

UBC Briefing 9: A brief description of the PRIME Theory of Human Motivation

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'Motivation' refers to all those brain processes that energise and direct behaviour. It can be understood at: 1) a psychological level (involving constructs such as 'desire', 'habit' and 'drive'); and 2) a physiological level (involving anatomical structures such as the nucleus accumbens and processes such as receptor activation and neurotransmitter release).

It fits within a broader model of behaviour known as the COM-B model, which views behaviour as part of an interacting system in which behaviour occurs when people have the capability and opportunity to engage in it, and are more motivated to do it than any other behaviour at that moment.

The PRIME Theory of Motivation brings into a single model theories of: 1) 'reflective motivation' (involving deliberate decisions to behave in a particular way) and 2) 'automatic motivation' (involving emotional, habitual and instinctive processes).

Unlike some other theories of motivation it proposes that reflective motivation must act *through* automatic motivation to influence behaviour. Thus, a decision to do something will not result in action unless it generates the desire to do it at the relevant moment and that desire creates a sufficiently strong impulse to act.

PRIME Theory proposes that our responses at every moment are governed by potentially competing impulses and inhibitions.

Impulses and inhibitions arise from: 1) stimuli acting on unlearned (instinctive) and learned (habitual) stimulus-impulse associations, and 2) 'motives' (also known as 'desires').

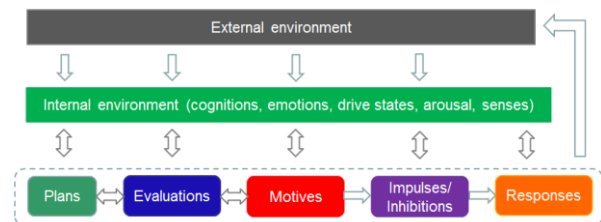
Motives are either 'wants' (imagined future states of the world with associated feelings of anticipated pleasure or satisfaction), or 'needs' (imagined future states of the world with associated feelings of anticipated relief from distress or discomfort). Motives arise from: 1) stimuli triggering imagination of future world states with which positive and negative feelings are associated, and 2) 'evaluations'.

Evaluations are beliefs (propositions that we hold to some degree to be true) about what is good or bad, right or wrong, harmful or beneficial. Evaluations are generated by: 1) stimuli (through recall or abstraction), 2) other beliefs (through analysis and

inference), 3) motives (e.g. through cognitive dissonance), and 4) 'plans' (see below).

Plans are self-conscious intentions to behave in a particular way. They provide the overarching structure to our behaviour. Plans are generated by: 1) reminders (that cause them to be remembered), 2) evaluations (e.g. If we think something is a good we may decide to do it), and 3) other plans (e.g. deciding to do something in order to be able to do something else).

The chain of influence to behaviour means that for a plan to be enacted it has to be remembered at the appropriate time, still considered to be a good idea, and generate sufficiently strong desire to compete with all other desires present at the time; and the desire to enact the plan has to translate into a sufficiently strong impulse or inhibition to overcome competing impulses or inhibitions at that moment.



Identity plays an important role in motivation. In this theory it is all the momentary thoughts (labels, attributes and personal rules), images and feelings we have about ourselves. It is the source of self-control and potentially a powerful source of motives.

Self-control is the process whereby plans influence behaviour in competition with other desires and impulses. *Self-regulation* is broader than this. It involves everything we do to enable us to exert self-control, including acting to avoid temptation.

A key generalisation from PRIME Theory: 'At every moment we act in pursuit of what we most want or need at that moment'.

PRIME Theory also describes how our dispositions to experience different motivations change over time and with experience, introducing the concept of the 'unstable mind', and the need for 'balancing input' to avoid us spiralling out of control.

Reading: West R, Brown J (2014) *Theory of Addiction*. Oxford: Wiley. www.primetheory.com