

C1.2

Essay 1.2

Energization and Direction Are Both Essential Parts of Motivation

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C1.2P1 Motivation is central to how day-to-day life is lived. Therefore, it is not surprising that motivation is a core concept in research within the field of psychology. A good definition of motivation is needed because it lays a solid foundation for theory, research, and application in this important area of study.

C1.2P2 The term “motivation” comes from the Latin verb *movere*, which means “to move” (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). This grounding of motivation in movement makes a lot of sense intuitively because it maps onto our everyday, person-on-the-street understanding of motivation as “getting going in a particular direction.” However, grounding motivation in movement is only a first, general step. A full and complete definition needs to be more specific and more precise.

C1.2P3 Over the years, many different researchers and theorists have offered definitions of motivation. These motivations vary from one another, but most have included the idea that motivation involves the energization and direction of behavior (see, e.g., Arkes & Garske, 1977; Ford, 1992; McClelland, 1985; Reeve, 2018). The definition of motivation that I have embraced focuses exclusively on these two concepts: I view motivation as the energization and direction of behavior (Elliot, 1997). I think that the key to a good, helpful definition of motivation lies in carefully describing and understanding what energization and direction are and what their roles (functions) in behavior are. Once these two concepts are separately and clearly described, they can be brought together—integrated—to produce a full and complete definition of motivation.

C1.2S1

Energization

C1.2P4 Energization is what the pioneering American philosopher and psychologist William James called the “spring to action” of behavior in his classic book *The Principles of Psychology* (1890/1950, vol. 2, p. 555). That is, energization is the instigator or starter of behavior that serves the role of activating the person and orienting him or her in a general way. By “activate” I do not mean to imply the people are

typically passive until they are provoked to become active by an external cue or internal stimulus. Rather, I view people as constantly active and see this instigation as the shifting of attention and engagement from one thing to another (see Atkinson & Birch, 1970). In colloquial, everyday terms, “energization” addresses the question of *why* we behave as we do, and it identifies the *reason* behind our behavior (Elliot, 1997).

- C1.2P5** Energization is commonly experienced by people as a desire, interest, fear, or concern (Elliot, 2020) of a certain strength or intensity. For example, a student might see several classmates studying for an upcoming exam, and this may evoke a desire for achievement. As another example, a person might enter a party with a strong fear of being rejected by others. These examples highlight that energization can be a response to a strong external situation that would influence the majority of people in the same way, or it can be a response to a relatively weak external situation that points to a basic, dispositional sensitivity or tendency in a particular individual. Energization is relevant to any and all areas of life, including achievement and affiliation (as in the above examples) but also far beyond. In research, scholars have often used the following types of psychological concepts to represent energization: motives, values, temperaments, self-relevant beliefs, and subjective and objective environmental cues (Elliot, 2006).

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Direction

- C1.2P6** Direction is the guiding or channeling of behavior in a specific way. Energization orients people in a general way, but it does not provide a specific guideline for how to act. Direction serves the role of focusing the person on a concrete possibility that serves to address an activated desire, interest, fear, or concern. In colloquial, everyday terms, “direction” addresses the question of *how* we behave, and it identifies the specific future possibility that guides our behavior (Elliot, 1997).

- C1.2P7** Direction is often experienced as goal pursuit. For example, a student who sees several classmates studying for an upcoming exam and experiences the desire to achieve may adopt and pursue the goal of doing better than his or her classmates on the exam. Goals are the most common way that researchers represent direction in their work, but other relevant concepts are strategies, tactics, and intentions (Elliot, 2006).

C1.2S3

Energization and Direction: Apart and Together

- C1.2P8** It is critical that both energization and direction be defined clearly and be considered as separate, equally important aspects of motivation. In many descriptions or explanations of motivation, energization and direction are either not clearly defined or are not clearly separated, and this can lead to two problems. First, descriptions

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or explanations of motivation sometimes either ignore (at worst) or overemphasize (at best) one aspect over the other. For example, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2019) focuses primarily (albeit not exclusively) on energization, and goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2015) focuses primarily (albeit not exclusively) on direction. This can result in an incomplete or unbalanced account of motivation. Second, descriptions or explanations of motivation sometimes meld the two aspects together without acknowledging their different natures and their different functions. For example, early on in achievement goal theory, the goal concept was defined so broadly that it included both the energization and direction components without identifying them as separate (or separable) aspects of motivation (Ames, 1992). This, I believe, resulted in a lack of theoretical precision and reduced clarity in the achievement goal literature (see Elliot & Fryer, 2008).

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In separating the two components of motivation, clearly defining the nature and function of each and then (and only then) putting them back together, we can achieve precision on the conceptual front yet thoroughness on the explanation front. This allows one to simultaneously answer the questions of how a person is behaving and why he or she is behaving in that way. It also emphasizes the fact that motivation can, but need not, involve self-regulation. Energization without direction can produce aimless behavior that is ineffective or, at best, inefficient in attending to one's desires, interests, fears, or concerns. However, this energization can be assisted by being guided and directed, and, furthermore, it can be guided and directed in many different ways. This gives flexibility to one's behavioral options. In other words, energization is not our destiny, but rather it is a starting place that can be regulated to add concrete guidance or to shift one's focus in a different direction altogether. For example, if a person chronically fears failure, he or she can regulate this energization by adopting and pursuing the goal of approaching success. In short, in research on motivation, both aspects—energization and direction—need full attention and consideration for a theory to do justice to the full breadth and richness of the concept of motivation.

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Goal Complexes

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In my initial research on the energization and direction aspects of motivation, I implicitly used a billiard ball metaphor to illustrate how motivation operates (Elliot & Church, 1997). The main idea was that energization initiates motivation, this energization then prompts the adoption of a directional aid (e.g., a goal—I will use goal as the running example throughout this section), and this directional aid was the direct predictor of processes and outcomes (e.g., exam performance).

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This metaphor identified energization as a distal (indirect) predictor of processes and outcomes and direction as a proximal (direct) predictor. Energization leads to direction, then direction takes over and leaves energization behind. An unstated assumption of this metaphor is that directional variables have the same influence

on processes and outcomes regardless of the energization that led to the adoption of the directional variable in the first place.

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The billiard ball metaphor is helpful to some degree in explaining how energization and direction work together, but I also think it is limited in capturing the actual, deeply integrated way that the two aspects operate in tandem. Most critically, I think that energization is not simply left behind after prompting goal adoption, but rather that energization stays “in communication with” the goal (see Lewin, 1935, p. 137) and continues to have an influence on motivation during the process of pursuing the goal. That is, pursuing the same goal is experienced differently depending on the energization that prompted adoption of the goal, and this energization remains connected to the goal during goal pursuit. For example, a student pursuing the goal “Try to fully learn and master the material presented in my classes” would most certainly feel very different if this goal was energized by the desire to develop her skills to the fullest versus if this goal was energized by the fear of failing and being rejected by her loved ones.

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Energization and direction become so deeply and inextricably intertwined during the process of motivation that this integrated motivational concept is best given its own name. We have called it a “goal complex” (Elliot & Thrash, 2001). Note that it could also be called a “strategy complex,” a “tactic complex,” or an “intention complex” depending on the directional concept that is being considered (see also Murray’s 1938 concept of “need integrate,” for a related idea, pp. 64, 123–124). A goal complex is formed when energization prompts the adoption of a goal, and this integrated, situation-specific goal complex is then represented in memory as an entity in and of itself until the goal is achieved, the energization is attended to, or the goal complex is altered or abandoned.

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Goal complexes can be structurally represented in the following way: [Specific Goal] IN ORDER TO [Energization]. The first example provided in the preceding paragraph can be restated with this in mind as “Try to fully learn and master the material in my classes IN ORDER TO develop my skills and abilities to the fullest.” This formal structure highlights the fact that the same goal can have many different sources of energization, and the same energization may prompt many different types of goals. In other words, everyday motivation can involve many, many different and unique types of goal complexes (for recent research on goal complexes, see Senko & Tropiano, 2016; Sommet & Elliot, 2017).

C1.2S5

Conclusion

C1.2P15

Motivation science has emerged as a distinct and popular area of scholarly research since the turn of the century (as may be seen by journals, conferences, and associations dedicated exclusively to motivation). To succeed, motivation science needs a clear and precise definition of its central concept—motivation. For this reason, researchers, theorists, and practitioners need to make sure that there is

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consistency in the way that they define and theorize about motivation on the one hand, and measure, study, and try to change motivation, on the other hand. The definition of motivation that I have provided here—the energization and direction of behavior—is simple at first glance, but this first glance is deceiving. Once the two aspects of motivation—energization and direction—are fully considered and fleshed out, it becomes evident that this definition contains a complexity and breadth of coverage (far) beyond what one might expect on the basis of its apparent simplicity. In short, a good definition of motivation is clearly and precisely stated and includes both energization and direction; a not-so-good definition of motivation is not clearly and precisely stated and/or focuses on energization but ignores direction or focuses on direction but ignores energization.