SECONDARY DRIVE

Authored by

mohammad looti

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1. Core Definition and Terminology

The concept of the **secondary drive**, often referred to interchangeably as an **acquired drive** or learned impetus, is foundational to early psychological models of motivation, particularly those rooted in Drive Reduction Theory. Fundamentally, a secondary drive represents a motivational state or internal tension that is not directly tied to a necessary biological or physiological requirement, distinguishing it sharply from a primary drive.

Instead of arising from homeostatic imbalances--such as hunger, thirst, or the need for warmth--secondary drives are learned through persistent association with the reduction or satisfaction of a primary drive. They function as powerful internal stimuli that impel an organism toward specific actions, even though the goal object itself may hold no intrinsic survival value. This learning process typically involves mechanisms of conditioning, where a previously neutral stimulus gains the power to elicit motivational tension through repeated pairing with an unconditioned stimulus capable of reducing a primary need.

The significance of this distinction is profound: while primary drives ensure survival, secondary drives explain the vast complexity and diversity of human and animal behavior that extends far beyond mere physiological maintenance. These drives encompass nearly all motivations related to social interaction, achievement, status, wealth accumulation, and emotional security, demonstrating how fundamental biological needs lay the groundwork for highly sophisticated and culturally mediated behaviors.

2. Relationship to Primary Drives (The Foundation)

The defining characteristic of a secondary drive is its derivative nature; it is entirely dependent upon and advanced due to its stable correlation with the satisfaction of a **primary drive**. Primary drives are those innate, unlearned forces that stem from physiological necessities, such as the need for food (reducing hunger), water (reducing thirst), or safety (reducing fear). These biological imperatives provide the initial motivational energy in the drive model.

The transition from primary to secondary drive occurs when a previously neutral stimulus is consistently present during, or immediately preceding, the reinforcement event--the reduction of the primary drive tension. For example, money is not biologically essential, yet it becomes a powerful secondary drive because it is consistently instrumental in obtaining food, shelter, and comfort, all of which satisfy primary needs. The drive for money, therefore, is not the hunger itself, but the learned impetus to seek the means by which hunger can be reliably alleviated.

This learned relationship creates a powerful functional autonomy, allowing the secondary drive to operate independently of the moment-to-moment fluctuation of the underlying primary need. Once established, the acquired drive can persist for extended periods, guiding behavior even when the immediate primary need is temporarily satisfied. This phenomenon illustrates the efficiency of learning in ensuring long-term survival and prosperity by motivating actions that proactively secure resources, rather than reactively responding only to immediate physiological deficits.

3. Mechanisms of Acquisition (Classical Conditioning)

The psychological mechanism most frequently cited for the formation of secondary drives is classical conditioning, particularly as elaborated within the tradition of Clark Hull's behaviorist framework. In this process, the physiological state of the primary drive (the unconditioned stimulus or UCS) is repeatedly paired with an external cue (the conditioned stimulus or CS). Over time, the external cue itself acquires the capacity to elicit an emotional or motivational state similar to the original drive tension, or perhaps even the anticipation of its reduction.

A classic experimental demonstration involves teaching an animal to fear a neutral object (CS) by pairing it with an electric shock (UCS), which activates the innate primary drive of pain reduction and safety. Eventually, the neutral object alone triggers a learned fear response, which acts as a powerful **secondary drive** (fear or anxiety) motivating avoidance behavior. The reduction of this acquired fear drive, by escaping the presence of the neutral object, serves as a powerful source of reinforcement for the avoidance behavior itself, illustrating the circular self-sustaining nature of secondary drives.

This conditioning process transforms previously insignificant environmental elements into motivational beacons. Humans learn to associate symbols, words, status markers, and routines with comfort, security, or relief from discomfort. The resulting acquired drives are robust because they are linked to fundamental survival needs, ensuring that learned behaviors necessary for navigating complex social environments become internalized and highly persistent.

4. Key Characteristics of Secondary Drives

Learned Origin: Unlike primary drives, which are innate and species-specific, secondary drives are entirely acquired through individual experience, conditioning, and observational learning within a specific environmental context.

Variability and Specificity: Secondary drives are highly variable among individuals and cultures. While the primary need for social belonging is universal, the specific secondary drive used to satisfy it (e.g., the drive for academic achievement, military rank, or social media validation) is culturally specific.

Resistance to Extinction: Once established, especially if reinforced intermittently or associated

with deeply rooted primary drives like security, secondary drives can be highly resistant to extinction. This persistence explains why habits and learned anxieties often remain long after the original conditioning event has passed.

Motivational Autonomy: Secondary drives can sometimes appear to operate independently of the original primary drive that established them, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as functional autonomy. The pursuit of wealth, for instance, may continue long after basic subsistence needs are met, transitioning into a drive for power or status.

5. Functional Examples in Behavior

A multitude of complex human behaviors can be analyzed through the lens of secondary drives, as they bridge the gap between biological necessity and cultural demands. One common example cited is the drive to alter one's appearance or adhere strictly to fashion norms in order to fit smoothly into society. This behavior is not essential for survival, but the motivation behind it--the drive for social acceptance--is learned because social inclusion is historically correlated with access to resources, protection, and mating opportunities, thereby satisfying primary drives for safety and reproduction.

The drive for **achievement** is another powerful secondary drive. While success in a career does not directly fulfill a biological need, it is strongly associated with income, respect, and security. The internal satisfaction derived from meeting a demanding goal is a learned reinforcement mechanism that sustains the behavior, long after the immediate need for the salary has been addressed. Similarly, the drive for money, discussed earlier, encapsulates the learned value of a token that guarantees the reduction of numerous primary tensions.

Furthermore, many forms of maladaptive behavior, such as specific phobias or obsessive-compulsive routines, are understood as manifestations of acquired drives. The phobic individual is driven by a learned anxiety (a secondary drive) to avoid the conditioned stimulus, and the avoidance behavior is strongly reinforced because it temporarily reduces the learned anxiety, perpetuating the cycle.

6. Theoretical Significance (Drive Reduction Theory Context)

The theory of secondary drives gained significant prominence in the mid-20th century, particularly under the influence of behaviorists like Clark Hull and Kenneth Spence. The introduction of secondary drives was a crucial theoretical move, allowing Drive Reduction Theory to maintain its core tenet--that all behavior is ultimately motivated by a need to reduce tension--while simultaneously accounting for the vast array of learned human activities that appear disconnected from immediate physiological needs.

Prior to this concept, reductionist models struggled to explain why an organism would pursue goals

like collecting stamps or solving complex puzzles. Secondary drive theory provided the necessary mechanism, positing that even these seemingly abstract pursuits are linked, however remotely, to fundamental drives through complex chains of reinforcement and conditioning. It allowed the behaviorist framework to explain motivation across biological, social, and cultural domains without abandoning the principle of homeostasis as the ultimate source of motivational energy.

This theoretical framework provided a systematic, testable explanation for how environment and learning shape motivation. It underscored the importance of early life experiences and environmental associations in determining adult behavioral patterns, making the understanding of reinforcement schedules and stimulus pairing central to predicting and modifying behavior.

7. Criticisms and Alternative Models

While the concept of the secondary drive was highly influential, it faced significant theoretical challenges, particularly with the rise of cognitive psychology and alternative motivational theories. A primary criticism is that it often relies on reductionism that forces complex, goal-directed behaviors back to a simple state of tension reduction, sometimes ignoring the conscious and intentional aspects of human decision-making.

The greatest challenge came from theories emphasizing internal, non-tension-reducing motivations, such as Arousal Theory and the concept of **intrinsic motivation**. Arousal Theory suggests that organisms are motivated not only to reduce drives (low arousal) but also sometimes to seek stimulation and increase arousal, contrary to the premise that all motivation seeks homeostasis. Similarly, the existence of behaviors that are pleasurable in themselves--such as engaging in creative arts or exploration--challenges the notion that all motivation must be derived from association with primary need reduction.

Modern motivational models, such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, while acknowledging basic needs (primary drives), emphasize higher-level growth needs (self-actualization) that are intrinsically rewarding and cannot be easily explained as merely learned associations tied to biological survival. Despite these criticisms, the concept of the secondary drive remains a crucial historical and pedagogical tool for understanding the power of conditioning in shaping acquired behavioral motivations.

Further Reading

Drive Theory (Psychology)
Clark L. Hull
Classical Conditioning
Arousal Theory