

Instinct Theory of Motivation

Biological Programming Drives Behavior

CORE PRINCIPLE

Behaviors are motivated by innate, unlearned biological drives programmed through evolution. Just as birds instinctively build nests and salmon swim upstream, humans possess inherited behavioral tendencies for survival, reproduction, and social interaction.

Key Historical Figures

Charles Darwin (1872)

- Evolution & natural selection
- Continuity between animals and humans
- Emotions are inherited

William James (1890)

- Listed many human instincts
- Fear, curiosity, sociability, cleanliness, parental love
- Inherited neural structures

William McDougall (1908)

- Most systematic theorist
- Identified 18 basic instincts
 - Paired with emotions
- Goal-directed behavior

Major Categories of Human Instincts

(According to early theorists)

SURVIVAL

- Self-preservation
- Fear & danger avoidance
 - Hunger & thirst
 - Pain avoidance

REPRODUCTIVE

- Sexual behavior
- Mating & courtship
 - Parental care
- Maternal devotion

SOCIAL

- Gregariousness (belonging)
- Dominance & submission
 - Cooperation
 - Competition

CURIOSITY & EXPLORATION

- Information seeking
- Environmental exploration
 - Play behavior

AGGRESSION

- Fighting & pugnacity
- Territory defense
- Response to threats

⚠️ Why Instinct Theory Declined

Circular Reasoning

"Why do people fight?"
"Fighting instinct."
"How do we know?"
"Because people fight."

Labels behavior, doesn't explain it!

No real scientific explanation

Over-Classification

Lists grew to thousands of "instincts"

Bernard (1924): Over 6,000 instincts proposed!

If everything is an instinct, nothing is explained!

Lost all explanatory power

Cultural Variation

Behaviors vary greatly across cultures

If truly instinctive, should be universal

Learning & environment better explain diversity

Behaviorism replaced it

💡 KEY TAKEAWAY

Instinct theory dominated early psychology (1890s-1920s) by explaining behavior through biological programming. It declined due to circular reasoning, over-classification, and cultural variation evidence. Modern psychology recognizes both biological influences AND environmental learning shape behavior.

Legacy: While pure instinct theory failed, evolutionary psychology revived core insights

about biological influences on behavior—but with more sophisticated understanding of gene-environment interactions.