Chapter 5
The Motive Perspective

Learning Objectives

5.1 Explain how needs, motives, and press govern how people seek out or respond to objects or situations in the environment
5.2 Analyze the motive viewpoint to understand why different people display quite different patterns of behavior over time
5.3 Relate four major motive dispositions to the behavior that they have been tied to
5.4 Distinguish between implicit and self-attributed motives and how each influences behavior
5.5 Compare approach and avoidance processes in the context of motives
5.6 Evaluate the similarities and differences between motives and traits
5.7 Summarize the work done by prominent researchers in the study of narratives
5.8 Outline implicit assessment of personality from the motive viewpoint
5.9 Examine the possibility of changing people's achievement motivation and the criticisms against it
5.10 Summarize criticisms of the motive approach to personality

"I’m in the pre-med program, and I really want to get into a good medical school. The courses aren't that easy for me, so I have to study more than most pre-meds. I can’t even take time off on weekends, because I’m taking a huge load. I don’t mind, though, because when I do well, I feel really satisfied."

Most college students spend at least part of their time planning what they will do after college. Some have ambitions they're already pursuing (like the pre-med student above). Most also devote part of their energies to relationships. In fact, some are already thinking about being married and building a life together with someone.

These two concerns are probably familiar to you. Work and love are issues in everyone's life. But people vary quite a lot in how central each of these issues is. And not even these issues are everything, of course. Some people have a deep desire to influence others—maybe in politics, or in show business, or by running a successful company. Some people want to find order and meaning in life. Some seek truth, some seek beauty.

There's a lot of diversity in the concerns people focus their lives around. Yet despite the diversity, they all have something in common: They suggest the existence of needs and motives behind people's thoughts and actions. Think about how people describe their preoccupations. "I need to find the right person. I need to accomplish things in my life. I want to do well in school. I need to feel in control." There are also individual differences here. For any aspect of life you might imagine, some people feel a deep need within it and others don't.
5.1: Basic Theoretical Elements

5.1 Explain how needs, motives, and press govern how people seek out or respond to objects or situations in the environment

If needs and motives affect people’s thoughts and actions this way, they’re important. It might even be argued that a person’s needs define who the person is. This idea forms the basis for the viewpoint on personality that’s examined in this chapter.

5.1.1: Needs

The fundamental principle of this approach is that behavior is best understood as a reflection of the strength of the person’s needs. A need is an internal state that’s less than satisfactory, a lack of something necessary for well-being. Henry Murray (1938), who began this approach to personality, defined a need as an internal directional force that determines how people seek out or respond to objects or situations in the environment.

Every need has associated with it some category of goal objects. When you’re thirsty, you need water, not food.

Some needs are biological (for food, water, air, sex, and pain avoidance). Others—such as the needs for power, achievement, and intimacy—either derive from biological needs or are inherent in our psychological makeup. It’s easiest to start with biological needs, because biology is a good model for how needs work. Biological needs must be satisfied repeatedly over time. As time passes, the need gradually becomes more intense, and the person acts to cause it to be satisfied. For example, over time, your body starts to need food. When the need gets strong enough, you’ll do something to get food. That reduces the need.

The strength of a need influences the intensity of the behavior pertaining to it. The stronger the need, the more intense will be the action. Intensity can be reflected in several ways, such as vigor, enthusiasm, and thoroughness. But intensity can also be expressed in less obvious ways. For example, need strength can help set priorities—which action you do first versus put off until later. The stronger the need, the sooner it’s reflected in action. This prioritizing can create a continually changing stream of actions, as need strengths build and subside (Figure 5.1). The need that’s greatest at any given point is the one that is reflected in behavior.

Figure 5.1

A graphic display of how changes in behavior over time can be explained by variations in the relative strengths of several motives over the same time. The letters at the top of the diagram indicate which of three activities the person is engaged in at any given time (shifting from one to the other). The three lines indicate the levels of the three motives related to these three activities. As one motive rises above the other two, the behavior changes.

Needs are directive: They help determine which of many possible actions occurs at a given time. They are directive in two senses. First, when you have a need, it concerns something in particular. When you need water, you don’t just need; you need water. Needs thus pertain to classes of goal objects or events. Needs are also directive in that they create movement either toward the object or away from it. A need aims to get something or to get away from something. Thirst reflects a water-related need, but it’s more than just water related. Fear of going swimming also reflects a water-related need. Thirst reflects a need to get water. Moving toward versus moving away is part of the directionality of all needs.

5.1.2: Motives

Needs work through motives. Motives are a step closer to behavior. David McClelland (1984), an important
contributor to this view of personality, said motives are clusters of cognitions with affective overtones, organized around preferred experiences and goals. Motives appear in your thoughts and preoccupations. The thoughts pertain to goals that are either desired or undesired. Thus, they are emotionally toned. Motives are what eventually produce actions.

What’s the relationship between need and motive? The need for food occurs in the tissues of the body. But that need results in a motive state called hunger. Unlike the need for food, hunger is experienced subjectively. It creates mental preoccupation and leads to behavior that will reduce the hunger (and the need for food). Thus, we distinguish needs from motives partly by the existence of a subjective experience. A need is a physical condition you don’t sense directly. It creates a motivational state that you do experience.

5.1.3: Press
Motives follow from needs, but they’re also influenced by external events. Murray (1938) used the term press to refer to such external influences. A press (plural is also press) is an external condition that prompts a desire to get (or avoid) something. It thus has a motivational influence, just as a need does (see Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2
Internal need states and external press can both influence motives to engage in particular kinds of action, which in turn become realized in overt behavior.

It may be easiest to get a feel for the effects of need and press by considering a biological motive. Imagine your need for food creates a hunger motive. You respond by eating lunch. Your simple sandwich, dry and crumbly, satisfies the need for food. But just as you finish, someone walks in with an extra-large pizza (or whatever you find irresistible). Suddenly you’re not as satisfied as you were a moment before. The motive to eat has been rekindled—not by a need but by a press. The idea also applies to purely psychological motives. Seeing someone else receive an honor can increase your motive for recognition. Being around someone who’s engaged may increase your motive to be in a close relationship.

Although needs and motives clearly can be distinguished from each other, people don’t always do so. One reason is that it’s harder to keep the concepts distinct for psychological needs than biological needs. A need for achievement involves no deficit in the body. It’s hard to say how the need to achieve differs from the motive to achieve. For this reason, people writing about needs and motives in personality often use the two terms interchangeably, as we will.

5.2: Needs, Motives, and Personality

5.2 Analyze the motive viewpoint to understand why different people display quite different patterns of behavior over time

When motives are strong, they influence behavior. Motives vary across time and situations. But people also vary in dispositional motives. That is, some people naturally have more of a given motive much of the time than other people do. Such motive dispositions begin to form a picture of the person’s personality.

5.2.1: Motive States and Motive Dispositions
We’ve already shown how to think about temporary fluctuations in needs (Figure 5.1, earlier). People shift from doing one thing to doing something else, as one motive is satisfied and others build up. Ongoing behavior reflects whichever is now greatest. That model provides a sense of how people shift from one action to another over time.

Now let’s add the idea that people vary in their dispositional levels of motives. This can be portrayed as differences in the overall heights of the lines. Such differences can have large effects on moment-to-moment behavior. For example, John has a high dispositional need for achievement, whereas George’s dispositional need for achievement is lower. Assume that this motive goes up and down in the same pattern for both across time. Assume also that they have identical patterns in all their other needs. As Figure 5.3 shows, John and George would display quite different patterns of behavior over time. Why? Because even when John’s other needs are also elevated, his need for achievement is so high that it tends to remain above the others. As a result, he tends to do achievement-related things a lot of the time. For George, the achievement motive rarely gets high enough to be the strongest motive. Thus, George doesn’t engage in achievement-related behavior very often.

Henry Murray (1938) was the first to develop a view of personality organized in terms of needs and motives. He and his colleagues generated a list of needs that they believed underlie personality. Murray believed that all people have the same basic needs, but that everyone has a dispositional tendency toward some particular level of each need.
When you do the TAT, you view a set of pictures and are asked to create a story about each one. The pictures are ambiguous. Your story is supposed to describe what’s happening, the characters’ thoughts and feelings, the relationship among characters (if there’s more than one), and the outcome of the situation. The key assumption is this: Through apperception, the themes that emerge in your stories will reflect your implicit motives.

Do fantasy stories really reflect people’s needs? Early studies tested the procedure by creating situational needs. One such study looked at the need for food. People were deprived of food for varying lengths of time, so they would have different needs for food. Their stories subsequently differed in food-related TAT imagery (Atkinson & McClelland, 1948).

Another early study manipulated the achievement motive, by giving some people a success and others a failure. A failure should temporarily increase the achievement need by creating an achievement deficit. As expected, the failure caused greater achievement imagery than in a group that had not experienced a failure (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953). Unexpectedly, though, achievement imagery was also elevated in another group that had experienced a success. This finding led McClelland to conclude that deprivation isn’t necessary to arouse a motive (Winter, 1998). The motive can be aroused by any circumstance that points to the motive’s relevance.

5.3: Studies of Specific Dispositional Motives

5.3 Relate four major motive dispositions to the behavior that they have been tied to

Once it was tested in studies of situational motives, the apperception procedure was used to measure motive dispositions. The TAT pictures were used in some of this work, but variations using other pictures were also developed. The procedure in its various forms is now often referred to as the picture story exercise (PSE). Researchers have used this procedure to study several motive dispositions in detail, as outlined in the next sections.

5.3.1: Need for Achievement

Of the various needs identified by Murray, the first to receive research attention was the need for achievement. This motive was studied for decades by David McClelland, John Atkinson, and others (e.g., Atkinson & Birch, 1970; Atkinson & Raynor, 1974; Heckhausen, 1967; Heckhausen, Schmalt, & Schneider, 1985; McClelland et al., 1953).

5.2.2: Measuring Motives Using the Thematic Apperception Test

To develop the motive approach to personality, researchers had to measure motives. For several reasons, they didn’t begin by asking people directly about their motives, but with another strategy. Morgan and Murray (1935) suggested that needs are projected into a person’s fantasy, just as a movie is projected onto a screen. Murray called this process apperception: perceiving stimuli in light of one’s own experiences and motives. The idea that people do this readily led to the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) (Morgan & Murray, 1935; Murray, 1938; Smith, 1992).
Achievement motivation is the desire to do things well, to feel pleasure in overcoming obstacles. Need for achievement is reflected in PSE responses that mention performing well at something, reaching goals or overcoming obstacles to goal attainment, having positive feelings about success, or negative feelings about failure.

People who differ in achievement motivation differ in several ways in achievement-related situations. Consider the very act of choosing a task. Tasks (or problems within a task) can be easy, hard, or somewhere in between. Given a choice, which would you pick? (When you plan your course schedule for next semester, will you choose easy courses, hard ones, or ones in between?)

People low in need for achievement prefer tasks that are either very easy or very hard (Atkinson, 1957). It’s easy to understand the easy ones. There isn’t much achievement pressure if the task is easy, and it’s nice to get something right, even if everyone else gets it right too. But why would people with a low achievement need choose a hard task? Clearly, it’s not for the challenge. It seems to be that doing poorly on a hard problem doesn’t reflect badly on them. And there’s always the possibility (however remote) that they will get lucky and succeed. In contrast, people high in need for achievement tend to prefer tasks of moderate difficulty. They also work harder on moderately difficult tasks than on very hard or very easy ones (Clark & McClelland, 1956; French, 1955).

Why do these people prefer tasks of middle difficulty? Maybe it’s because these tasks give the most information about their ability (Trope, 1975, 1979). If you do well at an easy task, you don’t learn much about your ability, because everyone does well. If you fail at a hard task, you don’t learn much about your ability, because almost no one does well. In the middle, though, you can find out a lot. Perhaps people high in achievement motivation want to find out about their abilities. Trope (1975, 1980) tested this by having people choose test items. He figured out a way to manipulate (separately) the items’ difficulty and their diagnosticity (how much they tell about ability). People with high achievement needs had a strong preference for diagnostic items (see Figure 5.4), whereas difficulty turned out not to matter. This is consistent with a more recent finding that difficulty seems not to stress out people who are high in achievement motivation (Schultheiss, Wiemers, & Wolf, 2014).

Effects of achievement motivation have been studied a lot over the years. The need for achievement relates to greater persistence in the face of failure (e.g., Feather, 1961), better task performance (e.g., Lowell, 1952), higher grades (Schultz & Pomerantz, 1976), and greater educational achievement (Hustinx, Kuyper, van der Werf, & Dijkstra, 2009).

Indeed, it’s even been suggested that the need for achievement plays a role in the economic rise and decline of entire cultures. This idea led to studies of literature from several civilizations, at several distinct points in their history. The literature is interpreted for its themes, in much the same way as PSE responses are interpreted. The economic growth and decline of the civilization are then plotted over the same period. One impressive study of this sort (Bradburn & Berlew, 1961) examined the history of England from 1500 to just after 1800. The researchers divided this period into 50-year segments and coded achievement imagery and economic development in each. Achievement imagery was stable for 100 years, fell off, and then rose.
The index of economic development followed a nearly identical pattern of falling then rising—but 50 years later. This suggests that shifts in achievement motives had economic consequences.

Another motive that's been studied extensively by David Winter (1973) and others is the need for power. Need for power is the motive to have impact on others, to have prestige, to feel strong compared to others. PSE responses that have images of forceful, vigorous action—especially action that evokes strong emotional responses in others—reflect the need for power. Responses showing concern about having status or position also reflect the need for power.

What kinds of behavior follow from the power motive? Not surprisingly, people high in need for power seek out positions of authority and influence and surround themselves with symbols of power (Winter, 1972, 1973). For example, students high in this motive are likely to be office holders in student organizations (Greene & Winter, 1971) and men high in this motive are likely to hold executive positions in organizations (Harms, Roberts, & Wood, 2007). People high in the need for power try to control the images they present to others (McAdams, 1984). They want to enhance their reputations. They want others to view them as authoritative and influential. Not surprisingly, they tend to be somewhat narcissistic, absorbed in their importance (Carroll, 1987). They also are more sexually active than persons lower in this motive (Schultheiss, Dargel, & Rohde, 2003).

The power motive can be helpful in many contexts. People high in the power motive are less likely to make concessions in diplomatic negotiations than those lower in this motive (Langner & Winter, 2001), which can result in better outcomes. When power-motivated people win, they learn implicitly (outside their awareness) to continue what they had been doing. When they lose, they learn implicitly...
not to continue what they had been doing (Schultheiss et al., 2005).

There’s evidence that the power motive also enhances effectiveness in managing others. For example, U.S. presidents high in the power motive have been more effective than those who were lower (Spangler & House, 1991). Winter (2010) has argued that what makes the power motive effective in politics (where the achievement motive doesn’t help) is that people high in the power motive aren’t bothered by the lack of control in political situations. They just keep adjusting their behavior in a continuing effort to have influence.

In their personal lives, men with high power needs are inclined to say that the ideal wife is a woman who’s dependent (Winter, 1973). An independent woman is a potential threat. A dependent woman allows the man to feel superior. A later study found that the wives of men high in the need for power were less likely to have careers outside the home (Winter, Stewart, & McClelland, 1977).

This isn’t to say that the need for power is something that matters only among men. Women vary in this need, as well, and studies have shown that it predicts important outcomes among women. One study (Jenkins, 1994) found that women high in the need for power have more power-related job satisfactions than women lower in this need but also more dissatisfaction. These women also made greater strides in career development over a 14-year period—but only if they were in power-relevant jobs.

The level of a person’s need for power can also influence the way he or she relates to others. People with a need for power take an active, assertive, controlling orientation in peer interactions (McAdams, Healy, & Krause, 1984). They’re rewarded by low-dominance expressions from others (indeed, are especially attentive to those expressions; Schultheiss & Hale, 2007), and they’re disrupted by high-dominance expressions from others (Schultheiss, Fang, Torges, Wirth, & Treynor, 2005). These people also get more angry when others don’t respond well to their efforts to exert influence (Fodor & Wick, 2009). The dominating style of interacting that characterizes the need for power can also have more ominous overtones: Men high in power needs are more likely than men with lower power needs to physically abuse their female partners during arguments (Mason & Blankenship, 1987).

The desire for dominance often leads to success, but sometimes it’s frustrated by failure. People with high need for power have greater increase in the stress hormone cortisol after a failure (Wirth, Welsh, & Schultheiss, 2006). Interestingly, people with low need for power have an increase in cortisol after a success! Apparently, what constitutes a stressor differs between these two sorts of people (see Figure 5.5). Both success and failure can be stressful—but for different people. Stress seems to follow when the outcome isn’t the one you’re motivated for or accustomed to.

Figure 5.5
Increase in the stress hormone cortisol after a failure was greater among persons higher in the need for power; increase in cortisol after a success was greater among persons lower in the need for power.

SOURCE: Based on Wirth et al., 2006.

Oliver Schultheiss and his colleagues have found that the need for power also relates to the sex hormone testosterone (we say more about testosterone’s influence on personality in Chapter 7). There’s a slight link between power needs and baseline testosterone (Schultheiss et al., 2005), but more interesting is what happens to testosterone after success and failure. Among men, a high need for power relates to a larger increase in testosterone after a success and a greater reduction in testosterone after failure.

There’s also evidence that the sex hormone estradiol (which is closely related to testosterone chemically) plays a role in women similar to the role played by testosterone in men (Stanton & Schultheiss, 2007). First, high power motivation relates to a higher level of estradiol at baseline. More striking, after a competition, the changes in estradiol were very similar to changes in testosterone among men in the earlier study. Among winners, estradiol increased most among those who were highly power motivated. Among losers, estradiol decreased most among those who were highly power motivated. A similar pattern emerged in a later study by Stanton and Edelstein (2009), showing that women not taking oral contraceptives had an even higher correlation between estradiol and power motivation than other women.

Is the power motive a good thing or a bad thing? Winter has suggested that the power motive plays out in two ways, depending on whether or not the person acquires a sense of responsibility during socialization (Winter, 1988; Winter & Barenbaum, 1985). For those with a strong sense of responsibility, the power motive yields a conscientious pursuit of prestige, in which power is expressed in socially accepted ways. For those without this sense of responsibility, though, the power motive leads to problematic ways of influencing others, including aggressiveness, sexual exploitation, and alcohol and drug use.
Winter and Barenbaum (1985) found support for this reasoning. In one sample, among men low in responsibility, the need for power related to drinking, fighting, and sexual possessiveness. Among men high in responsibility, the need for power related inversely to all these tendencies. Similarly, Magee and Langner (2008) found that the two forms of the power motive led to antisocial and prosocial decisions, respectively.

All of this suggests that the power motive can be “tamed” by proper socialization. There’s an important qualifier to this conclusion, however: Prosocial decisions promote the good of one’s group. But sometimes, larger issues intrude. Winter (2007) analyzed communications of various sorts that occurred during a set of crises that developed into wars and a matched set that were resolved peacefully. The crises leading to war involved more displays of the power motive but also higher displays of responsibility. Winter noted that in many circumstances, going to war seems to be the responsible thing to do. Thus, the carefully socialized sense of responsibility may tame the power motive, but only up to a point.

5.3.3: Need for Affiliation

Another motive receiving a good deal of attention is the motive to affiliate. The need for affiliation is the motive to spend time with others and form friendly social ties. This isn’t a need to dominate others but to interact with others (for a review, see Sokolowski, 2008). In this need, social interactions aren’t a means to an end; they’re a goal in their own right. In PSE responses, the need for affiliation is reflected in concern over acceptance by others and by active attempts to establish or maintain positive relations with others.

There are several manifestations of this motive. For example, people who want to affiliate want to be seen as agreeable. They get nervous if they think others are judging their interpersonal skills (Byrne, McDonald, & Mikawa, 1963). They prefer interaction partners who are warm, compared to those who are reserved (Hill, 1991). They’re especially sensitive to angry expressions from others (Kordik, Eska, & Schultheiss, 2012; Schultheiss et al., 2005). They’re more likely to make concessions in negotiations (Langner & Winter, 2001), and they’re more likely to initiate contacts and try to establish friendships (Crouse & Mehrabian, 1977).

The active initiation of social contact suggests that affiliative needs lead to active participation in social interactions. People with a strong affiliation motive make more phone calls (Lansing & Heyns, 1959), and when randomly contacted they’re more likely to be engaged in social activity (Constantian, 1981; McAdams & Constantian, 1983). If they’re alone, they’re more likely to express the wish to be interacting with others (McAdams & Constantian, 1983; Wong & Csikszentmihalyi, 1991).

Links between the affiliation motive and relationship satisfaction are complex (Meyer & Pepper, 1977). Happiness depends partly on the balance of affiliation needs between partners. That is, well-adjusted husbands and wives have affiliation needs that correlate with each other. To put it concretely, if you have a low affiliation need, you’re best off with someone who has a similarly low affiliation need. If your affiliation need is high, you’re best off with someone whose affiliation need is also high. Still, having a positive relationship is more satisfying for people who have higher affiliation motives than people with lower motives (Hofer & Busch, 2011).

5.3.4: Need for Intimacy

Another motive that has emerged as a research focus is the need for intimacy. It’s been studied intensively by Dan McAdams (1982, 1985, 1989) and his collaborators. Intimacy motivation is the desire to experience warm, close, and communicative exchanges with another person, to feel close to another person. It goes beyond the need for affiliation in its emphasis on closeness and open sharing with another person.

McAdams proposed this need partly because he felt the need for affiliation didn’t focus enough on the positive, affirmative aspects of relationships. In addition, the need for affiliation is an active, striving, “doing” orientation, whereas the need for intimacy, as McAdams views it, is more of a “being” orientation (McAdams & Powers, 1981). The two aren’t completely separate, of course. McAdams and Constantian (1983) reported a correlation of 0.58 between them.

What kinds of behaviors reflect the intimacy motive? In one study, people higher in the need for intimacy reported having more one-to-one exchanges with other people, though not more large-group interactions (McAdams et al., 1984). Interactions reported by intimacy-motivated people involved more self-disclosure, as well. To put it differently, people with a high intimacy need are more
likely to share with friends their hopes, fears, and fantasies. The sharing goes both ways: People with a high intimacy need report doing more listening than people with a low intimacy need, perhaps because they’re more concerned about their friends’ well-being. Indeed, intimacy seems to entail both self-disclosure and partner disclosure (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998).

Because having close interactions is important to people with high intimacy needs, it should be no surprise that these people define their lives partly in terms of such interactions. McAdams (1982) collected autobiographical recollections among students high and low in intimacy needs. They were asked to report a particularly joyful or transcendent experience from their past and then an important learning experience. Analysis revealed that intimacy motivation was strongly correlated with memory content that also implied intimacy.

How do people high in the intimacy motive act when they’re with others? They laugh, smile, and make more eye contact than do people with lower intimacy needs (McAdams, Jackson, & Kirshnit, 1984). They don’t try to dominate the social scene (that’s what people with the need for power do). Instead, they seem to view group activities as chances for group members to be involved in a communal way (McAdams & Powers, 1981).

The desire for intimacy is good for people, based on evidence from a study in which men wrote narrative fantasies at age 30 and were recontacted 17 years later (McAdams & Vaillant, 1982). Men with higher intimacy motives at 30 had higher marital and job satisfaction at 47 than did those with lower intimacy motives. Another study found that women high in the intimacy motive reported more happiness and gratification in their lives than those low in the intimacy motive—unless they were living alone (McAdams & Bryant, 1987).

Interestingly, intimacy needs (needing to be close) don’t seem to coexist well with power needs (needing to influence or dominate others). Persons who are high in both needs are often poorly adjusted (Zeldow, Daugherty, & McAdams, 1988).

5.3.5: Patterned Needs

Thus far, we’ve discussed needs individually. Indeed, for many years, that’s how they were mostly examined—one at a time. However, some studies examined patterns of several needs at once—sometimes in combination with other characteristics. One well-known pattern combines a low need for affiliation with a high need for power, in conjunction with the tendency to inhibit the expression of the latter. This pattern is called inhibited power motivation (McClelland, 1979). The reason for interest in this pattern depends on the context in which it’s examined.

One context is leadership. The reasoning goes as follows: A person high in need for power wants to influence people. Being low in need for affiliation lets the person make tough decisions without worrying about being disliked. Being high in self-control (inhibiting the use of power) means the person will want to follow orderly procedures and stay within the framework of the organization. Such a person should do very well in the structure of a business.

This pattern does, in fact, relate to managerial success. In one study that spanned a 16-year period, people with the inhibited power pattern tended to move to higher levels of management than others (McClelland & Boyatzis, 1982). Among those whose jobs rested on engineering skills, however, personality didn’t matter. This is understandable, because the managerial value of these people depends heavily on their particular skills.

There’s also evidence that people with this pattern are especially effective at persuasion (Schultheiss & Brunstein, 2002). Their persuasiveness stems both from greater verbal fluency and from an effective use of nonverbal cues, such as gesturing. Presumably, being more persuasive helps these people be effective in mobilizing others.

The pattern of high power motivation and low affiliation motivation may be good for getting others mobilized, but even this may be a mixed blessing. Winter (1993) argued that this pattern is conducive to starting wars. Historical data show that high power imagery combined with low levels of affiliation imagery in the statements of politicians predicted going to war. For example, speeches by the rulers of Great Britain contained more power imagery than affiliation imagery in the year before the country entered a war, whereas the reverse was true during years before a no-war year (see Figure 5.6). In another case involving U.S.

Figure 5.6

Balance of power motive imagery versus affiliation motive imagery in the speeches of leaders during the year before Great Britain entered a war (18 cases) compared to the year before Britain did not enter a war (36 cases).

SOURCE: Based on Winter, 1993, Table 3.
5.4: Implicit and Self-Attributed Motives

5.4 Distinguish between implicit and self-attributed motives and how each influences behavior

As noted earlier in the chapter, the motive perspective holds that personality is a system of multiple motives. Each motive exists in every person. Behavior, at any given time, depends partly on how intense the various motives are, which is determined partly by personality and partly by context.

5.4.1: Incentive Value

This analysis is reasonable, but it’s missing something. It predicts that if your need for affiliation is more intense than your other needs, you’ll engage in an affiliative act. But what affiliative act? Additional concepts are needed to address this question (McClelland, 1985).

One candidate is incentive: the degree to which a given action can satisfy a need for you. It’s sort of a personalized weighting of how relevant an act is to the need. Incentive values determine how a motive is expressed in actions. For example, a person with a high need for affiliation who loves music will go to clubs and concerts with friends. A person with a high need for affiliation who loves sports will go to football and basketball games with friends. But people don’t engage in every conceivable need-related behavior. They choose ways to satisfy their needs, based on the incentive values that various activities have for them.

We didn’t introduce the concept of incentives earlier in the chapter when we introduced the concept of need. Clearly, though, something like it is needed to account for the diversity of behavior. People differ in what activities they engage in, even when satisfying the same need. As noted earlier, some women satisfy the need for achievement through careers, others by achieving strong family lives. These activities differ greatly, yet both can satisfy the need to achieve.

This principle relates to a point made in Chapter 4 regarding interactionism: We said there that people choose for themselves which situations to enter and which to avoid. This helps create an interaction between person and situation. We didn’t say why different people choose different situations. One answer is that various situations have different incentive values to different people, even if the situations fulfill the same need.

Needs and incentives both influence behavior, but in different ways. McClelland (1985) said that need strength relates to long-term frequencies of need-relevant actions of any type. Incentive values, on the other hand, should relate to choices within a domain of action. In McClelland’s view, needs influence behavior primarily at a nonconscious level, whereas values influence the more conscious process of choice.

5.4.2: Implicit Motives Are Different from Self-Attributed Motives

The last paragraph was deceptively simple, but it has a great many implications. Earlier in the chapter, we described development of the TAT or PSE to assess motives, instead of asking people directly about them. The decision to use that strategy had an important consequence. It allowed the discovery of something that today seems very important indeed.

The PSE procedure was used in the vast majority of the work we’ve described thus far. And from the wide range of findings, we’re relatively confident that it assesses people’s motives. Given the large effort required to score PSEs, however, other researchers created simpler self-report scales to assess motives. They intended those self-reports to measure the same motives as the PSE. But the self-reports turned out to correlate poorly with PSEs (McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989; Pang & Schultheiss, 2005; Schultheiss & Brunstein, 2001). Why? What’s going on?

McClelland and his colleagues argued that the two kinds of assessments are, in fact, measuring different things (McClelland et al., 1989). They used the term implicit motive to refer to what the PSE measures (Schultheiss & Brunstein, 2010). They called the motives implicit because the person may or may not be aware of them. They used the term self-attributed motive to refer to what’s measured by self-reports (also now termed explicit motive). An increasing body of evidence indicates that implicit motives and self-attributed motives are different. Implicit motives are what we have been calling motives. Self-attributed motives are closer to what was described in the preceding section as incentives.

McClelland et al. (1989) held that implicit motives are more basic. They are the recurrent preferences for classes of affective experiences that McClelland believed lie at the heart of motives (the feeling of “doing better” for the achievement motive, the feeling of “being strong” for the power motive, the feeling of “being close” for the intimacy motive). Implicit motives are primitive and automatic (Schultheiss, 2002; Schultheiss & Brunstein, 2010). Because they are basic, they are good predictors of broad behavioral tendencies over time. In contrast, self-attributed motives relate to specific action goals. They tell how a person will act in a particular situation. For this reason, they’re better at predicting responses in structured settings.
This distinction has been pursued further in several projects. Brunstein and Maier (2005) found evidence that the implicit achievement motive acts mostly as an energizer, boosting effort when the person falls behind. The self-attributed achievement motive, in contrast, acts mostly as an influence on decision making, influencing how people seek information about their skills compared to other people (e.g., by choosing to continue a task or not).

Evidence that these qualities are distinct also comes from research in which participants completed PSE and self-report measures and then kept records of memorable experiences over 60 days (Woike, 1995). The records were coded for motive relevance and for feelings. Strength of implicit motives (PSE) predicted the frequency of reporting feelings that relate to that motive. Strength of self-attributed motives did not. Self-attributed motives related to the frequency of reporting motive-related events (but PSE scores did not).

It seems, then, that the two aspects of motivation link to different aspects of memory. Further evidence that they link to different aspects of memory comes from studies showing that self-attributed motives predict recall of general memories related to the self-concept, whereas implicit motives predict recall of specific events (Woike, McLoud, & Goggin, 2003). Further evidence that the two types of motives are separate is reviewed by Köllner and Schultheiss (2014).

Another example of the value of distinguishing between implicit and self-attributed motives comes from studies of how well implicit and explicit motives match each other. Baumann, Kaschel, and Kuhl (2005) argued that people sometimes have motive-related intentions (explicit) that fit poorly with their implicit motive dispositions. When this happens, the person is stressed, which has adverse effects on his or her well-being. Evidence from three studies fits that picture.

The idea that incongruence between one’s implicit and explicit motives can be problematic has been studied in several other contexts. Once again, the idea is that the discrepancies create stress by having conflicting influences on behavior. Motive discrepancy of this sort has been shown to lead to unhealthy eating (Job, Oertig, Brandstätter, & Allemand, 2010) and to other signs of dissatisfaction (Hofer, Busch, Bond, Li, & Law, 2010). More generally, optimal well-being seems to follow from having explicit motives that are congruent with one’s implicit motives and acting in a way that satisfies both of them (Schüler, Job, Fröhlich, & Brandstätter, 2008; Sheldon, 2014).

McClelland believed that both the implicit motive and the self-attributed motive are important, but that they should be viewed separately. The evidence appears to support that belief. Sometimes it makes sense to expect an implicit motive to predict an outcome but not a self-attributed motive. Sometimes the opposite is true. For this reason, it’s important to be sure which one you want to measure and to measure it correctly (McClelland, 1989). The distinction between implicit and self-attributed motives is one aspect of the motive view on personality that is receiving increasingly close attention.

5.5: Approach and Avoidance Motives

5.5 Compare approach and avoidance processes in the context of motives

Another distinction that’s also increasingly important is the distinction between approach and avoidance. As noted early in the chapter, a motive is either a readiness to approach something or a readiness to avoid something. Thus far, we’ve written only about approach. For example, people motivated to achieve try to approach success. But any achievement task also holds a possibility of failure. It seems likely that the desire to avoid failure also plays a role here. Just as Atkinson (1957) tied the need for achievement to the capacity to feel pride in success, the need to avoid failure relates to a tendency to feel shame after failure (McGregor & Elliot, 2005).

A simple way to avoid failure is to avoid achievement situations altogether. Never trying keeps you from failing. Another way to avoid failing is the very act of succeeding. It may be that some people who struggle to achieve don’t care so much about gaining success as they care about the fact that gaining success lets them avoid failure.

Much of the early research on achievement actually measured both of these motives. A lot of it derived from Atkinson’s (1957) theory of achievement behavior. That theory makes its clearest predictions for people whose only motivation is to approach success and people whose only motivation is to avoid failure. Predictions are less clear for people high in both motives and people low in both motives. For that reason, studies often included only the two groups who were high in one motive and low in the other.

That strategy was guided by theory, but it had a bad side effect: It completely confounded the two motives. That is, as one motive differed between the two sets of people, so did the other motive. This causes ambiguity in interpretation. If the groups act differently, is it because of the difference in the motive to approach success or because of the difference in the motive to avoid failure? There’s no way really to know, although interpretations tend to focus on the motive to approach success.

In recent years, the distinction between approach and avoidance motivation has re-emerged as a focus for research on achievement, much of it by Andrew Elliot and his colleagues (e.g., Elliot, 2005; Elliot & Harackiewicz,
1996; Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Part of their theory is that achievement can reflect either of these motives. Which motive is central, however, will influence many aspects of the person’s experience.

Elliot and McGregor (2001) found that the motive to succeed in mastering course material (approach) related to study strategies that involve thoughtfully elaborating on the material. The motive to avoid failure related to memorization. Avoidance motivation also related to having trouble organizing study time effectively. Elliot and Sheldon (1997) found that the motive tendencies also have different effects on subjective experiences. People who focus their effort on trying to avoid failure report less emotional well-being and less satisfaction with their performance than people who are trying to approach success.

Although it might generally be better to approach than to avoid, there’s also evidence that people are better off when they’re doing what’s familiar to them. Specifically, people with a high fear of failure get uneasy and upset by imagining success (Langens & Schmalt, 2002). As we suggested in the context of the power motive, it may be that what’s stressful to you is what you’re unfamiliar with.

5.5.1: Approach and Avoidance in Other Motives

Once you grasp the idea of separate approach and avoidance motives, you realize that the idea has implications for every motive you can think of (see also Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1999; Higgins, 1997; Ogilvie, 1987). Try it out. Pick a motive, and a behavior that reflects that motive. Then see if you can spot the opposing motive that might create the same behavior. For example, acts of affiliation can come from the desire to be with others (need for affiliation) but they can also come from the desire to avoid being alone (Boyatzis, 1973; Pollak & Gilligan, 1982). These aren’t the same. One is a motive to approach; the other is a motive to avoid. The same issue can be raised for any motive you can think of.

Just as with achievement behavior, evidence is beginning to accumulate that approach and avoidance motives have different consequences in other domains. A powerful example is a study of commitment between romantic partners (Frank & Brandstätter, 2002). This study found that commitment based in approach predicted more relationship satisfaction 6 and 13 months later. However, commitment based on avoidance (i.e., avoiding breaking up) predicted lower relationship satisfaction at the follow-ups.

The idea that a given behavior can be based on either an approach motive or an avoidance motive (or some combination of the two) raises very broad questions about why people do the things they do. Are people generally moving toward goals, or are they trying to avoid or escape from things? Do actions differ depending on which motive is more prominent? Do the feelings that go with the actions differ?

The general idea that any approach motive has a corresponding avoidance motive has very broad implications. It complicates the picture of human behavior enormously. We will put this idea aside for the rest of this chapter, but you should keep in mind that it’s always in the background.

5.6: Motives and the Five-Factor Trait Model

5.6 Evaluate the similarities and differences between motives and traits

When thinking about motive dispositions as being the core of personality, a question that naturally arises concerns the relation between the motive view and the trait view from Chapter 4. Does the five-factor model cover the qualities that motive theorists see as important?

One way this question can be approached is to analyze measures of self-attributed motives and their relations to five-factor measures. Several people have tried this, with varying degrees of success. With one measure of explicit motives the motive scales matched up only moderately well to the five factors (Costa & McCrae, 1988a; Paunonen, Jackson, Trzebinski, & Forsterling, 1992). A better fit to the five-factor model has been found with a different measure of needs (Piedmont, McCrae, & Costa, 1992).

5.6.1: Traits and Motives as Distinct and Complementary

The attempt to fit motives to the five-factor model can be seen as an effort to integrate across theoretical boundaries. However, many believe that the effort is misguided and that traits and motives are fundamentally different (Winter, John, Stewart, Klohnen, & Duncan, 1998). Note that the evidence reviewed just above involved self-attributed motives, not implicit motives. The fact that self-attributed and implicit motives are not strongly related is reason enough to be wary about concluding that traits and motives are the same. Indeed, there’s separate evidence that implicit motives relate poorly to the five-factor model (Schultheiss & Brunstein, 2001).

Winter et al. (1998) proposed an integration, but of a very different sort: They proposed that motives are fundamental desires and that traits channel how those desires are expressed. Thus, they argued, motives and traits interact to produce behavior. In some respects, this resembles the argument described earlier in the chapter about implicit motives and incentive values. In this view, traits may represent patterns of incentive preferences.
In support of their argument, Winter et al. presented two studies of extraversion and (PSE-derived) motives. The studies examined women’s lives across many decades. Winter et al. argued that intimacy needs would have different effects among introverts and extraverts (see Table 5.1). For women with low intimacy needs, it shouldn’t matter much whether they are introverts or extraverts. Intimacy isn’t a big deal for them. The complicated situation occurs among those with high intimacy needs. An extravert with high intimacy needs should do fine in relationships, because extraverts are comfortable with, and good at, various kinds of social interaction. In contrast, introverts with high intimacy needs should have problems. Their highly inner-directed orientation should interfere with relationships. Their partners may see them as remote or withholding. The result should be a greater likelihood of marital problems. That’s exactly what was found.

Table 5.1 Sample hypothesis about the interaction between the affiliation–intimacy motive and the trait of introversion–extraversion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affiliation–Intimacy Motive</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extravert</td>
<td>Intimate relationship not salient as a desire</td>
<td>Desire for intimate relationship leads to single stable relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introvert</td>
<td>Intimate relationship not salient as a desire</td>
<td>Desire for intimate relationships but difficulty maintaining them, because having a high focus on one’s inner world is disruptive of a connection to the other person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The bottom line here appears to be that implicit motives exist at a different level of abstraction than traits. Exactly how these constructs relate to each other doubtless will be a subject for continued research.

5.7: Personology and the Study of Narratives

**5.7 Summarize the work done by prominent researchers in the study of narratives**

Research on motive dispositions tends to take one of two approaches. Some studies examine how people respond to particular events, in the laboratory or in the field. Other studies collect evidence of a dispositional motive (or set of motives) at one time and relate the motive to some outcome that occurs considerably later.

Both approaches differ greatly from the one favored by Murray, the father of this viewpoint. Murray believed that the way to understand personality is to study the *whole person* and to do so over an extended period. The work on which he based his theory was an intensive study of 51 college men (Murray, 1938). Each was tested in many ways and interviewed by a staff of professionals, who came to know each man’s personality quite thoroughly.

This approach was idiographic. It focused on the pattern of qualities that made each person unique. Murray disliked nomothetic methods. He thought their focus on comparison keeps them from probing deeply into a person’s life. To Murray, the nomothetic approach yields only a superficial understanding. Murray’s concerns led him to coin the term *personology* to refer to the approach he preferred. He defined *personology* as the study of individual lives and the factors that influence their course. He believed that personology was more meaningful than other approaches because of its emphasis on the person’s life history. According to Murray (1938), “the history of a personality is the personality” (p. 604).

Recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in this way of thinking about personality. For example, Dan McAdams, whose work on intimacy motivation was described earlier, has written extensively on the idea that identity takes the form of an extended narrative—a life story that each of us composes and lives out over time (McAdams, 1985; McAdams & Pals, 2006). This narrative has chapters, heroes, and thematic threads that recur and permeate the story line (see also Rabin, Zucker, Emmons, & Frank, 1990).

Here’s an example of how narratives can differ from person to person. Some themes emphasize growth (“I found out how to make our relationship better”); others emphasize safety (“I hope that never happens again”) (Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005). As another example of a narrative focus, McAdams (2006) identified a constellation of themes focused on personal redemption—a transition from a state of suffering to a better psychological state—which characterizes the lives of some middle-aged Americans.

From this point of view, the person’s identity lies in keeping a coherent narrative going across time (McAdams & Pals, 2006; Singer, 2004). This way of thinking speaks directly to the uniqueness of each person, because every life story is unique (Singer, 2005). Whether this approach will become more prominent in personality psychology in the future remains to be seen, but it’s surely a development that Murray would have applauded.

5.8: Assessment from the Motive Perspective

**5.8 Outline implicit assessment of personality from the motive viewpoint**

Assessment of personality from the motive viewpoint is a matter of determining the levels of a person’s motive dispositions. The assessment technique most associated with assessment of these dispositions is the PSE (Smith, 1992; Winter, 1996).

Earlier in the chapter, we described the essence of the procedure by which the PSE is administered (see also...
Box 5.1). People who are completing it view a set of ambiguous pictures, in which it isn’t clear what’s happening. They’re asked to create a story about each picture. The story should describe what’s happening, the characters’ thoughts and feelings, their relationship to each other (if there’s more than one character), and the outcome of the situation. Through apperception, the themes that are manifested in the stories reflect the story-teller’s implicit motives.

Scoring people’s responses can be complex (Winter, 1994), but here’s a simplified version. Look to see what kinds of events take place in the story and what themes and images are in it. Events that involve overcoming obstacles, attaining goals, and having positive feelings about those activities reflect the achievement motive. Events in which people choose to be with other people and stories that emphasize relationships among people reflect the affiliation motive. Stories with images of one person controlling another reflect the power motive. More than one theme can occur in a given story. These can be scored separately, so the stories can be used to assess several different motives at the same time.

The use of stories written about ambiguous pictures is the core method for assessing motives in research deriving from this theoretical viewpoint. It’s not just stories that can be scored this way, of course. Anything that’s written—speeches, diaries, letters—can be scored in the same way (Winter, 1994). However, variations on the PSE remain the most popular method of assessing implicit motives.

The PSE is widely used to measure motives, but it has had its share of criticism. Questions have been raised about its relatively low internal consistency and test–retest reliability (Entwisle, 1972; Lilienfeld, Wood, & Garb, 2000). Defenders reply that there are good reasons for both of these to be relatively low. The pictures in any PSE vary considerably in content, so it’s not surprising that they bring out different kinds of stories, reducing internal consistency but perhaps increasing validity (Schultheiss & Schultheiss, 2014). It also may be that being told to tell several stories in the same session creates implicit pressure to avoid repetition. This can reduce both internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Atkinson & Raynor, 1974). There’s evidence, though, that the reliability of the PSE is not as low as was once believed (Lang, 2014; Lundy, 1985; Schultheiss, Liening, & Shad, 2008; Schultheiss & Pang, 2007).

Another criticism of the PSE is far more pragmatic: It takes a lot of time and effort to give and score it. This is a key reason why people wanted to develop self-report measures of motives. As noted earlier in the chapter, however, there’s now substantial evidence that self-attributed motives (assessed by self-report scales) and implicit motives (assessed by story imagery) are not the same. Each captures something about human motivational experience, but what is being captured differs from one to the other.

5.8.1: Other Implicit Assessments

People working within the motive tradition in personality have relied heavily on the PSE as the primary tool of implicit assessment. In recent years, however, other ways of assessing implicit constructs have been developed (which were mentioned in Chapter 3). The reasoning behind them doesn’t rely on the concept of projection, but rather on the idea that a good deal of people’s knowledge is associative. If you ask people to introspect about that knowledge, they...
won’t be able to give you accurate answers, because the knowledge isn’t explicit (able to be verbalized). Instead, it’s in the pattern of associations. Implicit knowledge may well rely on different sources of information than are used to create explicit knowledge (Rudman, Phelan, & Heppen, 2007).

An example of a procedure derived from this reasoning is the implicit association test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 2008). It measures links among semantic properties in memory that are believed to be hard to detect by introspection. As noted in Chapter 3, the IAT can be applied to virtually any kind of association. When it’s applied to properties of personality, reaction times for various associations can be informative about the implicit sense of self. Just as explicit and implicit motives predict different aspects of behavior, explicit and implicit (IAT) measures of self-concept contribute separately to predicting behavior (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2009).

Some research has compared the TAT and IAT (Sheldon, King, Houser-Marko, Osbaldiston, & Gunz, 2007). The two measures were correlated and had similar patterns of correlations with other scales. This suggests that they may be measuring similar things.

5.9: Problems in Behavior, and Behavior Change, from the Motive Perspective

5.9  Examine the possibility of changing people’s achievement motivation and the criticisms against it

People working within the motive approach to personality have been interested in specific domains of human activity (e.g., achievement, affiliation, power, intimacy) and in the more general idea of motivation as a concept. They haven’t spent nearly as much effort analyzing problems in behavior. Nevertheless, the literature has at least tentative links to some problems.

5.9.1: The Need for Power and Alcohol Abuse

It’s been suggested that the need for power can play a role in developing a drinking problem (McClelland, Davis, Kalin, & Wanner, 1972). This idea stems partly from the finding that drinking alcohol leads to feelings of power. Thus, a person with a need for power can satisfy that need, at least somewhat, by drinking. This doesn’t satisfy the need for long, of course, because the feeling of power is illusory. It goes away when the person soberes up.

The idea that alcohol abuse may reflect a need for power leads to some recommendations for treatment. In particular, it suggests that people who are using alcohol this way aren’t aware of doing so. If so, they should benefit from realizing what they’re doing. By encouraging other ways to satisfy the power motive, therapists can treat the issue productively, rather than simply treating a symptom. One study (Cutter, Boyatzis, & Clancy, 1977) found that this approach was more effective than traditional therapies, yielding nearly twice the rate of rehabilitation at one-year follow-up.

5.9.2: Focusing On and Changing Motivation

Psychologists contributing to the motive approach to personality have also had relatively little to say about therapeutic behavior change. Murray, the father of this approach, was a therapist, but he didn’t develop new techniques. In general, he applied the currently existing psychodynamic techniques to people’s problems.

It would seem, however, that the study just discussed makes some suggestions about behavior change. As noted, some people appear to use alcohol as a way of temporarily satisfying a desire for power. A treatment program developed for these people focused on two things: It made them more aware that this motive was behind their drinking, and it helped them find other ways to satisfy the need for power, thus making drinking unnecessary.
The program began by describing the nature of the achievement motive and instructing people on how to score TAT protocols for achievement imagery. People were then taught to use achievement imagery in their thoughts as much as possible. By teaching themselves to think in terms of achievement, they increased the likelihood of using an achievement orientation in whatever activity they undertook.

Achievement-related thinking is important, but it isn’t enough by itself. A second goal of the training was to link these thoughts to specific, concrete patterns of action. It was also important to be sure the patterns worked outside the training program. The people were encouraged to think in achievement terms everywhere—not just in the training sessions—and to put the action patterns into motion. People in the course wrote down their plans for the next two years. They were taught to plan realistically and to set goals that were challenging but not out of reach. This planning provided a way of turning the achievement orientation they learned into a self-prescription for a course of activity. This prescription then could be used in guiding actual achievement later on.

Was the course effective? Yes. In a two-year follow-up, participants had higher business achievements, were more likely to have started new business ventures, and were more likely to be employing more people than before, compared to control participants (McClelland & Winter, 1969).

This program showed that it’s possible to change people’s achievement-related behavior, but a question remains about whether it changes their underlying needs. It also remains uncertain how much these effects can be generalized to the domain of therapy. Nonetheless, the studies do seem to provide intriguing suggestions about behavior change.

5.10: Problems and Prospects for the Motive Perspective

5.10 Summarize criticisms of the motive approach to personality

The theorists represented in this chapter look to motivational processes and the pressures they place on people by providing a way to think about how dispositions create behavior—by specifying a type of intrapersonal functioning—this approach to dispositions evades one of the criticisms of trait theories.

A criticism that’s harder to evade is that decisions about what qualities to study have been arbitrary. Murray developed his list of needs from his own intuition (and other people’s lists). Others working in this tradition have tended to go along uncritically. Yet McAdams noted one omission from that list—the need for intimacy—that’s strikingly obvious as a human motive. This suggests that Murray’s intuitive list was incomplete (see also Schwartz et al., 2012). A response to this criticism is that the motives that have been examined most closely are those that fit with ideas appearing elsewhere in psychology, as well. This convergence suggests that the needs really are fundamental.

Another criticism bears less on the theory than on its implementation. Murray was explicit in saying that the dynamics of personality can be understood only by considering multiple needs at once. However, research from the motive approach to personality has rarely done that. More often, people study one motive at a time to examine its dynamics. Occasionally, researchers have stretched to the point of looking at particular clusters of two or three needs, but even that has been rare.

Despite these limitations, work on personality from the viewpoint of motive dispositions has continued into the present. Indeed, this area of work has enjoyed a resurgence in the past decade or so. The idea that people vary in what motivates them has a good deal of intuitive appeal. Further appeal derives from the idea that motive states wax and wane across time and circumstances. These ideas provide a way to incorporate both situational influences and dispositional influences in an integrated way. Given these “pluses” and a growing interest in understanding how implicit motives and self-attributed motives work together, the future of this approach seems strong.

Summary: The Motive Perspective

The motive approach to personality assumes that behavior reflects a set of underlying needs. As a need becomes more intense, it’s more likely to influence behavior. Behavior is also affected by press: external stimuli that elicit motivational tendencies. Needs (and press) vary in strength from moment to moment, but people also differ in patterns of chronic need strength. According to this viewpoint, this difference is the source of individual differences in personality.
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Murray catalogued human motives, several of which later received systematic study by others. One (studied by McClelland, Atkinson, and others) was the need for achievement: the motive to overcome obstacles and to attain goals. People with high levels of the achievement motive behave differently from those with lower levels in several ways: the kinds of tasks they prefer, the level of task difficulty they prefer, their persistence, and their performance levels. Early research on achievement tended to disregard how approach and avoidance motives might separately influence behavior. More recent work has begun to examine those distinct influences.

The need for power—the motive to be strong, compared to other people—has also been studied extensively. People who score high in this need tend to seek out positions of influence, to surround themselves with the trappings of power, and to become energized when the groups they’re guiding have difficulties. People with high levels of the power motive tend to choose as friends people who aren’t influential or popular, thereby protecting themselves from undesired competition. The power motive can lead to unpleasant forms of social influence, unless it’s tempered by a sense of responsibility.

The need for affiliation is the desire to spend time with other people—to develop and maintain relationships. People who score high in this need are responsive to social influence, spend a large proportion of their time communicating with other people, and when alone, often think about being with others. A related motive that isn’t represented in Murray’s list but has received attention in recent years is the need for intimacy. People high in this need want warm, close, and communicative relationships with others. People with strong intimacy needs tend to spend more time in one-to-one interaction and less time in groups. They tend to engage in interactions that involve a lot of self-disclosure and are concerned about their friends’ well-being.

Research has also investigated patterns of motives, such as inhibited power motive. This pattern is defined by having more of a need for power than a need for affiliation and by restraining the power need. People with this pattern do well in managerial careers, but the pattern has also been linked to political stances that preceded wars.

Theorists of this view use other concepts besides motives in talking about behavior. Incentive value—the extent to which a given action will satisfy a given need for a person—helps to explain why people with the same motive express it in different ways. Indeed, the concept of incentive provides an opening into a broader issue. Specifically, assessment of motives by the picture story exercise (PSE) technique does not relate well to assessment by self-report. What’s assessed by the PSE has come to be called implicit motives, and what’s assessed by self-report has come to be called self-attributed or explicit motives. Implicit motives are thought to function mostly unconsciously, and self-attributed motives are thought to function mostly consciously. One active area of interest is how these two aspects of motives function and relate to one another.

Murray emphasized the study of individual lives in depth over extended periods of time. He coined the term personology to refer to the study of the whole person, and personology was his goal. This emphasis has not been strong in the work of most others, but it has re-emerged more recently in the work of McAdams and his colleagues.

The contribution to assessment that’s most identified with the motive approach is the PSE. It’s based on the idea that people’s motives are reflected in the imagery they “apperceive”—that is, read into ambiguous stimuli, such as a set of pictures depicting people in ambiguous situations. There are also self-report measures of motives, but they appear to measure something different from what the PSE measures.

The motivational approach to personality has largely ignored the issue of analyzing problems in behavior, although at least some evidence links the need for power to the misuse of alcohol. It’s possible to infer from this evidence, however, that many problems in behavior stem from inappropriate channeling of motives. It’s also reasonable that people can be helped by increasing their awareness of the motive that underlies the problem and then channeling the motive in alternative ways. Research on increasing the need for achievement suggests that it may be possible to alter people’s dispositional levels of the motives that make up personality.