Drive

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Motivational Psychology, Behavioral Psychology

1. Core Definition

A **drive** in psychology refers to an aroused state of psychological tension that typically arises from a need. This internal state of discomfort or activation motivates an organism to engage in behaviors designed to alleviate the tension and satisfy the underlying need. Essentially, a drive acts as a powerful internal stimulus, pushing an individual toward a particular goal or set of actions that will lead to its reduction. For instance, when a person experiences hunger, this state of tension is caused by a physiological need for food. The resulting drive motivates the individual to seek out and consume food, thereby reducing the tension and restoring a state of physiological balance. Similarly, thirst, a drive stemming from the body's need for hydration, compels an individual to drink water.

The concept posits that these drives are fundamental to survival and well-being, serving as primary mechanisms that ensure an organism's basic needs are met. They are not merely passive states but active forces that direct attention and energy towards specific goals. The intensity of a drive is often proportional to the intensity of the underlying need; a severe deficiency will generate a stronger, more urgent drive. This intricate interplay between needs, drives, and goal-directed behavior forms a central pillar in understanding the dynamics of motivation and how organisms maintain internal equilibrium, a process known as homeostasis.

Beyond basic physiological needs, the concept of drives has also been extended to encompass psychological needs, such as the need for affiliation, achievement, or self-esteem, albeit these are often considered secondary or learned drives. Regardless of their origin, the fundamental principle remains: drives create a state of internal disequilibrium that an individual is motivated to resolve, guiding their actions to achieve a state of comfort and satisfaction.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of a "drive" as a motivational force has deep roots in psychology, evolving from earlier ideas of instincts and impulses. One of the earliest and most influential frameworks involving drives came from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Freud proposed that human behavior is largely motivated by unconscious instinctual drives, which he called "Triebe" (often translated as "instincts" or "drives"). He identified two primary categories: Eros (life instincts, including sexual drive and self-preservation) and Thanatos (death instincts, encompassing aggression and self-destruction). These drives, originating from the primitive id, create tension that the ego attempts to resolve in socially acceptable ways, forming the bedrock of personality and psychological conflict. While Freud's conception was highly influential, it was largely theoretical and less empirically

testable.

A more systematic and empirically focused approach emerged in the behaviorist tradition, particularly with the work of Clark L. Hull in the 1940s and 1950s. Hull developed Drive Reduction Theory, a comprehensive framework that sought to explain learning and motivation in terms of drives. For Hull, a drive (D) was an energizing, non-specific internal state arising from a physiological deprivation. He posited that learning occurs when a response reduces a drive, thereby reinforcing that response. His famous formula, E = H x D x K, attempted to quantify the excitatory potential (E) of a response as a product of habit strength (H, learned association), drive (D, motivational state), and incentive (K, reward value). Hull's work provided a robust, testable model for understanding how internal states could energize behavior and facilitate learning, becoming a dominant paradigm in experimental psychology for decades.

Following Hull, other theorists like Kenneth Spence refined drive theory, differentiating between primary (innate, physiological) and secondary (learned, acquired) drives. Psychologists such as Neal Miller and John Dollard also integrated drive theory into their social learning approaches, explaining how drives could be conditioned to various stimuli and how behaviors are learned to reduce these acquired tensions. This historical progression highlights a shift from speculative philosophical concepts to more measurable and empirically grounded explanations of motivation, laying crucial groundwork for subsequent research in motivational science.

3. Key Characteristics

Origin from Needs: Drives are intrinsically linked to underlying physiological or psychological needs. A deficit in essential resources (e.g., food, water, sleep) or a lack of psychological fulfillment (e.g., social connection, competence) creates a state of need, which then gives rise to a drive. These needs can be fundamental biological requirements for survival (e.g., hunger, thirst) or more complex learned requirements through social interaction and cognitive processes (e.g., need for achievement, affiliation).

Arousal and Tension: A defining characteristic of a drive is the creation of an internal state of arousal or tension. This state is often experienced as unpleasant or uncomfortable, acting as a direct internal stimulus. The discomfort associated with this tension serves as a powerful motivational force, compelling the individual to take action to alleviate it. The greater the underlying need, the more intense the aroused state and the stronger the drive.

Goal-Directed Behavior: Drives are not random states; they are specifically oriented towards achieving a particular goal or set of behaviors that will satisfy the underlying need. For example, a hunger drive leads to food-seeking behaviors, while a thirst drive leads to water-seeking behaviors. The behaviors energized by a drive are typically adaptive, meaning they contribute to the organism's survival and well-being by restoring equilibrium.

Homeostatic Regulation: A core function of many drives, particularly primary drives, is to maintain internal physiological balance, or homeostasis. The body strives to keep critical variables (e.g., temperature, blood sugar, water levels) within an optimal range. When a deviation from this range occurs, a drive is activated to prompt corrective action. Once the need is met and homeostasis is restored, the drive is reduced, and the associated tension subsides, leading to a temporary state of satisfaction.

Primary vs. Secondary Drives: Drives are often categorized into two main types. **Primary drives** are innate, biological, and essential for survival, such as hunger, thirst, sex, and the need for sleep or warmth. These drives are typically unlearned and universal across a species. **Secondary drives**, also known as acquired or learned drives, develop through experience and association with primary drives. For example, the drive for money can become a powerful secondary drive because money can be used to satisfy primary needs. Similarly, the drive for achievement or social approval can be learned through their association with reducing anxiety or gaining positive reinforcement, which in turn might be linked to more fundamental needs.

4. Significance and Impact

Drive theory, particularly Hull's formulation, significantly impacted the field of psychology by offering a rigorous, mechanistic, and testable framework for understanding motivation during the mid-20th century. Before drive theory, motivational explanations often relied on more introspective or teleological concepts. Hull's model brought a scientific, quantitative approach to motivation, aligning with the prevailing behaviorist paradigm. It provided a clear explanation for why organisms initiate and sustain behaviors, suggesting that internal states of deprivation were powerful energizers of action. This was particularly influential in explaining simple, survival-related behaviors and learning in laboratory settings.

The theory's emphasis on drive reduction as a mechanism for reinforcement profoundly shaped learning theories. It explained how behaviors that successfully reduce a drive become strengthened and more likely to be repeated in the future. This provided a compelling explanation for classical and operant conditioning phenomena, where associations between stimuli and responses were seen as being formed through their ability to reduce internal tension. Consequently, drive theory became a cornerstone of learning psychology and had implications for understanding habits, addiction, and even the development of fears and anxieties, which could be conceptualized as learned drives or responses to reduce them.

Beyond its direct impact on behaviorism, drive theory stimulated extensive empirical research into the physiological and psychological bases of motivation. It encouraged researchers to investigate the specific internal states associated with various needs and how these states translate into observable behaviors. Although later theories refined and challenged its scope, drive theory laid

crucial groundwork by establishing a systematic way to think about internal motivational states and their role in guiding behavior, fostering a robust tradition of experimental research in motivation that continues to evolve today.

5. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its historical significance, drive theory, especially in its strict Hullian form, faced substantial criticisms and ultimately proved insufficient to explain the full spectrum of motivated behavior. One of the primary criticisms is its inability to account for behaviors that are not aimed at reducing an immediate, unpleasant internal tension. Many human and animal behaviors appear to be driven by curiosity, exploration, play, or the pursuit of novel experiences, none of which necessarily reduce an existing drive. In fact, some behaviors, like thrill-seeking, seem to increase arousal rather than decrease it. This led to the development of Arousal Theory, which suggests that organisms are motivated to maintain an optimal level of arousal, not necessarily the lowest possible level.

Another significant limitation concerns the role of external incentives. Incentive Theory emerged as a counterpoint, proposing that external stimuli (rewards, goals) can pull an individual towards a behavior, often independently of internal drive states. For example, a person might eat a delicious dessert even when not hungry, or work hard for a promotion that offers prestige rather than merely satisfying a basic need. Drive theory struggled to explain this "pull" motivation adequately, focusing predominantly on the "push" from internal states. The interplay between internal drives and external incentives is now understood to be far more complex than either theory alone could explain.

Furthermore, drive theory has been criticized for its reductionist and mechanistic view of motivation, largely neglecting the crucial role of cognitive factors. Human motivation is often influenced by expectations, goals, values, beliefs, and attributions, which are not easily incorporated into a simple drive-reduction model. Theories such as expectancy-value theory, goal-setting theory, and attribution theory highlight the importance of conscious thought and interpretation in directing behavior. The theory also struggles to explain complex human motivations like self-actualization, altruism, or creative pursuits, which are often characterized by intrinsic satisfaction rather than the reduction of a deficit. The rise of more holistic approaches like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Self-Determination Theory reflected a broader recognition of the multifaceted nature of human motivation beyond basic drive reduction.

Further Reading

Drive theory - Wikipedia
Homeostasis - Wikipedia
Sigmund Freud - Wikipedia

Clark L. Hull - Wikipedia
Arousal theory - Wikipedia
Incentive theory - Wikipedia
Maslow's hierarchy of needs - Wikipedia
Self-determination theory - Wikipedia