

Human Needs and Drives

Introduction

One of the most accepted, yet confusing, areas of psychology is the concept of human drives. The underpinning premise is that people are driven to act to satisfy cravings or desires, some of which are linked to the very survival of that person. Any attempt to classify human needs must address the varied and complex nature of people.

Our actions are driven by a vast array of needs. Basic survival needs are easy to explain. For instance, if a person is deprived of fluid, he or she will be driven to seek water to satisfy that need. We seek food when we are hungry and warmth when we are cold. If confronted by a dangerous situation, our autonomic response of fight-or-flight comes into play. Human physiological responses—such as adrenaline surges and pupils dilating—mean we are ready to react instinctively without delay.

Simplistically, it would seem that the need to survive would be the most dominant, yet as psychiatrist William Glasser points out, the fact that people commit suicide dispels this theory. Suicide is an act that is dramatically and permanently contrary to the need to survive. Psychological problems like anorexia also illustrate this fact; people starve themselves to death, defying the drive to survive. Apparently there are more complex human needs that dominate our behaviours. We are all driven to satisfy a multitude of complex requirements that manifest in a range of adaptations.

Stress: The Result of Threatened Needs

In fact, it is stress that drives us to behave. Stress occurs when our sense of self is either threatened (subject to *compressive stress*) or in deficit (subject to *tensile stress*). There is a third cause of stress, and this is the stress caused as we seek to find our sense of self and our purpose in life—our destiny.

Compressive Stress: The Need to Protect

Compressive stress occurs when our sense of self and our security are endangered by external forces. For instance, our survival may be threatened by an attack from a virus. The stress we experience at, perhaps, the brain stem level will cause us to act to protect ourselves. We may increase the white cell count of our blood or we may feel the need to rest—whatever the response is, it will have been instigated by the experience of an external attack

Another kind of threat may be more philosophical than physical. Our sense of self may be threatened by an assault on our beliefs. This type of threat results in heated arguments designed to protect ourselves.

Tensile Stress: The Need to Integrate

Tensile stress is the result of our needs not being met in the outside world. At the survival level, we may be experiencing a need for fluids. This stress is experienced on the subconscious level, and it is the desire that drives us to seek satiety.

On a higher level, we may feel rejected by those around us. Our need for attachment is in deficit. This will produce a good deal of stress that will force us to act to satisfy this need. We will act in a way we perceive to be attractive to others—wearing the “right” clothes and using the “right” talk. We conform until we are acceptable.

A crucial consideration is that the level of the mind in which the need is situated will be the level that is activated. If the behaviour is situated in the limbic system, we will make decisions at that level. All other levels are by-passed.

Many prominent psychologists and philosophers have turned their thoughts to the issue of human behaviour. In the field of psychology, the most successful description of needs may well be Maslow's. He presents a hierarchical model that holds that people can only pursue higher, more complex endeavours after their more basic drives are satisfied. Maslow held that humans could only seek self-actualization after they had satisfied lower drives like survival.

Glasser, another prominent voice in the field of needs and the founder of choice theory, stated that all needs fall into the categories of survival; love and belonging; power; fun; and freedom. Like Maslow, he argued that people will act to satisfy the area where the need is greatest; when that is satisfied, other activities can be pursued. This desire to satisfy deficits in our human construct is, of course, the underpinning concept of needs. The desire or need drives the behaviour.

Any attempt to classify needs into discrete groupings is at best a generalisation. I believe any classification of needs is only a division of one single driving force into subsets. The single driving force that motivates all behaviour of every individual is the need integrate the sense of self with the outside world.

The ability of the brain to learn need-satisfying behaviour is developed in an upward direction as a child matures. The account given describes the development of behaviour in discrete terms. That is, if a person is driven to act to satisfy a need for affiliation, no other need is active. This constitutes a gross oversimplification, but that is unavoidable for the sake of explanation. However, when there is a dominant situation that provides a great deal of stress on a person, the drive to eliminate this stress will command the person's attention and behaviour.

Primary Drives

Every psychologist, psychiatrist, and philosopher understands the very basic need for survival. We cannot exist without basic physiological conditions that allow our bodies to function. We need oxygen, food, and drink to fuel our bodies. When these are not available

for short periods, we become extremely stressed, and all our efforts will be focused on getting a supply to satisfy our needs.

The functional behaviours required to satisfy survival needs are controlled by decisions made in the brain stem. These are largely developed while the child is carried by the mother. Things like heart rate and blood pressure are in place before birth. In the very early years, the midbrain develops, and with it functions of behaviour like motor regulation and sleep. One only needs to watch babies struggle to take control of their arms to see motor regulation being learned. These activities are to a large extent controlled by what could be called the unconscious mind, which is situated in the brain stem or midbrain.

When these survival needs are not satisfied, the resulting stress will provide the drive for the individual to behave in a way that will return him or her to a satiated state. When we need food, we feel hungry. This emotion is linked to the stress created. Our behaviour will become focused on the satisfaction of this hunger. The more the need for food increases, the greater will be the impact on our stress and hunger, and our focus on eating. Our behaviour will certainly be dominated by the need for food.

From the model described above, it is clear that the area of the brain that controls the thought processes that deal with these primary needs lies in the brain stem and midbrain. The actions learned to satisfy these needs are developed very early in our personal evolution and are firmly locked into our behaviour patterns.

As mentioned, mastery of behaviours that address survival needs are developed primarily in early childhood. That is not to say there is a very significant overlap in the development of all behaviours. Perry assigns these behaviours to the area of the brain that loses its plasticity, its ability to learn new behaviours, after about three years. The development of new behaviours that are controlled in this region are very difficult to acquire in later life but can be achieved.

Change in motor regulation is most commonly sought after by athletes. Anyone who has played golf can attest to the fact that the development of a good, consistent swing of a golf club is a very difficult motor skill. Mastery of an effective new motor skill can only be achieved after a huge number of repetitions. All sports that require fine motor skills that are not naturally learned in early years involve a direct link between the amount of success and mastery and the amount of practise. That is the learning of a new behaviour.

Coaches will have athletes practise correct motor skills and techniques until they can be performed at high speed. These are described as brain stem reactions. What this means is that the decision and subsequent action required in a given game situation is made instinctively. This same instinct is experienced when the rest of us trip and regain our balance in an instant.

The ability to change other survival behaviours such as heart rate or blood pressure have been demonstrated by those who practise deep meditation. There is evidence that some gurus from India and the East can control their brain stem activities. However, this control

can only be achieved in a deep meditative state. Through years of practise, these remarkable individuals can access the brain stem and midbrain and exert some control.

For the rest of us, changes that threaten our survival will create unease or stress that the body has learned to address in an unconscious manner. When our body temperature is elevated, we sweat in an attempt to cool down. However, we don't consciously say, "I'm hot! I had better sweat." We take off our jacket or turn on the air conditioning.

Secondary Drives

It is the development of the limbic system within the brain that dominates the formation of our sense of ourselves. The satisfaction of drives controlled in this area of the brain, to a large extent, depends on interaction with others. These secondary drives are the result of stress created when a person is unable to safely integrate the self with the various levels of the community.

Although listed in a hierarchical manner, there is no order of importance here such as is found in Maslow's model. The importance of each need is related to how satisfied the person is. For instance, if a child is excluded from a game on the playground, a need for affiliation will dominate the child's behaviour in an effort to regain inclusion. Within the secondary drive we find several subsets.

Attachment

Attachment is the intimate connection with another. As an infant develops, this attachment is primarily satisfied by the mother and subsequently by other family members. As the child addresses the need for attachment, there is a simultaneous evolution of the infant's sense of separation to become autonomous and reduce the intensity of the first attachment. As the process of separation from the initial caregiver continues to evolve, the need for reassurance of close attachment to others is crucial. Even when the primary separation is complete, the need for attachment is lifelong, and it is a drive that moves people to form intimate partnerships, moving to build their own family units.

The loss of a strong attachment will bring a person into a major state of disequilibrium. Events like the death of a parent, the death of a child, or the breakup of marriage subject people to the most stressful of all situations. A good deal of suicides can be traced back to the loss of intimate attachment.

Affiliation

Affiliation is the integration of the self with those outside the intimate circle. The drive to be accepted by others in the community emerges as the child grows. At a very early age, infants become aware of "strangers." The insecurity can be seen when a developing child is given to another person. In a distressed state, the child will look back, often reaching for the mother.

As children mature and go to childcare or preschool and then on to school, the need to affiliate with these others becomes crucial. Behaviours will be learned in an attempt to satisfy this need. However, if the child makes friends and is then rejected, he or she becomes stressed from the sense of exclusion, and the resulting stress forces action.

How the child satisfies this need depends on the lessons learned early in life. The behaviours developed to satisfy attachment will be the same as those employed to satisfy affiliation. If the child has been raised in an environment that is congruent with the rest of the community, these behaviours will most likely be functional. However if the family dynamics are at odds with those of the rest of the community, the child may find that attempts to affiliate based on behaviours that worked in the family could work against the ability to satisfy the drive to affiliate. Such behaviour could isolate a child in the community. In extreme cases, such behaviour can be described as dysfunctional. To successfully affiliate, the child will need to learn new behaviours.

As children grow into adulthood, they need to affiliate with a broader cross section of the community. Friends and workmates will have a strong impact on the child's sense of affiliation, yet the need to affiliate also encompasses those with whom there is little contact.

Often, when people walk into rooms where they know no one, they will become extremely uneasy. This is particularly true for those who have a poor self-image. At these times, the person will either leave, be driven to behave in a manner that allows some contact, or remain in an uneasy state.

The need to integrate ourselves with others on an increasing level of intimacy provides us with a good deal of feedback on our sense of ourselves. The ability of a person to move between various members of the community in a confident and comfortable manner indicates a strong sense of self-worth. People who have difficulty dealing with others will find the stress that comes from their inability to integrate in a satisfactory manner very troubling.

Sexual Behaviour

A person's sexual sense develops slowly throughout childhood. There are many opinions about the difference in gender-based behaviour in infants; however, if you watch a group of boys and girls, it is not long before you do see a difference. The boys will develop games that are rough and tumble and the girls will generally be more subdued and organized. Of course, this is a huge generalisation, but there are undeniable gender differences among young children.

These differences have little value in childhood. At the onset of puberty, however, the drive for sexual satisfaction becomes dominant. In the majority of cases, satisfaction of the sex drive will be found in relationships with those of the opposite gender. Those who have a sexual preference for the same gender will still have to satisfy this need through behaviour driven by the same need.

It is during the years of puberty that sexuality becomes a strong force in human development. Much has been written about the emergence of sexuality and the need to acquire behaviours that satisfy the drive it produces.

In most cultures, there are social taboos about sexual activity. In the main, these are designed to protect people from the real dangers of unrestricted sexual behaviour. This undercurrent of community standards designed to protect the young, unless explained, may create a sense of shame in the very experience of emerging sexual feelings. There is a real conflict that confuses the issue of what behaviours are appropriate to satisfy this drive. A child trying to satisfy sexual needs has to learn behaviours that satisfy the drive yet do not risk rejection from the community. A parent “catching” a child masturbating is faced with a most sensitive issue. Any sign of disapproval will shame the child, but parent must still teach appropriate methods of dealing with the sex drive without risking community rejection.

On top of the confusion between natural sex drive and community standards, there is the constant bombardment of sexual messages from the media, especially advertisements. The young adult has to satisfy the sex drive in a community that preaches high standards of moral practise yet exalts sexual attraction. Is it any wonder that puberty is so difficult? The lack of sexual satisfaction in any age group creates stress, and the persons involved will seek behaviours that satisfy that drive.

Sex drive constitutes a huge overlay on the needs for attachment and affiliation. Although these are individual drives, intimate encounters cannot be experienced in isolation. The satisfaction of the drive, apart from masturbation, requires close contact with another. The need for attachment and/or affiliation also comes into play at these times. How people weave these drives together will determine how much aggregated satisfaction is achieved, and this is an extremely difficult task. How many friendships and partnerships have been destroyed because of sexual adventures? The satisfaction of the sex drive outside the intimate relationship can destroy the relationship that satisfied attachment.

Emotional Activity

Emotions make up the feedback mechanism that lets a person know how he or she is integrating within the community. Feelings that could be described as positive—such as happiness, safety, or joy—occur when people are successfully negotiating themselves within the community. These feelings allow individuals to know that all is well and they are satisfied. On the other hand, negative feelings like anger, shame, and fear are sure signs that the security of one’s sense of self is under threat. The sense of shame, discussed elsewhere, is the fundamental emotion that drives these negative feelings. Shame is based on a person’s sense of rejection.

Emotional activity is a particular drive that is dependent on all others but can be seen as independent. People will be moved to find happiness without understanding where their unhappiness comes from. This is an immature response to this drive that moves people to

seek happiness in behaviours like drug and alcohol use or other addictive activities that mask an underpinning cause.

A lack of emotional stimulation results in boredom, a deficit in emotional activity. We are rarely bored when we are under threat or engrossed in an activity we really enjoy. Boredom motivates us to get some stimulation. In an advanced society, one that allows most survival and material needs to be easily met, boredom is a curse especially for children. Kids with almost unlimited stimulating toys are bored. This boredom is exploited by entrepreneurs who create demand for products that will excite us. The vehicle to get at the bored consumers is television, the modern tool we turn to when bored.

Concrete Thought

It is well documented by the renowned psychologists Piaget and Erikson that as children develop, they move through a period where the answers to questions about the world require a degree of certainty. This is the period when everything is seen in black-and-white terms. As children develop, the need for certainty gives way to the exploration of abstract concepts. The need for certainty, however, still dominates behaviour when we are faced with unusual and stressful situations. It is these beliefs that anchor us when we feel lost in our environment.

Despite the acceptance that there is nothing certain, there is a need for certainty in our beliefs. We can only navigate through the world with some fundamental doctrine. Our religious beliefs, our political and social ideologies, are more often than not set in concrete thought. Any challenge to these will present a good deal of stress; we are in a state of disequilibrium. It may be only after we adjust our thinking and accept a new concept that we return to a state of calmness. However, this requires us to accept another concrete belief. This newly adopted belief will have no more certainty than the one it replaced.

It is often considered wise never to discuss politics or religion if you want to have a pleasant dinner party. One only has to observe the angst that accompanies most discussions about these topics to understand why. The heated arguments have more to do with the stress that is created when our concrete beliefs are challenged than with events that generally have no immediate impact on us. The tragic situation that has created the slaughter in the Middle East is no more than two groups of humans fighting to the death in an insane desire to prove their beliefs are right. Those who do not share these beliefs will find it difficult to understand; however, most wars throughout history have their foundation in someone's concrete beliefs. The insane behaviours have more to do with our beliefs being attacked than with calm logic.

The underpinning of Christianity for example, is faith. We have to accept, without question, the teachings our particular church puts forward. This unquestioning faith is no more than the satisfaction of our concrete thoughts. The upsurge in charismatic religions is a result of these sects' ability to find troubled souls and provide them with a certainty that will

eliminate the stress formerly felt. Converts will describe how they were at sea and lost until they were “given the answer.”

Tertiary Drives

The final drives related to the development of a person’s thought processes are those concerned with our understanding of the world around us and the need to make sense of it and how we fit into it.

Life’s Purpose

There is within all of us a spirit, a drive towards fulfilling a vague sense of destiny. We are driven to take our place in the external world with some sense of purpose or significance. We need to be defined in our world—whether it be with our intimate others, our peers, or the general community. This definition is our statement of purpose.

As kids, we are asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Children might respond with such options as a fireman or a circus performer. These answers are kids stating what they see as a job that is good in society. The same question will be asked over and over.

There is state of unease when the career we pursue clashes with our sense of being. A woman who has a strong sense of caring for others may find herself working selling makeup and perfume. This work will not satisfy her. As a nurse, she would experience satisfaction. Her sense of self and her need to pursue her destiny will be satisfied in nursing. People will look for work that coincides with their need to align their sense of self with the job they do.

Exploration

Most people have a genuine curiosity. The questioning of why things are the way they are without any personal investment in the answer allows humans to advance their knowledge. We are all driven to explore. The drive to know what’s over the hill, over the ocean, or out in the planets is a constant theme in human history.

How does the body work? What happens if I mix two substances together? What is that made of? The questions of exploration underpin much of the activity in any society.

Spirituality

Perry does not include reference to spirituality; however, any description of human needs without reference to this is incomplete. Throughout history, societies have developed a set of beliefs that address an individual’s spirituality. Go to any country, any town, and you will see buildings where people gather to satisfy their need for spiritual satisfaction. The thing these religions have in common is that they all include a description of the consequences of death.

It is at times of intimate danger, or when a loved one dies, that people turn to their god for comfort. It is when they are confronted with their own mortality, or the mortality of intimate others, that this need creates the most stress. At these times, people pray to their god for the alleviation of the stress.

It is the fear of death, yet its certainty, that most threatens our sense of self—in fact, our very sense of existence. On an individual level, we will one day understand the process of death, but until that time we can only guess. The strength of our belief in our guess can be described as our faith. It is this sense of faith that will satisfy a person's need for spiritual satisfaction.

The peace that comes from a strong faith is just as real for a Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Christian, or any other doctrine, yet each denies the validity of the other. Wars have been fought throughout the ages in an attempt by each group to reinforce the certainty that its faith is the only faith.

Conclusion

The descriptions outlined above have two ramifications on previous models. First, the idea that there is some hierarchy of needs that exists, as in Maslow's model, is obviously flawed. This model demonstrates that the security of our sense of self is the dominant drive. If we are attacked, the need to protect is dominant, and the part of the brain that deals with the particular attack will be engaged at the exclusion of the regions above. There is no hierarchy.

Secondly, the behaviour that results from the particular stress experienced will be decided on the level in which it is situated. If the lessons we learned in early childhood, when those behaviours were being formed, do not work effectively in our current situation, our behaviour will not solve the problem. The stress will remain or will increase. Success will only come when we learn new ways to behave to deal with the stress.

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, any description of drives will be at best a crude attempt to explain human behaviour. The variation between individuals, the uniqueness of their learning, their capacity to learn, and the values of society will make forms of behaviour very individualised. For some, the need for affiliation will be low, while for others, it will be high. For some, the need for spirituality will dominate, while others genuinely have a low need in this area.

However, the major point—true for all people—is that when individuals fail to integrate their sense of self within the outside world, they will become stressed. It is this stress that generates behaviour. The resulting behaviour is designed to obtain peaceful acceptance.