The Three Social Motives

Introduction

The purpose of this unit is to provide you with a detailed understanding of underlying motivation. Because motives have such a strong impact on behavior, it is important to understand those motives that affect how you manage and perform in both your work and personal lives. The motives most relevant to work are referred to as the Three Social Motives. Why they are important, their definitions, and a discussion about how they were developed will be presented in this unit.

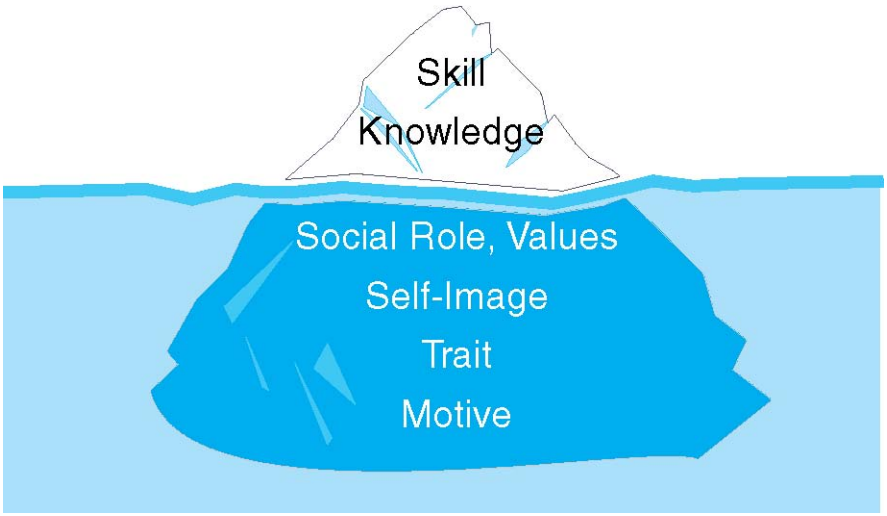
The Importance of Motivation

It is important to remember that a person's behavior at any given time is a function of only two things: some characteristic of the personin interaction with some characteristic of the situation. This basic principle of human behavior can be shown in a formula like this:

Behavior = f (Person; Situation)

There are many personal characteristics that influence what we do: skills, knowledge, social role, self-image, traits, and motives. These various characteristics exist at different levels of consciousness. You can think of these characteristics as being levels of an iceberg, as illustrated on the next page. The most conscious ones are those above water on the visible tip of the iceberg, while the characteristics that are less conscious or unconscious are below water, on the invisible part of the iceberg.

The characteristics of which you are the most conscious are your knowledge and skills, depicted as the tip of the iceberg. Skills are what you know how to do (e.g., read a profit-and-loss statement), and knowledge is what you know (e.g., various accounting principles).



Social role, or "values," is what you think is important to be or to do. For example, you may value balancing a career and family, or you may value achieving as much success as you can, or you may value both. See the Values unit for more information.

Self-image refers to how you see yourself. Do you see yourself as an expert, a coach, a teacher, a leader, a change agent?

Traits refer to relatively enduring physical, cognitive, and psycho-social characteristics. The ability to see patterns across seemingly unrelated events (e.g., a change in the value of the dollar, a bumper rice crop in Japan, and trade tariffs) is an example of a cognitive trait called "pattern recognition." Self-control is an example of a psycho-social trait.

Motives are the least conscious characteristics. They are actually "nonconscious." The reason they are so important is that they influence almost everything you do. Yet, because you rarely get feedback on what motivates you, you may not know or understand that characteristic of yourself.

More important, the "deeper" characteristics—the ones underneath the tip of the iceberg—determine whether you are well-matched or not so well-matched with your role or job. The better the match, the more effective and satisfied you will be in carrying out what the role or job requires.

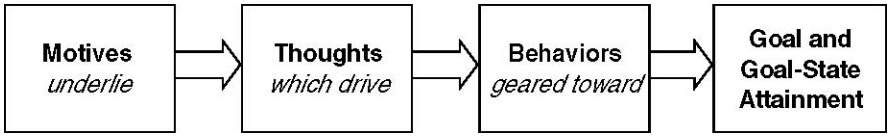
What Are Motives?

As we have said, a motive is an ongoing need, want, or concern of which you are usually not conscious. It predisposes you to perceive and think about the people and situations you encounter in certain consistent and even predictable ways. These perceptions and thoughts lead you to behave in ways that are consistent with your motives. That is, you naturally engage in the kinds of behavior—both actions and decisions—that you find intrinsically satisfying or energizing.

Every motive is marked by a strong desire to reach a certain kind of goal—or, more precisely, a certain goal state, which is less tangible. A goal state is the feeling of satisfaction you get upon reaching a particular goal. Without it, goal-attainment in and of itself would lose its meaning and attraction.

Because a goal state is so satisfying, you attempt (are motivated) to reach it over and over again. Thus, the motive—the drive to achieve the goal state—is recurrent and is stimulated repeatedly, whenever a situation provides an opportunity for reaching the goal-state toward which that particular motive strives.

When we say that a motive predisposes you to perceive and think about people and situations you encounter in certain consistent and predictable ways, we mean that your thoughts naturally revolve around reaching the goal state. These thoughts, which have been influenced by motives, then drive our behaviors—our decisions and actions—toward goal-state attainment. We can illustrate the relationship of these elements like this:



A motive not only drives behavior by influencing your thoughts, but it also directs behavior. In so doing, it determines the arena in which you will choose to engage. For example, motives are a significant determinant in both your choice of occupation and in your choice between working for someone else and being self-employed. Such choices are made according to the degree of opportunity they provide for reaching the goal-state specific to the underlying motive. Once you have engaged in an arena, your underlying motivation will determine how you will react to stimuli there.

The Three Social Motives

The Three Social Motives, so termed by Dr. David C. McClelland in 1949, are the motives that collectively explain the widest range of human social behaviors. These motives are: the Achievement Motive, the Affiliation Motive, and the Power Motive. For more than 30 years, Dr. McClelland and his associates at McBer and Company, and later Hay/McBer, have conducted extensive research on the relationship between underlying motivation and performance in organizations, focusing in particular on the Three Social Motives as they are associated with individual performance in organizations. These three motives are described below.

The Achievement Motive

Primary test: Meeting or exceeding a standard of excellence and/or improving one's performance.

N When this motive is aroused, a person is concerned with or thinks about—

Outperforming someone else when that someone represents excellence
Meeting or surpassing a self-imposed standard of excellence
Accomplishing something new, unique, or innovative
Being involved in the long-term planning/advancement of his or her career

The Affiliation Motive

Primary test: Maintaining or avoiding disruption of close, friendly relationships with people.

N When this motive is aroused, a person is concerned with or thinks about—

Establishing, restoring, or maintaining close, warm relationships and being liked and accepted Separation from another or disruption of a positive relationship and wanting to restore the close relationship Group activities, primarily social

Note: See "Additional Information" at the end of this unit for explanations of the three subtypes of the Affiliation Motive.

The Power Motive

Primary test: Having an influence or making an impact on others.

N When this motive is aroused, a person is concerned with or thinks about—

- Performing powerful actions, including
  - Exercising forceful behaviors that affect others (e.g., aggression)
  - Giving unsolicited help, advice, or support
  - Trying to control other people through regulating their behavior or the conditions of their lives
  - Trying to influence, persuade, or make a point for the purpose of convincing others to comply or conform rather than to compromise or understand
  - Trying to impress other people, or the world at large

  Arousing strong positive or negative emotions in others

  His or her reputation, position, or strength

Note: See "Additional Information" at the end of this unit for a discussion of the Four Stages of Power.

Background: The Development of the Three Social Motives

The Origin of Identifying Motives

Because motives are recurrent and ongoing, and underlie needs, wants, or concerns, we can detect them in people's fantasies. We all tend to think about those things that are of particular concern or interest to us, and we fantasize about them, particularly in daydreams and the dreams we have at night.

For example, if you have just had an argument with a significant person in your life and the outcome was unsatisfactory to you, you might sit around staring out the window, and playing back that conversation repeatedly. During these ruminations, you fantasize about what you could or should have said to change the argument's outcome. You daydream about it not only because it is of concern

to you, but also because its outcome did not satisfy your underlying motive; you did not achieve the satisfying goal or goal state that your motive sought. The specific content of your fantasies reveals your underlying motives.

In 1935, Dr. Henry A. Murray, a psychologist, recognized this phenomenon of motives becoming manifest through fantasy. He reasoned that if a relatively systematic approach were taken to collect the thoughts that people have when they look at an ambiguous picture and create a story about it, a good deal of insight would be gained into what it is that motivates them.

He subsequently developed the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) as a means of doing that. The TAT consists of a set of 20 pictures. A clinician shows a person one picture and then asks the person to tell a story about it. As a person tells the story, the clinician takes detailed notes. Once all 20 pictures have been shown, the clinician then ascertains the person's driving motives, based on the 20 stor-ies told. Using the TAT, Dr. Murray identified 50 different motives.

Murray's basic principle proved to be sound, and the TAT continues to be used by clinicians. When several people are shown the same ambiguous picture, the story each person tells about it is unique. If the picture were unambiguous, everyone looking at it would tell the same story.

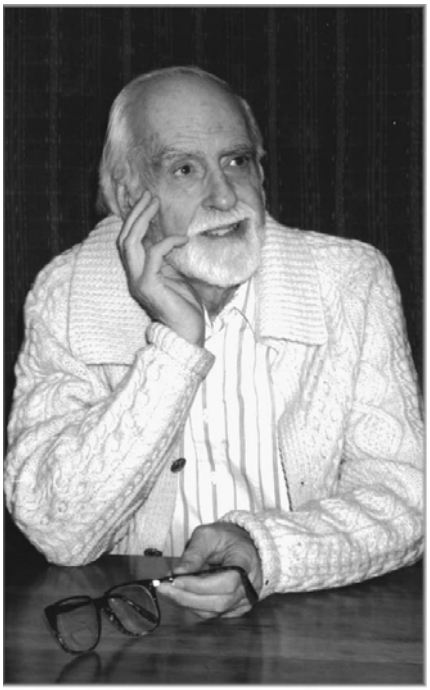
How Motives Filter Information

People are more sensitive to opportunities to satisfy their motives, so they tend to focus on or filter out imagery that fits with their motives. For example, this photograph has a number of people in a sailboat, with various actions taking place.

Different motives lead people to focus on different aspects or interpretations of the same picture. Below are examples of three people, each with a different dominant motive, and what they might tend to see.

A -Affiliative–This person filters out the focuses on the group of people person pointing, and writes a story sitting with their feet over the about a captain directing the crew edge, and writes a story about and getting them motivated to beat friends getting together for a the competition in a race. This is sailing trip, reflecting their own the kind of influence-thinking that interest in and concern about occurs spontaneously to the Power-relationships motivated person.

C -Achievement–This person picks out the ropes and equipment on the stern of the boat and writes about a new, superior ship design that is now being tested, and the struggle to make it work. This relates to the concern for improvement in the Achievement-motivated person.



The content of the ambiguous picture shown is not important. One of Murray's TAT pictures—actually, a blank, white card—illustrated this. Even if people had the same initial reaction to its lack of content (e.g., if they all said, "It's a blizzard"), that lack of content still provided enough ambiguity to elicit different and elaborate stories from each person. What makes the stories different? The "filters" each person brings to looking at the picture—his or her motives. A person's story provides a way for a clinician to sample its author's fantasies and, consequently, understand more about what motivates him or her.

Objective Scoring of Motives

When clinicians initially used the TAT, an interesting problem arose: the clinicians often read their own motives into the stories they scored. At that time, there were no standardized scoring rules to prevent this.

In 1949, Dr. David C. McClelland, who later founded McBer and Company, Inc., saw the need for more objectivity in the scoring of TAT stories for motives and set about establishing an objective scoring system. Reasoning that any given motive would be randomly distributed within a group to which the TAT was administered, he decided to select a motive (for example, the Affiliation Motive), divide the group in half, and have one group write TAT stories in a relatively neutral setting. That served as the baseline. The setting for the other half of the group, rather than being held neutral, was manipulated, through various strategies, to arouse the Affiliation Motive within these group members. Once it became clear that these group members were thinking about Affiliation, they were asked to write their TAT stories. These were then compared and contrasted against the baseline group's stories, and what was seen in the stories of the "aroused" group but not in the stories of the "neutral" group were images related to the Affiliation Motive.

That procedure produced an objective coding system identifying the specific types of imagery that are indicative of a particular motive. Using this objective coding system, two trained people will "score" the same stories the same way 95% of the time.

Upon developing the scoring system for the TAT, Dr. McClelland decided to concentrate on the fewest number of motives that would explain the widest range of human social behaviors, as previously mentioned. These were what he termed the Three Social Motives: the Achievement Motive, the Affiliation Motive, and the Power Motive.

Dr. McClelland and his colleagues at McBer and Company, Inc., through extensive research and testing, later developed the Picture Story Exercise, a refinement of the TAT that consists of a set of six pictures to which stories are written and then scored for the Three Social Motives. The next unit, "Recognizing the Three Social Motives," addresses the kinds of story imagery that indicate the presence of these three motives.

Additional Information

Three Subtypes of the Affiliation Motive That Can Be Aroused by Recent Life Events

Positive Affiliation

N Primary interest when Positive Affiliation is aroused: Reaching out, liking, the positive experience of belonging to groups.

Can be related to starting or experiencing new, positive relationships.

N When Positive Affiliation is aroused, a person thinks about—

Consoling, comforting, or caring for another
Good, positive, emotional relationships—liking someone
Feeling good about or proud of being part of a larger whole
Authority figures as benevolent or caring

Anxious Affiliation

N Primary interest when Anxious Affiliation is aroused: Fear of rejection; nervousness about relationships; loss of self; anxiety around separation; fear of intimacy.

N Can be related to recent life changes, having been attacked.

N When Anxious Affiliation is aroused, a person thinks about—

Discussing an interpersonal problem
Feeling bad about a separation or disruption in a relationship
Actions taken to form a relationship being rejected or ignored
Merging with something else and getting lost or caught up in it

Cynical Affiliation

N Primary interest when Cynical Affiliation is aroused: Dishonesty within, or betrayal of, a relationship; hypocrisy; the inability to be intimate successfully.

N Can be related to disruption in a life relationship; marital separation.

N When Cynical Affiliation is aroused, a person thinks about—

Lying or deception within a close relationship
Hypocrisy: a false positive front with a negative reality
Personal block or internal inability to act affiliatively

The Four Stages of Power

The Power Motive develops to different levels of maturity over one's lifetime. The stage of a person's Power Motive at a given time depends on the level of "ego maturity" he or she has reached.

The Four Stages of Power parallel various theorists' views of human development (Freud, Jung, Erikson), and one's movement through them is dynamic. People regress to earlier stages when under stress, but in some situations they operate out of higher levels of ego maturity than in other situations. People tend to "grow" into a higher stage of ego maturity when staying in a lower stage becomes too painful.

One can think of Power motivation on two dimensions:

- The source of one's power or feelings of strength
- The target of one's power or feelings of strength

Stage I: Dependent Power

In this stage, people use the feeling of strength they get from being associated with powerful others to make themselves feel strong and capable. You can see dependent power in children who say, "My mommy is smarter than your mommy" or "My daddy is bigger than your daddy."

Some adults never progress beyond Stage I power. They are likely to accept orders uncritically, but will become confused and depressed when superiors are critical rather than warm and nurturant. They are trusting and optimistic; they believe their own wants and needs will be met by other people (especially powerful superiors). Thus, they may sometimes seem dependent, lacking in initiative, and passive, but they are certainly loyal.

Stage II: Independent Power

In this stage, people begin to realize that they are a source of power and strength, which they can use to enhance themselves. This is a stage of power typical of adolescence, illustrated by the adolescent declaration, "I don't need anybody. I can take care of myself," aimed at his or her parents. People in this stage get into physical exercise to make themselves feel strong, and acquire prestigious objects to enhance their perceived strength.

Some adults never get beyond Stage II power. Although they are likely to be suspicious (especially if superiors are critical), they are not rebels. These people tend to withdraw from other people and may be loners. They are worried about their own competence, and therefore respond well to praise. Also, they are likely to get bogged down in energetic (though trivial, ritualistic) work, so they need clear goals—but "at a distance," and without criticism.

Stage III: Assertive Power

In this stage, people realize they can use their own strength to make others feel either weak or strong. People usually pass through personalized power first, whereby they influence others for self-aggrandizement (i.e., to make themselves feel, or be perceived as, strong, capable, or influential). Then, if their egos mature, they move to socialized power, whereby they use their strengths to make others feel strong and capable.

Whereas women typically take longer than men to move from Stage I to Stage II power, they very quickly move to Stage III power and to socialized power, at that. Men, on the other hand, move quickly to Stage II power, but often take longer to move to Stage III and an even longer time to move from personalized to socialized power.

Some adults never move beyond the personalized power level of Stage III power. Such adults can become defiant and rebellious if their attempts at assertion are blocked. They can also be single-minded, even ruthless, and are likely to see people as objects or the means to an end. In this stage, people worry about failure.

Stage IV: Interdependent Power

In this stage, people perceive themselves as being part of something larger than themselves. This allows them to help others feel strong and capable. Truly inspirational leaders (e.g., Gandhi, Churchill) are often seen as high in Stage IV power. People in this stage are "generative"; that is, they wish to pass on to others what has been of benefit to them.

People who have progressed to Stage IV power recognize the complexity and ambiguity of authority. They are less likely to fly off the handle at criticism from a superior, and are more likely to exercise their own authority with thoughtfulness, wisdom, and restraint. They can deal with people as individuals rather than as stereotypes or as projections of their own needs. They work with realism and energy ("energetic realism"), vs. cynicism, despair, or rigid and unreasonably high aspirations.

Additional Readings

1 Jacobs, Ruth (1992), Moving Up the Corporate Ladder: A Longitudinal Study of Motivation, Personality and Managerial Success in Women and Men. Doctoral thesis, Boston University.

2 Kelner, Stephen P., Jr. (1991), Interpersonal Motivation: Cynical, Positive, and Anxious. Doctoral thesis, Boston University.

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4 McClelland, D.C., and D. Burnham, (Jan/Feb 1995), "Power Is the Great Motivator," Harvard Business Review, 73, No. 1: 126-139.

5 Stewart, Abigail (1982), Motivation and Society, Jossey Bass Publishers.

6 Winter, D.G. (1973), The Power Motive. New York: The Free Press.