the very center, of psychology.

Definition of Motivational Psychology

The most encompassing definition of the subject matter of the field of motivation is *why human and subhuman organisms think and behave as they do*. Various motivational psychologists have phrased this somewhat differently:

[We may] define the study of motivation broadly as a *search for determinants (all determinants) of human and animal activity*. (Young, 1961, p. 24)

Questions about motivation, then, are questions about the *causes of specific actions*. Why does this organism, this person or rat or chimpanzee, do this particular thing we see it do? The study of motivation is the search for principles that will help us understand *why people and animals initiate, choose, or persist in, specific actions in specific circumstances*. (Mook, 1987, p. 4)

[Motivation has to do with why] behavior gets started, is energized, is sustained, is directed, is stopped and what kind of subjective reaction is present in the organism when all this is going on. (Jones, 1955, p. vii)

Motivational psychologists therefore observe and measure what the individual is doing, or *choice* behavior; how long it takes before the individual initiates that activity when given the opportunity, or the *latency* of behavior; how hard the individual is working at that activity, or the *intensity* of behavior; what length of time the individual will remain at that activity, or the *persistence* of behavior; and what the individual is feeling before, during, or after the behavioral episode, or *emotional* reactions.

As the reader progresses through this book, he or she will note that varying aspects of these definitions and observations have attracted theorists and researchers at different periods of time. For example, the earlier motivational psychologists were especially concerned with activation, or what initiates behavior, whereas contemporary theorists are more interested in choice, or what activities an organism undertakes. Further, early researchers focused on observable actions, whereas current concerns include judgments and emotional feelings. However, the motivational question has remained *why*—that is, not *how* one learns or *how* one perceives, but rather *why* one acts.

It is evident that the search for motivational answers is not limited to motivational psychologists—all of us, as participants in everyday life, attempt to reach “why” conclusions to explain the behavior of others as well as our own actions. For example, when a child (or an adult) does not eat his or her food, we ask why: Is it lack of hunger or dislike of the food? If a student fails an exam, the teacher considers why: Does the student lack the capacity? Did the student not study enough? Were the questions too hard or unfair? And if our cat or dog seems listless, we ask why: Is it sick? Bored? Lonely? To function adaptively, we continuously consider why questions and, if possible, come up with answers. Because we all function as motivational psychologists, the professional faces the difficult task of providing a “better” answer than that given by the layperson. This also distinguishes the field of motivation from other process areas in psychology, such as learning and perception, for knowledge about these processes usually is unavailable to the layperson.

Characteristics of a “Good” Motivational Explanation

What is meant by a “better” answer to a motivational question than the layperson can provide? It may be that the explanation is more accurate; that is, it improves predictions of the future as well as predictions about other concurrent reactions. For example, if a teacher attributes the failure of a

student to lack of ability, then that teacher is likely to expect the pupil to fail in the future, and perhaps to feel embarrassed or ashamed. On the other hand, if the motivational psychologist believes that the "why failure" answer is lack of effort, then he or she might anticipate success for the student if circumstances can be changed so that the student is more engaged in learning, and might also surmise that the student is experiencing some guilt or sorrow. Accuracy of prediction is one indicator of the "correctness" of the motivational diagnosis.

It should be anticipated that the answer of the trained motivational psychologist will be "better" than that of the layperson. The naive observer often simplistically places the answer to a why question within the acting person; for example, reluctance to accept a date is interpreted as due to "shyness" or "introversion," acting in a bossy manner is ascribed to "aggressiveness" or "dominance," and so on (Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). In sum, the why answer is a trait, a stable characteristic of the person that unfortunately often merely defines or describes the behavior to be explained (e.g., the definition of an introvert is one who prefers to be alone, and choosing to be alone is explained by the trait of introversion). However, there typically are many determinants of an action, interacting in intricate ways. Some of these determinants are located within the person, others are in the environment; some of the determinants within the person are traits, others may be states, moods, and emotions; some determinants are conscious thoughts, and others are unconscious attitudes; and so on. This complexity too often is ignored in everyday analyses.

But there is another characteristic of a "better" explanation that is of particular importance in the present context, and this property guides the organization and contents of this book. Namely, a "good" explanation is one that may be applied in different situations to interpret specific actions. That is, a scientific explanation includes general principles that transcend the specific instance. For example, when a layperson explains why an individual is drinking water, he or she may say that the person is thirsty. When the layperson accounts for why another individual is eating, he or she may infer that the person is hungry. The motivational psychologist, in contrast, attempts to use the same construct(s) to interpret both instances. It could be postulated, for example, that behavior is directly related to the amount of deprivation (whether water or food), the level of arousal (whether the source of arousal is the absence of water or food), and so on. Thus the same concept explains disparate particular cases. Further, the analysis shifts from concrete instances to abstract issues, such as the presence of any need. One of the goals of a science is the development of general explanatory principles.

Now further assume that a person is observed to improve at a skill-related task after some practice. For example, with experience, typing goes faster, a ball is thrown into a basket a greater percentage of the time, and so on. The layperson explains the improvement as due to learning, or skill acquisition, which is related to the number of practice attempts. We all

know that "practice makes perfect." This interpretation is totally removed from the motivational question of why an individual is drinking or eating. The motivational psychologist, however, attempts to comprise these very disparate observations within the same theoretical network or explanatory system. Perhaps it is postulated that behavior is determined by the amount of deprivation and the number of rewarded experiences. Thus a very parsimonious explanation for an array of phenotypically divergent behaviors is supplied, and one might be able to predict not only how long a person will play basketball, but also the percentage of successful shots.

The task of the motivational psychologist is to account for or explain as broad a swath of behavior as possible with as few constructs as possible. This is not a conscious goal of the layperson, who generally is satisfied with ad hoc explanations of behavior; that is, a why answer is provided with a particular end or purpose in mind, without reference to wider applications. Conversely, the goal of motivational psychology is to develop a language, an explanatory system, a conceptual representation, or what is more commonly termed a *theory*, that is applicable across many domains of behavior and explains why behavior is initiated, sustained, directed, and so forth. This is how the reader should think about the problem of motivation (see Atkinson, 1964). It is assumed here that motivational laws of breadth and generality can be discovered.

Problem- Versus Theory-Focused Textbooks

Now, what has this to do with the organization and the contents of this book? Textbook writers often face the choice of analyzing their scientific fields with a problem- or a theory-focused orientation. Each approach has advantages and disadvantages. For example, one might write a motivation book including chapters on problems or topics—achievement, affiliation, aggression, anxiety, authoritarianism, to name just some motivational concerns at the start of the alphabet. In the chapter on aggression, it would be revealed that aggression is influenced by a multiplicity of factors, such as environmental temperature (aggression is augmented in hot weather), social class (more aggression is found among the lower classes), unconscious forces (Freud contends that there is unconscious family rivalry), and so forth. But it is unlikely that this analysis will be theoretically satisfying, as determinants with little conceptual coherence are merely listed and cataloged. Furthermore, the behaviors discussed in other chapters, after it is decided what motivational issues in the remainder of the alphabet to leave in or eliminate, will have different motivational determinants. Hence the chapter on altruism could include a discussion of diffusion of responsibility (personal tendencies to help decrease if other potential helpers are present), feelings of empathy and sympathy (which promote aid giving),

and so on. But the insights that can be provided by encompassing theoretical frameworks will be missing; there is likely to be prediction without scientific understanding, and making sense without making deep discoveries that link aggression to altruism and to other aspects of the dynamics of motivation.

An alternate approach when writing a motivation book, which is more consistent with scientific goals, is to have a theory focus. Some of the theories, but surely not all, will address issues related to aggression and/or altruism. These topics therefore would be examined within an overarching theoretical framework so that, for example, in a chapter considering Freud's theory of motivation, aggression could be related to wit, or to slips of the tongue, or even to love. In this way, the topic of aggression is parsimoniously addressed and unexpected insights might be communicated.

The danger of this strategy, however, is that the many determinants of behavior that fall outside the range of psychoanalytic theory or, for that matter, outside the conceptual reach of other general theories of motivation would be ignored. It is unlikely that the discussion of aggression or altruism within a chapter on Freud or any of the remaining theories of motivation would consider weather conditions or diffusion of responsibility, even though these factors affect hostile and altruistic behaviors, respectively.

Furthermore, theories come and go in psychology relatively quickly and seemingly capriciously. Thus, although the present book contains a chapter examining Hullian drive theory, this theory is neither current nor contemporary. Hence a theory book often appears to be "dated" because it discusses theories that already have been discarded (also see Mook, 1987).

In defense of a theory-focused book, it can be contended that science consists of the slow building of conceptual systems, with each new theorist seeing a little further because he or she is standing on the shoulders of prior contributors. To understand current knowledge, the scientist as well as the student must be able to trace the course of development of the science. Often some surprising and unknown connections to earlier theories are made that even contemporary researchers do not realize. For example, research in motivation is now examining self-consistency notions—the idea that a person wants to engage in actions and accepts information that is consistent with his or her self-concept (e.g., Swann, 1987). This hypothesis can be traced back to Gestalt psychologists and their analysis of perceptual units, as well as to their acceptance of concepts regarding forces in physical fields, as will be shown in this book. Hence examining a "dated" theory, such as the Gestalt theory of motivation, is not a vice, particularly if the building blocks laid down by that theory are highlighted. That approach is taken here, and the challenge I must face as writer is to ensure that "dated" is not equated with "irrelevant" or "worthless." At the same time, it is not possible to follow a theory format without ignoring many pertinent topics in the field of motivation that do not readily fit within a larger conceptual framework. It does sadden me to exclude important issues within this text.

The Nature of Being

The decision to describe or portray the field of motivation within a theory framework forces one immediately to confront metaphysical issues—basic philosophies and a priori judgments about the nature of the person that are not subject to empirical verification or disconfirmation. All motivational theories have as their starting points first principles or philosophies about what it “means” to be an animate agent versus an inanimate object, and human as opposed to subhuman. These metaphysical beliefs, which greatly affect the study of motivation, have changed markedly over time and differ among theories. Two central figures influencing such key motivational presumptions and dogmas were René Descartes and Charles Darwin.

Pre-Darwinian Thought

Just as asking about why organisms think and act as they do is not limited to motivational psychologists, it also is not confined to this point in time. Throughout history, there is evidence that individuals sought to know the causes of behavior (see Bolles, 1967; Cofer & Appley, 1964). Simple observations well before Darwin surely revealed that the reasons for the behavior of humans and subhumans must be differentiated from the causes of motion of inanimate objects. Among these differences, only humans and subhumans seem capable of self-induced motion, whereas inanimate objects *appear* to be motionless until acted upon by some external force.

More central to the concerns of motivational psychology was a distinction between the determinants of subhuman versus human action. This differentiation is intimately connected with what has been called the “mind-body” problem in philosophy.

Mind and Body

Metaphysical systems addressing the nature of the universe postulate either one or two basic elements or factors. Those specifying one element are referred to as *monistic* systems; those presuming two elements are referred to as *dualistic* systems. The elements in both monistic and dualistic systems are called mind and/or body, or spirit and/or matter, or soul and/or material. The mind is conceived as subjective, nonmaterial, and known only by the possessing individual, whereas the body is considered physical, material, and objectively observable. The mind-body distinction is consistent with the self-observation that when the body is inert, as during sleep, there is mental activity such as dreaming. Thus the spirit or soul inhabits the body yet is independent of that body. Further, it typically is