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ZOLTÁN DÖRNYEI

## Motivation theories

Motivational psychologists have traditionally tried to understand why humans think and behave as they do. Little justification is needed as to why this issue is immensely complex and the number of

potential determinants and influences of human behaviour is very large. Therefore, a substantial amount of effort in motivation research in various sub-fields of **PSYCHOLOGY** has been devoted to identifying a smaller set of key variables that would subsume or mediate other interrelated factors, thus explaining a great deal of the variance in people's behaviour. The endeavour can be compared metaphorically to lifting a large, loosely knit net: If you lift it up holding some of the knots, different shapes will emerge than if you lift it up holding others, even though the actual net is exactly the same. The question, then, is to decide which knots to grab (i.e. which factors to assign a key role to) and how to lift the net up in order to obtain a shape that makes most sense (i.e. what kind of relationships to specify between the selected factors).

Motivation theories have highlighted several different principal components as 'fundamental' to human behaviour and, if we look at the whole body of motivation literature in the twentieth century, it becomes clear that the number of motivational factors that are critical (in the sense that their absence can cancel or significantly weaken any other existing motives whereas their active presence can boost learning behaviour) is extremely extensive. There simply do not appear to exist any 'magic' variables that can universally overrule any other factors and which, therefore, could rightfully be considered the core motivational constituents (or the 'right' knots to grab, in the net metaphor). As a preliminary, therefore, we must note that none of the available theories in psychology offer a completely comprehensive overview of all the relevant motivational forces and conditions.

Although different conceptualisations of motivation show considerable variation, both in terms of their scope and their level of analysis, most researchers would agree that motivation theories in general attempt to explain three interrelated aspects of human behaviour: the *choice* of a particular action, *persistence* with it, and *effort* expended on it. That is, motivation is responsible for *why* people decide to do something, *how long* they are willing to sustain the activity, and *how hard* they are going to pursue it. The bulk of past research on motivation has focused on the 'choice'

or 'why' aspect, i.e. drawing up constructs and processes that affect decision-making and choice with respect to an individual's goals.

Looking at the different areas of psychology in which explaining human behaviour is a focal issue, we can identify two distinct research traditions:

- *motivational psychologists* tended to look for the *motors* of human behaviour in the *individual* rather than in the social being, focusing primarily on internal factors (e.g. drive, arousal, cognitive self-appraisal);
- *social psychologists* tended to see action as the function of the social context and the interpersonal/intergroup relational patterns, as measured by means of the individual's social attitudes.

The most influential approach in the social psychological tradition has been the theory of *reasoned action* and its extension, the theory of *planned behaviour* advocated by Ajzen and his colleagues (for reviews, see Ajzen, 1988; Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). According to these, the chief determinant of action is a person's *intention* to perform the particular behaviour, which is a function of two basic factors, the 'attitude towards the behaviour' and the 'subjective norm' (referring to the person's perception of the social pressures put on him/her to perform the behaviour in question). To these, a further crucial modifying component was added later: 'perceived behavioural control', which refers to the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour (e.g. perceptions of required resources and potential impediments or obstacles).

In motivational psychology there are currently three dominant approaches: *expectancy-value theories*, *goal theories* and *self-determination theory* (for comprehensive summaries from an educational perspective, see Pintrich and Schunk, 1996; Stipek, 1996; Wigfield, Eccles and Rodriguez, 1998).

Expectancy-value theories comprise a number of different constructs (beginning with Atkinson's classic achievement motivation theory; see, e.g., Atkinson and Raynor, 1974) that are based on the principle that motivation to perform various tasks is the product of two key factors: the individual's *expectancy of success* in a given task and the *value* the individual attaches to success at that task (Wigfield, 1994). Broadly speaking, if people perceive the task

outcome to be valuable and feel that completing the task is within their abilities, they are likely to initiate action. The expectancy component is determined by multiple variables, and there are various subtheories that focus on these: *Attribution theory* (e.g. Weiner, 1992) is centred around the way individuals process past experiences (successes and failures); *Self-efficacy theory* (e.g. Bandura, 1993) analyses the causes and consequences of how people judge their own abilities and competence; *Self-worth theory* (Covington, 1992) focuses on how people attempt to maintain their self-esteem.

*Goal theories* are based on the assumption that human action is caused by purpose, and for action to take place, goals have to be set and pursued by choice. Therefore, the key component in these theories is the *goal* and its various properties. In *goal-setting theory* (Locke and Latham, 1990) the main goal variables include the specificity, difficulty and intensity of the goal, as well as goal commitment on the part of the individual. *Goal orientation theory* (Ames, 1992) is centred around two qualitative types of goal as defined by their success criteria: *mastery goals* (also labelled as task-involvement or learning goals) focus on learning the content, and *performance goals* (or ego-involvement goals) focus on demonstrating ability, getting good grades, or outdoing other students.

*Self-determination theory* (Deci and Ryan, 1985) was originally based on the well-known distinction of *intrinsic* versus *extrinsic motivation*. The first type of motivation deals with behaviour performed for its own sake. In order, for example, to experience pleasure or to satisfy one's curiosity. The second involves performing a behaviour as a means to an end, i.e. to receive some extrinsic reward (e.g. good grades) or to avoid punishment. Further research has found, however, that it is more appropriate to perceive internal and external regulation as a cline rather than a dichotomy, and therefore various types of motives were suggested along a continuum between self-determined and controlled forms of motivation (see Vallerand, 1997).

As was mentioned at the beginning, the primary concern of most theories of human motivation in the past has been the 'choice' or the 'why' aspect. However, from an educational perspective this is only of limited relevance, since in instructional contexts many of the decisions and goals are not

really the learners' own products but are imposed on them by the system. In such contexts, the effort and persistence dimensions of motivation (the 'how hard' and 'how long' aspects) are more pertinent, with key motivational issues involving maintaining assigned goals, elaborating on subgoals, and exercising control over other thoughts and behaviours that are often more desirable than concentrating on academic work. Such 'volitional' or 'executive' issues have received increasing attention over the past decade (for reviews, see Corno and Kanfer, 1993; Snow, Corno and Jackson, 1996), mainly inspired by Heckhausen and Kuhl's *action control theory* (for a review, see Kuhl and Beckmann, 1994). A central theme within this approach is the analysis of various control strategies that the learner can apply in order to maintain, protect and enhance the initial motivational impetus – a topic that has considerable educational implications and that is closely related to the relatively new discipline of 'self-regulatory learning' within educational psychology.

**See also:** Attitudes and language learning; Autonomy and autonomous learners; Cross-cultural psychology; Motivation; Psychology; Strategies of language learning; Teaching methods

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