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Instinct Theory Of Motivation

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There are different theories of motivation that are viewed in various approaches. The differences in these theories usually lie on how they emphasize biological and/or environmental forces in their attempt to explain the process of motivation. While there are theories that combine several aspects of science, the Instinct Theory of Motivation is one (and perhaps the only one) that gives a complete emphasis on the biological approach to motivation.

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What is Instinct?

Coined by Wilhem Wundt in 1870s, “instinct” is a term that was used to refer to any repeated behaviour. This definition led a research to list about 4,000 instincts of humans. As years passed by, the concept of instinct had been refined. Freudian psychoanalysts use the word instinct as a human motivational force, or what we now call human “drives”. Psychoanalysts have identified two kinds of basic instinct: “eros” or life instinct, and “thanatos” or death instinct.

In contrast to the Freudian concept of instinct, well-known behaviourist Abraham Maslow claimed that instinct is something that a human cannot override. He argued that instinct does not exist anymore because we have already overridden our instincts.

“Instinct: An Enduring Problem in Psychology”, a book published in 1961, outlined a set of criteria that draws the line between an instinctual behaviour and a non-instinctual one. The authors of the book, Robert C. Birney and Richard C. Teevan, claimed that the following are

the characteristics of a behaviour that is motivated through an instinct:

1. automatic
2. irresistible
3. happens at some point in one's development
4. triggered by an environmental occurrence
5. happens in each member of the species
6. unmodifiable
7. does not require training

On the other hand, William McDougal proposed his own understanding of what an instinct is. He stated that an instinct must be:

1. unlearned
2. uniform in expression
3. universal in a species

What is Instinct Theory?

The Instinct Theory of Motivation views biological or genetic programming as the cause of motivation. This claim means that all humans have the same motivations due to our similar biological programming. This theory says that the root of all motivations is the motivation to survive. From our motivation to survive, all other motivations emerge. And, as we act or behave with this kind of motivation, all our actions are therefore considered as instincts.

A common example used to explain the Instinct Theory is that a human mother will attempt to provide comfort to a baby who has been crying all night and will not sleep until she sees that the baby is calm and asleep. According to Instinct theory, human mothers behave in this way because they were biologically programmed to do so; it is a mother's instinct to provide comfort to her child. Proponents of this theory argue that this is not because of conditioning or learning, the mother having weak or strong female role models, being raised in a rich family or a poor one – it is all because of their instinct – that is, they cannot override the motivation to take care of their children.

Problems With Instinct Theory

One of the problems with this theory of motivation is that many identified instincts are not universal. For instance, there are mothers who do not exhibit the supposed instinctual behaviour to take good care of their children. Another issue is that humans may exhibit different levels of motivation because of instinct, such as jealousy and aggression.

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