Motivation: Theory/Human Model

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Synonyms

Drive; Goals; Incentives; Motive; Purpose; Reason; Stimulus

Definition

Motivation is a determinant of human behavior characterized as an instinctual drive that entices an individual to reach a task or goal organized into a hierarchy of needs, from basic physiological needs to the need for self-actualization (Maslow 1970).

Overview

Motivational factors are an important component of aging well (See ► [“Aging Well”](#)), and regulation of motivation optimizes development throughout life. Interest in studies related to

motivation in old age, particularly perspectives on aging, development, and life-span research, is growing (Braver et al. 2014). A classical theoretical framework of motivation is self-determination theory (SDT), which identifies fundamental psychological needs in the life course. Satisfaction of these basic needs supports healthy motivation and psychological well-being, promoting activity and growth in older adults (Ryan and Deci 2000) (See ► [“Health and Aging”](#)).

According to traditional theories of life-span development (See ► [“Life-Span Development”](#)), such as the selection, optimization, and compensation (SOC) model (See ► [“Selection, Optimization, and Compensation, The Model of”](#)), late-life changes reflect adaptations to the potential negative dynamic between gains and losses (Baltes and Baltes 1990). This model’s motivational perspective postulates that individuals, depending on the availability of resources, focus on achieving goals to maximize gains and minimize losses (Knecht and Freund 2017) (See ► [“Successful Aging 2.0”](#)). Regulation of motivation is, therefore, a central feature of individuals’ adaptive capacity to optimize development through the main changes that occur in late life (Heckhausen et al. 2019).

Socioemotional selectivity theory (SST) is a life-span theory of motivation that postulates that the perceived time horizon decreases as age progresses, with implications in shaping goal setting and goal pursuit (See ► [“Socioemotional Selectivity Theory”](#)). Older people become selective in

social relationships and focus on meaningful relationships, prioritizing motivational shifts that favor goals related to emotional well-being. Furthermore, older adults report reduced levels of negative affective experience and preserved levels of positive experience compared to younger adults, resulting in decreased attention to and memory of negative versus positive material; these changes may have implications for shifts in motivational goals (Carstensen 2006; Giasson et al. 2018).

Age-related cognitive changes seem to influence motivational factors. Increased mental effort and costs associated with cognitive engagement negatively impact older adults' motivation to engage in effortful cognitive activities in everyday life (Hess 2014) (See ► [“Selective Engagement of Resources”](#)). The interaction of motivation and cognitive control has proven particularly important to understand goal-directed behaviors in aging (Braver et al. 2014).

In December 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic emerged. Social distancing is an effective measure to restrain the spread of infections; however, older adults are highly susceptible to isolation, with a high mental health burden (Bavel et al. 2020; Newman et al. 2020). Motivation can be an important mechanism that modulates the behavior of older people during the Covid-19 emergency. They may show a high level of concern for the virus, thereby increasing behaviors related to fear. However, in contrast to younger people, they may tend to avoid isolation, reflecting the motivation to resolve a psychological conflict (characterized by the urge to take action against a feeling of concern) by maintaining a normal lifestyle (Bacon and Corr 2020).

Key Research Findings

In later life, motivation results to be especially related to affect and cognitive factors. As individual aged, there is a focus on motivational reprioritization, where older individuals perceive that time horizons are limited and as consequence increase engaging in meaningful activities and give priority to closest social relations; older adults select

behavioral goals that are associated to positive affect and have high self-relevance. This period of shifting motivational goals avoids engagement in cognitive effortful activities or those that induce negative affect (Giasson et al. 2018).

Research on human motivation theory can be applied in diverse areas, such as health and life-long learning in old age. Age-related change in motivation can influence older adults' decision-making, so evidence can be useful when constructing interventions to increase motivation in behavior related to active aging (Strough et al. 2015). Motivational factors are implied to increase older adults' healthy behaviors, such as participating in exercise programs (Biedenweg et al. 2014), walking (Notthoff and Carstensen 2014), participating in team sports (Pedersen et al. 2017), engaging in cognitively demanding everyday activities (Hess et al. 2018), or engaging in activities such as volunteer work (Giasson et al. 2018) (See ► [“Psychological Theories of Health Aging”](#)).

Future Directions of Research

Future research should integrate progress in neurocognitive, social/personality, and life-span perspectives, to examine the interaction of affect and cognitive factors and their influence on motivational factors in old age (Braver et al. 2014). Individual motivational self-regulation requires more research, as do choice of relevant goals, the role of emotions and goal engagement, and disengagement in later life (Heckhausen et al. 2019). Motivation factors play an important role in interventions and may increase motivation in behavior related to healthy and active aging. Further evidence is necessary to test the effectiveness of interventions that improve health behavior decision-making in older adults (Strough et al. 2015).

Cross-References

- [Aging Well](#)
- [Covid-19 Pandemic and Healthy Aging](#)
- [Healthy Aging](#)

- Life-Span Development
- Psychological Theories of Health and Aging
- Selective Engagement of Resources
- Selective Optimization with Compensation Theory
- Selection, Optimization, and Compensation, The Model of
- Socioemotional Selectivity Theory
- Successful Aging 2.0

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