

# A UNITARY THEORY OF MOTIVATION AND ITS COUNSELING IMPLICATIONS

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One of the most frequent problems posed by those working with people, including counselors, is represented by such questions as: What do we do with the unwilling, the involuntary client, the so-called unmotivated individual? How can we instill motivation into people? How can we get people to want to be helped, to want to do what they should do, what is obviously good for them?

The problem of motivating people is a ubiquitous one. It is present in all situations where one person desires to affect or influence the behavior of others, including child training, education, politics, advertising, courtship, counseling and psychotherapy, and brainwashing. What can the psychology of motivation contribute to the solution of this problem? It is the purpose of this paper to review briefly the development of a unitary concept of motivation, and to discuss its implications for the counseling relationship.

## DEVELOPMENT OF A UNITARY CONCEPT OF MOTIVATION

### *Many Motives or None*

The concept of motivation has been a central aspect of so-called dynamic systems of psychology, from Freudian psychoanalysis to neo-behaviorism. However, there has been little agreement upon identifying the motives underlying behavior, with the result that there have been as many lists of motives as there were of instincts, the precursors of motives. As in the case of instincts, the question may be raised as to whether motives are necessary, and the question might well be answered in the same way, that is, in the negative. Postman (22) reviewing one of the volumes of the Nebraska Symposium on Motivation, expressed the hope that at a future symposium someone would devote a paper to this question. His wish was in part granted by Kelly who stated in opening his discussion: "I have no use for the concept of motivation . . . . Motivation is an invented construct" (14, pp. 83-84; see also 13). Jones in the introduction to this tenth symposium notes that, "There seems to be increasing evidence over the years that the motivational concept as such has reached the end of its usefulness as a scientific concept" (12, p. viii).

English and English (7) define motivation as follows: "1. the non-stimulus variables controlling behavior; the general name for the fact that an organism's acts are partly determined in direction and strength by its own nature (or enduring structure) and/or internal state. 2. a specific hypothesized process that energizes differentially certain responses, thus making them dominant over other possible responses to the same situation."

This is a rather vague and loose definition, but even so it is not generally accepted by psychologists. The lack of agreement as to what motivation is, and the inability to answer such questions as how many motives (or drives, impulses, desires, needs, etc.) there are, how they operate, how they are aroused (11) could well suggest that there may not be any validity or utility to the concept.

Littman (16) attempted to find common elements among 52 motivational terms. Motivation as an energizing function or as an instigator of behavior was not present in all terms, nor was the concept of selection or direction of activity. Persistence in behavior, suggested by some as a characteristic of motivation, did not appear in most terms or definitions. Littman proposed, facetiously, a definition of motivation which would include all the aspects proposed by various writers. This definition turned out to include all of behavior, and thus all of psychology.

Littman's definition may not be as facetious as he supposed. It points to something which has not been adequately recognized by many psychologists, and which, when recognized, changes the whole problem of motivation. This is the fact that activity, or behavior, does not have to be energized, or stimulated, either from within or from without. This disposes of the necessity for a concept of motivation to account for activity, or to look for sources of energy which give strength to motives or drives.

The living organism is continuously active, continuously behaving. Life is activity, so that motivation, in its energizing aspect, is living activity. It is a given, and does not have to be accounted for except as a property of living matter. As Littman expresses it: "It is not necessary that there be psychological actives (motives) to set behavioral systems into motion; systems may be so constructed that they already have the property of motion or activity" (16).

Kelly suggests that we begin "by assuming that the fundamental thing about life is that it goes on. It isn't that something *makes* it go on; the going on *is the thing itself*. It isn't that motives *make* man come

alert to do things; his alertness is an aspect of his very being. Talking about activating motives is simply redundant talky-talk, for once you've got a human being on your hands, you already have alertness and movement, and sometimes a lot more of it than you know what to make of" (14, p. 85).

And Skinner, a strict behaviorist, makes the same point. "No one," he says, "asks how to motivate a baby. A baby naturally explores everything it can get at, unless restraining forces have been at work. And this tendency doesn't die out, it's not wiped out . . . We don't need to create motives" (26, pp. 101-102).

But does this dispose of the concept of motivation? Is motivation entirely redundant, and useless, as Kelly (13) claims? What about the direction of activity? Motivation is frequently considered as the directional influencing of behavior by nonstimulus, or internal, variables. These variables are usually called drives or needs.

In the effort to understand the great variety of behavior manifested by the human organism, long lists of physiological, psychological and social drives and needs have been proposed. A basic problem in motivation then becomes the organization of these needs into a system. The solution most frequently proposed is the ordering of needs in a hierarchy. Maslow's (18) hierarchy is perhaps the most adequate attempt at such a solution. Problems arise in any ordering of needs, however, and no hierarchy appears to be invariant, with the so-called more basic or prepotent needs always taking precedence over the "higher" needs. For example, it is not always true that the lower, more basic physiological need of self-preservation will take precedence over a "higher" less prepotent need such as belongingness or esteem needs, to use Maslow's terms.

Is there no way of resolving this problem? Must we, with Littman (16), accept the conclusion that "there are many different kinds of motivational phenomena," all separate, unique, specific, unintegrated? There have been, and are, many who feel that we do not. These are the psychologists, and others, who seek to understand the organism or the individual as an organized, integrated whole, who feel that there must be an organizing or unifying element or factor.

### *Unitary Concept of Motivation*

There have been a number of unitary theories of motivation, and the first to propose such a theory probably lived before recorded history. Contemporary psychology includes many well known figures

who have arrived, more or less independently, at the conclusion that there is one single, dominating need or motive behind all behavior.

Freud for a time was a monist, basing all behavior upon eros or the libido, or the pleasure principle. But he then added a second instinct or motive, the ego. His theory of instincts went through many stages (3), but the dualism persisted. He became impressed by the destructive and aggressive elements in behavior, and felt that they needed to be accounted for on an instinctual basis. His final theory continued the dualism, with life instincts (self-preservation and preservation of the species) on the one hand, and the death instinct (aggression and destructiveness) on the other.

The existence of aggression has been a stumbling block to many who have been concerned with human motivation. Its strength and practical universality have led to its being considered instinctive or innate. But there have been many who have suggested that this is not the case, that "it may be that what has often been considered instinctive or natural aggressiveness is always a reaction to threat, a reaction which is universal because threat, in some form or other, is universal" (21, p. 115). Bibring (3) in his discussion of Freud's theories suggests this solution also. He raises the question "whether there are any phenomena of aggression at all outside the field of the ego-preservative functions," and notes "the empirical fact that aggressiveness appears only or almost only when the life instincts or the ego instincts are exposed to harm." Ashley Montagu (20) contends that the view that aggressiveness is instinctual is not scientifically corroborated. "In fact," he states, "all the available evidence gathered by competent investigators indicates that man is born without a trace of aggressiveness," but that aggression or hostility results from deprivations or the frustration of needs (cf. also 17). Support for this is also provided by Dollard and his associates (6) in their discussion of the frustration-aggression hypothesis.

The influence of the aggressive aspect of behavior has been so strong that in some cases it has been accepted as the basic and single motivation for behavior.<sup>1</sup> Adler, who was one of the first in contemporary psychology to propose a unitary concept of motivation, originally accepted aggression as the unifying principle (2, p. 34). But he seems to have recognized that aggression occurs "when one of the primary drives is prevented from satisfaction," or as a result of neurotic feelings of inferiority, and soon abandoned this principle.

<sup>1</sup>An interesting development of this thesis is found in Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (9).

Adler then sought the unifying concept elsewhere, and over a period of time used varying terms to designate the basic striving and the "fictional" (because unattainable) goal of such striving. An early term was the striving "to be a real man" of the masculine protest. Other early terms were the striving for superiority, for power, for security, for self-esteem. Such striving was a compensatory process, developing out of a feeling of inferiority. As Adler turned from the neurotic to the normal or healthy individual, he turned from compensatory strivings to more positive concepts: completion and perfection. While the neurotic strives to overcome personal deficiencies, the normal individual is less self-centered and strives for a goal which includes the welfare of others. Adler saw no need for positing special forces as the source of energy for motivation: "The striving for superiority . . . is an intrinsic necessity of life itself" (2, p. 103). "The striving for perfection is innate in the sense that it is a part of life, a striving, an urge, or something without which life would be unthinkable" (2, p. 104).

Many others have reached this solution to the problem of motivation, apparently independently and using somewhat differing terminology.

Goldstein, on the basis of extended experience with brain-injured veterans, came to the conclusion that self-actualization is the single basic motive of all behavior: "We can say, an organism is governed by a tendency to actualize, as much as possible, its individual capacities, its 'nature' in the world" (8, p. 196).

Angyal, defining life as "a process of self-expansion" (1, p. 29) goes on to say that "We can say that the tendency of the organism is toward increased autonomy" (p. 1, 47), or a tendency toward self-determination. He also refers to self-realization as being the intrinsic purpose of life (1, p. 354).

Lecky, impressed by the integration and organization of the self, felt that a need for self-consistency and its preservation is the single basic need of the organism: "The goal for which the individual strives is the maintenance of a unified organization" (15, p. 45).

Rogers sees the organism, or the individual, as being inherently growing and forward-moving. The basic tendency of the maintenance and enhancement of the organism and of the self provides the motive force for therapy and personality change (23, p. 195). "The organism has one basic tendency and striving—to actualize, maintain, and enhance the experiencing organism" (23, p. 487). Other terms which

Rogers uses include independence, self-determination, integration, self-actualization. In his presentation of his theoretical position, Rogers (24) refers to self-actualization as an aspect of a general actualizing tendency. The self becomes differentiated as part of the actualizing tendency, and a need for positive regard from others and for positive self-regard develops. Rogers here considers the need for positive regard from others and of oneself as secondary or learned needs. However, although they may develop on the basis of and be shaped by experience, these needs may be potential in the general actualizing tendency.

Combs and Snygg adopt the same terminology, and were in fact influential upon the development of Rogers' thinking. They state that "From birth to death the maintenance of the phenomenal self is the most pressing, the most crucial, if not the only task of existence . . . Man seeks not merely the maintenance of a self . . . Man seeks both to maintain and enhance his perceived self" (4, p. 45). Their book is probably the most systematic and detailed development of the implications of a unitary theory of motivation.

White's (27) concept of competence, which he defines as "an organism's capacity to interact effectively with its environment," may appear to be a unitary approach to motivation, and he does refer to motivation as the urge toward competence. But White's concept is actually much narrower. Competence does not supplant or subsume the primary drives. It is an attempt to integrate many apparently spontaneous activities such as exploration, manipulation, sensing, mastery, etc. But while pleasure or satisfaction is not the goal, the feeling of efficacy as a goal seems limited and hardly acceptable as a basic, general goal of life.

Woodworth does elevate a similar interaction with the environment to the status of a single motivating principle, however. He states that ". . . the direction of receptive and motor activity toward the environment is the fundamental tendency of animal and human behavior," and "is the all-pervasive primary motivation of behavior" (28, pp. 124-125). Again, however, this would appear to be a limited and rather meager concept of life.

Even those who would repudiate the whole concept of motivation appear to be unable to avoid dealing with the problem of the direction or goal of behavior, and develop concepts which are essentially motivational. Kelly declares that the concept of motivation is not needed to explain directionality of movement. Yet his theory of personal con-

structs assumes a motive or goal which is quite similar to those discussed above: "A person chooses for himself that alternative in a dichotomized construct through which he anticipates the greater possibility for extension and definition of his system" (13, p. 59).

It appears then that a number of workers have converged, more or less independently, to the position that the assumption of a single basic, dominant, integrating motive, or goal, is more useful in understanding behavior than an indefinite multiplicity of separate, independent, or even hierarchically arranged motives or needs. Whether this is an overemphasis upon the love of parsimony, or itself evidence of the need for integration, unity, perfection or completeness is a matter for the future to decide. Suffice it to say that the concept seems to be increasingly accepted in psychology, and may lead to the solution of the age-old problem of motivation and the understanding of behavior.

The concept of a single, basic motive clarifies, or eliminates, the confusion which we face when we try to understand and order or integrate the multiplicity of specific drives and motives, often contradictory or opposed to each other, which are attributed to human beings. There is no need to attempt to order drives or needs in a hierarchy. There *is* no hierarchy, except in the sense that all the specific needs or drives are subservient to the basic tendency for the preservation and enhancement of the self. Specific needs take priority in terms of their current relation to the basic tendency. The concept has the virtues of simplicity and parsimony, and offers an organizing principle for the understanding of individual behavior. To illustrate this, we shall apply the concept to the process of counseling and psychotherapy. First, however, some criticisms of the concept will be briefly considered.

#### *Some Objections to a Unitary Concept*

The unitary concept of motivation has not of course achieved complete acceptance. Three objections may be briefly noted and disposed of.

Hilgard, discussing the concept of a master motive and referring to some of the writers presented above, concludes, "Because these theorists disagree among themselves as to the one master motive, we are on safer grounds to think of a group of *ego-integrative* motives, that is, motives with some sort of self-reference" (10, p. 144). It is of course true that many terms have been used by various writers—self-

enhancement, self-actualization, self-fulfillment, self-realization, self-esteem, completeness, perfection, etc. But as far as the concept is concerned the diversity is more apparent than real. There appears to be a basic commonality which would require only agreement as to its designation.

A second objection may be formulated in the question whether the maintenance and the enhancement of the self are not a dualism. Are these not two independent motives, which may actually oppose one another at times, rather than a single motive? Preservation of the physical organism may mean the sacrifice of the psychological self, or its actualization, fulfillment, or realization. Conversely, preservation of the psychological self may require the sacrifice of the physical organism. Maslow (19) apparently was influenced by some such considerations in his concept of deficiency motivation and growth motivation.

But preservation or maintenance, and enhancement or actualization may be seen as two aspects of the same motive, operating in different situations. Adler (2, p. 114) recognized the different expression of the same basic motive in neurotics and normals. The neurotic, threatened and compensating for a deep feeling of inferiority, reacts to preserve or restore his self-esteem, to overcome his inferiority with superiority through the striving for power. The normal individual, on the other hand, free of threat, can strive for completeness or perfection. In the unhealthy individual, in the individual under stress who is threatened, enhancement or positive striving is impossible. He must defend himself against attack or threat of attack, and strive to safeguard, defend or secure what he has. His energies are absorbed in preservation. Goldstein (8) makes the same point. He considers the drive for self-preservation a pathological phenomenon. The drive for self-actualization, he suggests, undergoes a change in the sick (or threatened) individual in whom the scope of life is reduced, and he is driven to maintain (or defend) a limited state of existence. Preservation or maintenance of the self is thus a pathological form of self-actualization, the only form of self-actualization left to the threatened individual.

A third objection to a unitary concept of motivation as self-actualization or self-enhancement is that it leads to a self-centered, selfish, antisocial or asocial individual. This objection appears to be based upon the assumption that man is innately bad or antisocial, that the needs of the individual are antithetical to those of society. A more



adequate assumption is that man, as Aristotle noted, is a political (social) animal, and in order to exist needs the group. In order to actualize himself, man needs others. Moreover, man lives in a society, and as a social being he "must necessarily adjust to the demands of society or remove himself from it. If he identifies himself with society he cannot deny it, for to do that is to deny himself. Since he lives in and is dependent upon society for his welfare, his own maintenance and enhancement will lead to that of the members of society as well, providing he is free to make adequate differentiations and to accept these into his concept of self" (4, p. 260). Rogers notes that in the long run enhancement of the self "inevitably involves the enhancement of other selves as well . . . The self-actualization of the organism appears to be in the direction of socialization, broadly defined" (23, pp. 150, 488; see also 25, pp. 177-178).

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR CLIENT-CENTERED COUNSELING

##### *There is no Unmotivated Client*

There is no such thing as lack of or absence of motivation. To be alive is to be motivated, to be unmotivated is to be dead. Thus we cannot say that a client is unmotivated.

Marguerite Dickey (5), in summarizing the Cleveland Symposium on Behavioral Research in Rehabilitation, noting that while perhaps no more difficult problem exists for the rehabilitation worker than how to deal with the so-called non-motivated patient points out that "the label 'non-motivated' attached to such a patient is not only erroneous but is not likely to lead into the kinds of behavioral or conceptual analyses which would increase our understanding of the problem."

Recognizing that clients are not unmotivated is the first step in recognizing positive aspects in them, in attempting to understand how their motivation is directed, i.e., toward what goals or objectives. For the client does have goals and objectives, although they may not be the same which the counselor has for him, or would like him to have. This shift from a negative to a positive view of the client is the beginning of an understanding of him. Instead of viewing a client as resistant, uncooperative, unreasonable because he does not seem to be interested in commonly accepted goals, we may see him as concerned about other things, which are of importance to him in achieving adequacy or enhancing his self. We recognize then, that in many cases

the problem is not lack of motivation, but motivation towards goals not accepted by the counselor or others concerned with the client. They are not lacking in motivation. Indeed, the problem often is that the client is too highly motivated! There are also those individuals who refuse and resist counseling, and are thus "uncooperative" because they are strongly motivated to go it alone and remain independent.

*Motivation is in Terms of the Self-Concept*

The motivation toward personal adequacy or self-enhancement is always in terms of the concept one has of himself. The self-concept is the center around which behavior is organized. Essentially the world is given meaning in terms of its significance for the maintenance and enhancement of the self, for the development of a sense of personal adequacy or self-esteem. This orientation leads to a consideration of motivation in terms of the implementation of the self-concept.

To understand the client and his motivation, one must know what his concept of himself is. It does not help to know what others think of him, how others see him. The perceptions which others have about one, may influence one's self-concept, but the pictures which others paint of a particular individual are not necessarily his "real" self.

The self-concept is the organization of the perceptions of the self. It includes all the perceptions and conceptions which the individual has about himself, his attitudes and beliefs about himself. It influences his perceptions of the world about him. If he sees himself as weak and inadequate, the world is a threatening place. The self is the central part of the individual's phenomenal field, about which the world is organized. "All perceptions . . . derive their meaning from their relation to the phenomenal self" (4, p. 131). What a person thinks and how he behaves are largely determined by the concepts he holds about himself and his abilities" (4, p. 122).

We can only attempt to understand the self-concept of the particular client with whom we are working. It is not easy to put oneself in the place of another and to see himself and the world as he does, because each individual is unique. If we were able to do this more successfully, perhaps we would have less of a problem with so-called uncooperative and non-motivated clients.

Clients may have perceptions of themselves and the world which are not consistent with the perceptions others have of them and the world. I do not say reality, here, since no one knows what reality

really is. What we call reality is no more than the agreement of the perceptions of a number of observers. Nor do I speak of "distorted" perceptions, since this also implies a known reality. A person's perceptions are not distorted to himself, but are so only from the frame of reference of another whose perceptions differ. This constitutes a problem in understanding. The client may perceive his personality, with its positive aspects and its limitations, differently than the counselor. He may perceive his abilities and aptitudes differently than they are indicated by tests or other evidence of performance. He may perceive the opportunities available to him quite differently than does the counselor. He may perceive the attitudes of others toward him in an entirely different way than does the counselor or others, or even different from the way in which others would express their attitudes toward him. It is the client's perceptions, however, which determine his conceptions of what he can or can not do, what he should or should not do, what his goals should be.

*Behavior Change Must be Preceded by Change of Perception*

The third implication of this point of view has to do with the way in which change in the direction or goals of the client may be facilitated or made possible. The basic assumption is that perception determines behavior. The individual behaves as he does because of the way he perceives his environment, his world, particularly in relation to himself and his need for enhancing his personal adequacy. The problem of changing behavior, then, is not one of "motivating" people, but of changing their perceptions of themselves and of the world around them. This is to some a startling and apparently inadequate approach to behavior change. Yet it is a basic and effective method which is recognized and used in much advertising, for example.

How do perceptions change? We know that they do change, that change actually is the normal state of living. Change sometimes occurs suddenly and dramatically, although more frequently it is slow and even painful. The fact that perceptions may change suddenly is attested by experiences which all of us have had of suddenly seeing things in a new light, a new perspective. It is the ah-hah experience of insight. It is also illustrated in the phenomenon of figure-ground reversal.

In the area of interpersonal relationships, the ability to put oneself in the place of another, and in effect to look at oneself through the eyes of the other, is a source of new perceptions of oneself. The loss of

this ability seems to be a characteristic of the severely emotionally disturbed person.

While it is not clear just why and how perceptions, including perceptions of the self, change, there is evidence regarding the conditions which are conducive for such change. Combs and Snygg (4) suggest that there must be a stimulus, from within or without, the impingement of a new feeling or experience, a disturbance or change in the internal or external environment. Thus experiences with which an individual is confronted present him with inconsistencies or discrepancies or raise questions about his way of looking at himself and his environment. These authors list three factors which are important in determining the likelihood of change in the perceived self:

1. "The place of the new concept in the individual's present self organization" (4, p. 163). Central concepts of the self will be more resistant to change than more peripheral ones.

2. "The relation of the new concept to the person's basic need . . . Other things being equal, change in the self is most likely to occur in situations which do not force the individual to self defense" (4, pp. 163-164).

3. "The clarity of the experience of the new perception . . . . The more vivid such experience, the more likely is it to result in changes in self perception" (4, p. 164).

There is resistance to change, however, due to the need to maintain the self as well as to enhance it. This leads to a clinging to the current self and its perceptions. Threat further restricts perception, rigidifies it, prevents the open acceptance of new perceptions, or leads to altering or denying them. Under threat the organism reacts to defend its organization, its present perceptions. As Combs and Snygg note, "To resolve a threatening situation requires exactly the opposite of suppression and tunnel vision. It requires freedom to examine and to differentiate any and all aspects of the field in a search for a more adequate self" (4, p. 188).

It is apparent that the absence of threat is the prime condition for change, whether in psychotherapy or in other interpersonal relations. Where the client feels threatened, whether by the counselor, or others in his environment, or by nonpersonal aspects of the environment, he will show behavior which is commonly designated as lack of motivation. Actually he is strongly motivated, motivated to resist change, to defend what he is and has against possible loss. He

prefers the security of the present, the known, for the insecurity of the unknown future.

Now it is also true that behavior does change under threat. We have already indicated that the individual retreats, withdraws, becomes defensive or aggressive. He changes from open, positive self-enhancing behavior to restricted, negative self-preservative behavior. And if the threat or actual force is great enough—or perceived as great enough—the individual will comply with the demands made upon him, and will submit and conform. This is, of course, a change in behavior. But it is not the kind of change in which we are interested. We are concerned here with positive change, self-enhancing change, with voluntary rather than enforced change, with change which will be lasting and persist when force, or the threat of force, is no longer present.

So we come to a conclusion which is not new, not startling, and not a panacea. We deal with the so-called unmotivated client exactly as we do with any other client. He is not different from any other client, or from ourselves. He has the same basic need, the need for the maintenance and enhancement of himself. This is his basic motivation, a strong motivation. He manifests it in the only way he can in the situation as he perceives it. In a situation which by its nature has threatening aspects, he defends his concept of himself and his perceptions of the environment. The counselor can help him to change his perceptions, and thus his behavior, only by understanding him and providing an atmosphere free of threat.

However, even though the counselor is not threatening, success is not possible with every client. The responsibility of the counselor can not go beyond the providing of the opportunity for the client to accept and use the counseling relationship. If the client cannot accept it, it cannot be forced upon him. If he chooses not to accept it, that is his right. The possibility of future acceptance will be greater if pressure, coercion and threat are not used in the false belief that such devices are motivating.

#### SUMMARY

We have compared various formulations of unitary motivation. These showed a substantial commonality in spite of different designations. The assumption of such a single basic integrative motive or goal is more useful in theory and practice than traditional multiplicities, dualities, or hierarchies of drives or needs. The understand-

ing of the direction and goals of behavior is possible only when we recognize that behavior is determined by the one basic need for the preservation and enhancement of the self or the self-concept. The goal is always conceived in terms of the individual's perception of himself and his environment. The counselor, then, is one who is skilled in understanding human beings and their perceptions and who provides the conditions under which change in perceptions, and then self-initiated behavior change, can occur.

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