

METAMOTIVATION

Authored by
mohammad looti

October 18, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *METAMOTIVATION*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=48706>

METAMOTIVATION

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Humanistic Psychology, Personality Theory, Motivational Psychology

1. Core Definition

The concept of **Metamotivation** describes the psychological dynamics and motivational forces that emerge in individuals who have largely satisfied their basic deficiency needs (D-needs). Originating within the framework developed by Abraham Maslow, metamotivation represents the striving toward optimal psychological health, personal growth, character expression, and full maturation. It is exclusively associated with the highest level of Maslow's pyramid: self-actualization and, later, transcendence. Unlike D-motivation, which is aimed at reducing internal tension caused by lacks (e.g., hunger, fear, loneliness), metamotivation is growth-motivated, driven by intrinsic desires for knowledge, beauty, creativity, and the realization of one's inherent potential. It is not about filling a deficit but about maximizing capacity.

Maslow defined metamotivation as an alternative designation for the types of needs that operate once the individual has moved beyond the survival and safety stages. When physiological, security, and social needs are routinely met, the individual is freed to focus on what Maslow termed the Being-values, or B-values. These B-values--such as truth, justice, elegance, and wholeness--serve as the intrinsic motivators for self-actualizing individuals. These motives are often expressed through dedicated work, creative endeavors, and a persistent desire to improve oneself and contribute meaningfully to the world. Therefore, metamotivation is characterized by its qualitative difference from lower motivation; it is less urgent, more persistent, and focused on long-term developmental goals rather than immediate gratification or survival.

The operation of metamotivation suggests that the human organism is inherently oriented toward growth and development, provided the environmental conditions are sufficiently supportive. Maslow noted that self-actualizing people are often driven by a vocation or mission that transcends their own personal needs, indicating that metamotivational drives frequently involve altruistic or transpersonal goals. This shift from ego-centric motivation (focused on deficit removal) to being-centric motivation (focused on realization and contribution) is the defining feature of this psychological state. An individual operating under the influence of metamotivation seeks experiences that are meaningful, challenging, and conducive to a deeper understanding of reality, rather than just comfortable or secure.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term **Metamotivation** was conceptualized by Abraham Maslow in the mid-20th century, emerging as a critical component of his third force in psychology, humanistic psychology. Maslow

introduced this concept to specifically delineate the motivational structure of self-actualizers--the small percentage of the population he studied who seemed to be living at their highest potential. Prior to Maslow, most motivational theories, notably psychoanalytic and behaviorist approaches, centered on tension reduction and deficiency drives. Maslow recognized that these models failed to account for the highest forms of human striving, such as philosophical inquiry, artistic creation, or profound moral integrity.

The historical development of metamotivation is inextricably linked to the refinement of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Initially, the hierarchy contained five levels, culminating in self-actualization. As Maslow continued his research, he differentiated the motivating factors at the self-actualization level from those below it. He needed a specific term to capture the unique, positive, and growth-oriented drives operating here, leading to the designation **Metamotivation**. Later in his career, Maslow even suggested a sixth, higher level--transcendence--which involved moving beyond the self entirely and serving others or a higher ideal, further reinforcing the concept that motivation extends far beyond simple biological or social fulfillment.

In his later works, Maslow utilized the prefix 'meta-' (meaning beyond or after) to signify a level of motivation that goes beyond the basic motivational architecture common to most organisms. The development of this idea helped solidify the humanistic school's focus on health rather than pathology, emphasizing human potential and inherent goodness. By categorizing the drives into D-needs (deficiency) and B-needs (being), Maslow provided a structure for understanding why some individuals, despite having all their basic needs met, continue to pursue increasingly complex and challenging goals, seeking fulfillment through expression rather than acquisition. This foundational differentiation proved influential in fields ranging from organizational management to education.

3. Key Concepts: D-Needs versus B-Needs

The architecture of **Metamotivation** is best understood through its opposition to D-motivation (Deficiency Motivation). D-motivation is deficit-driven, operating via the principle of homeostasis; its goal is to restore balance by acquiring something lacking--food, safety, love, or recognition. The psychological experience of D-motivation is generally characterized by tension, urgency, and anxiety until the need is met. D-needs are considered universal and foundational, necessary for psychological survival and stability. If D-needs are thwarted, the result is psychological or physical sickness, such as malnutrition or trauma. Once satisfied, D-needs temporarily cease to motivate.

In contrast, **Metamotivation** is governed by B-needs (Being Needs), sometimes referred to as Metaneeds. B-needs do not arise from a lack but from an inherent drive toward realizing potential and expressing fundamental human values. Examples of B-needs include the need for truth, goodness, beauty, aliveness, and meaningfulness. The frustration of B-needs does not lead to common psychological illnesses, but rather to what Maslow termed "metapathologies"--existential

malaise, despair, cynicism, or feelings of futility. Crucially, satisfying a B-need does not extinguish it; rather, it often intensifies the desire for more experience of that B-value. For instance, experiencing great beauty may increase the appreciation for, and seeking of, more beauty.

The shift from D-needs to B-needs represents a profound qualitative change in the individual's focus and perception of the world. An individual motivated by D-needs perceives the world primarily in terms of what it can offer to fulfill a deficit (e.g., 'Do others value me?'). A metamotivated individual, however, perceives the world holistically and accepts reality for what it is, seeking to engage with fundamental questions of existence and meaning ('How can I contribute to truth or justice?'). This contrast highlights that metamotivation is the mechanism by which individuals move from a strictly protective, reactive existence to a creative, proactive, and values-driven existence.

4. The Relationship to Self-Actualization

Metamotivation is the exclusive motivational engine of the self-actualizing person. Self-actualization, according to Maslow, is the highest expression of human nature, characterized by the full use and exploitation of talents, capabilities, and potentialities. It is not a sudden achievement but a continuous, lifelong process of becoming. The individuals Maslow identified as self-actualizing--including historical figures like Albert Einstein and Eleanor Roosevelt--were not motivated by wealth, fame, or security (D-needs), but by the intrinsic satisfaction derived from pursuing their B-values.

For the self-actualizer, work becomes fused with play, and the separation between vocational duty and personal mission dissolves. Their activities are motivated by the Metaneeds: they pursue knowledge for the sake of truth, create art for the sake of beauty, and fight injustice for the sake of fairness. This intrinsic drive means that rewards external to the activity itself (e.g., salary or praise) become secondary, though not unwelcome. The primary reward is the feeling of congruence, authenticity, and the continuous unfolding of their inner potential. This constant striving, fueled by metamotivation, explains the intense dedication and productivity often observed in self-actualizing individuals.

Furthermore, self-actualization is associated with peak experiences--moments of profound joy, insight, and awe that are often triggered by the fulfillment of B-values. These experiences, such as feeling deeply connected to nature or momentarily achieving a profound artistic expression, are themselves metamotivational, reinforcing the individual's commitment to growth and transcendence. Thus, metamotivation is both the prerequisite for and the result of self-actualization; it is the force that sustains the individual on their journey toward full psychological maturity and realization.

5. Metaneeds and Metapathologies

Central to the understanding of **Metamotivation** are the specific B-values, or Metaneeds, that drive this state. Maslow identified a comprehensive set of Metaneeds, all of which are interrelated and hierarchical in their own right, defining the qualitative landscape of a self-actualized life. These Metaneeds include:

Truth: Honesty, reality, simplicity, and objectivity.

Goodness: Righteousness, desirability, ethical behavior, and benevolence.

Beauty: Form, symmetry, grace, elegance, and appropriateness.

Unity/Wholeness: Integration, tendency to oneness, and interconnectedness.

Aliveness: Spontaneity, process, and functionality.

Justice: Fairness, lawfulness, completeness, and necessity.

The failure to satisfy these Metaneeds results in Metapathologies. While D-need deprivation leads to observable physical or classic psychological illness (e.g., neurosis), Metapathologies manifest as spiritual or existential ailments. If the need for Truth is blocked, the person may become suspicious or cynical; if the need for Beauty is ignored, life may be experienced as vulgar or sterile; and if the need for Justice is frustrated, the person may develop feelings of rage, helplessness, or profound meaninglessness. These existential anxieties reveal that the motivation for ultimate meaning is as fundamental to human well-being as the motivation for food or safety.

The Metapathologies underscore Maslow's belief that human beings require a system of values to live a psychologically rich life. When growth is stunted at the level of B-needs, the individual may appear outwardly successful (having satisfied all D-needs) but remain internally unfulfilled, suffering from what has been termed the 'malaise of affluence.' This highlights the crucial distinction: Metamotivation is not merely an optional luxury but a necessary condition for achieving genuine psychological fulfillment and avoiding the unique forms of distress that accompany the frustration of the highest human drives.

6. Significance and Impact

The concept of **Metamotivation** holds immense significance, particularly within humanistic and positive psychology, by offering a distinctly optimistic and comprehensive view of human nature. It provided a powerful theoretical counterpoint to the deterministic and reductionistic theories prevalent in the mid-20th century, asserting that human beings possess inherent, positive forces striving toward growth and excellence. This shift redefined psychological health, moving the focus away from simply treating illness and toward fostering full potential and flourishing.

In organizational and educational settings, the principles of metamotivation have had a major impact. In management, theories promoting intrinsic motivation, job enrichment, and aligning

personal values with corporate missions draw heavily on Maslow's B-needs concept. The goal is to move employees beyond merely working for a paycheck (D-motivation) toward working for meaning, challenge, and contribution (Metamotivation). Similarly, in education, understanding metamotivation encourages pedagogical approaches that prioritize curiosity, critical thinking, and the pursuit of knowledge for its intrinsic worth, rather than solely for grades or external rewards.

Furthermore, Metamotivation fundamentally supports the modern field of Positive Psychology, pioneered by figures like Martin Seligman. Positive psychology explicitly focuses on strengths, virtues, and optimal functioning--concepts deeply rooted in Maslow's work on self-actualization and the B-values. By articulating a motivational structure dedicated to growth, Maslow provided the psychological framework necessary to scientifically study human flourishing, resilience, and subjective well-being, confirming that humans are motivated by more than just survival and pleasure.

7. Criticisms and Limitations

While influential, the theory encompassing **Metamotivation** and the B-needs is subject to several key criticisms, primarily concerning its empirical verification and cultural specificity. One primary limitation is the difficulty in operationally defining and measuring Metaneeds. Concepts like "Beauty" or "Wholeness" are highly subjective and resistant to standardized scientific assessment, making it challenging to test hypotheses related to metamotivation with rigorous experimental methodology.

A second major criticism relates to the exclusivity and sequential nature of the hierarchy itself. Maslow often implied that metamotivation is only accessible after all D-needs are fully satisfied. Critics argue that this sequential requirement is too rigid. Historical and cross-cultural evidence suggests that individuals can be motivated by B-values (e.g., profound artistic creation or commitment to justice) even while struggling with profound deficiency needs, such as poverty or political persecution. Therefore, the separation between D-motivation and Metamotivation may be less absolute and more permeable than Maslow's original model suggested.

Finally, the concept has been critiqued for its potential Western, individualistic bias. The emphasis on individual Self-actualization and autonomy, which fuels metamotivation, may not universally apply to collectivist cultures where the highest level of motivation might involve profound dedication to group harmony, kinship, or societal roles rather than personal expression. While Maslow later expanded his concept to include transcendence--a more altruistic state--the core definitions of Metamotivation still center heavily on the development of the autonomous self, potentially limiting its universal applicability across all human societies.

Further Reading

Abraham Maslow (Wikipedia entry on the primary proponent of the concept).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Wikipedia entry detailing the motivational structure underlying Metamotivation).

Self-actualization (Wikipedia entry discussing the state achieved through Metamotivation).

ARABPSYCHOLOGY.COM