Insomnia

Seek Sleep disorders

Instinct

The inborn tendency of every member of a certain species to behave in the same way given the same situation or set of stimuli.

Behavior is considered instinctive only if it occurs in the same form in all members of a species. Instincts must be unlearned and characteristic of a specific species. Animals provide the best examples of instinctive behavior. Birds naturally build nests without being taught and feed and protect their young in the exact same ways. Other animals, such as squirrels or dogs, behave in manners characteristic of only squirrels or dogs. Ethologists, scientists who study animals in their natural environments, devote much of their efforts to the observation of instinctive behavior.

Throughout history, theorists have speculated on the role of instinct in determining human behavior. While it has been widely accepted that animal behavior is governed largely by innate, unconscious tendencies, the presence and power of instincts in humans have been a source of controversy. Early Christian theorists believed that only animals were guided by instincts, asserting that the absence of instinct-governed behavior and the presence of a moral code provided the major distinction between humans and animals. Instinct assumed a more prominent place in behavior theory in later years. In the late 1800s, William James proposed that human behavior is determined largely by instinct, and that people have even more instinctual urges than less complex animals. James believed that certain biological instincts are shared with animals, while human social instincts like sympathy, love, and modesty also provide powerful behavioral forces.

Sigmund Freud considered instincts to be basic building blocks of human behavior and play a central role in his drive theory, which postulates that human behavior is motivated by the desire to reduce the tension caused by unfulfilled instinctive urges or drives. For instance, people eat when they are hungry because unsatiated hunger causes tension, which is reduced by eating. For Freud, the life instinct (Eros) and its components motivate people to stay alive and reproduce. The death instinct (Thanatos) represents the negative forces of nature. Another theorist, William McDougall, described instincts simply as “inherited dispositions.”

The debate continues today over the role of instinct in human behavior, as the balance between learned behavior and innate urges remains a subject ripe for continued research and discussion. It is useful to note a nonscientific use of the term instinct. In casual conversation, a person may use instinct to mean “natural” or “automatic—in describing a baseball player’s instinct for batting, for example. This use of the term would not meet the scientist’s criteria for instinct.

See also Drive reduction theory

Further Reading


Institutionalization

Placing emotionally disturbed or psychotic people in a therapeutic facility.

Our views of mental institutions are often colored by media’s portrayal of them, such as in the movies One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest and Girl, Interrupted. With an emphasis on care and treatment, the best institutions offer emotionally disturbed people a better chance at life. They can learn new skills, improve behavioral and psychological problems, and develop healthier self-esteem.

People with mild emotional or behavior problems often benefit from a short stay at an institution and benefit from a therapy protocol that minimizes the fact of institutionalization. However, severely disturbed people require a longer stay and a highly controlled environment.
Psychologists differ widely on the long-term effects of institutionalization. A shortage of research funds means that little solid evidence exists to support one side or the other. Although many improvements have been made in the quality of mental institutions, some civil-rights and patients’-rights groups claim that incidences of neglect or below-standard care still exist. Of particular concern is the lack of proper staff training. Detractors of institutions also point out that patients are often sedated without given any other form of treatment. They assert that institutions do more harm than good.

Some concerns have also been raised regarding the institutionalization of children. In 1990, the American Public Welfare Association estimated that 65,000 children were living in group homes, residential treatment centers, or psychiatric hospitals. Institutionalization for emotionally disturbed children and adolescents is usually not meant to provide long-term treatment. The average stay ranges from several months to two years.

During the 1980s, the federal government began a program of “deinstitutionalizing” the mentally ill. Some returned to their families. Others found themselves in hospitals or community health centers. Today, it is not uncommon to see emotionally disturbed or psychotic people living on the streets, along with other homeless people. Local communities have been reluctant to provide alternatives to mental institutions, refusing to allow mental health clinics, half-way houses, or group homes to be established in their neighborhoods.

**Instrumental behavior**

Behavior exhibited by persons in response to certain stimuli.

Instrumental behavior is a concept that grew out of the behavior therapy movement, originating in the 1950s with the work of H.J. Eysenck. Behavior therapy asserts that neuroses are not the symptoms of underlying disorders (as Sigmund Freud theorized), but are in fact disorders in and of themselves. Further, these disorders are learned responses to traumatic experiences in much the same way that animals can be demonstrated to learn a response to instrumental, or operant, conditioning.

In the classic behaviorist experiments of Ivan Pavlov and B.F. Skinner, it was shown that animals could be trained to respond in a learned way to external stimuli. Humans also respond in a similar manner. If, for instance, a child has a difficult, painful relationship with his older brother, who is athletic and popular, he may develop a fear or hatred of all popular, athletic males that will stay with him throughout life—even after the original stimuli for the reaction (his older brother) is absent. This behavior is referred to as instrumental behavior.

In treating a patient to eliminate instrumental behaviors, behavioral therapists rely on several fairly well-tested techniques. Perhaps the most popular is counter-conditioning, a process in which a therapist links the stimuli to a different instrumental behavior, or conditioned response. Other methods include flooding and modeling. In flooding, a therapist will attempt to expose a patient to an overload of the anxiety-producing stimuli in order to lessen its effect. In modeling, the patient is exposed to someone who has successfully dealt with a similar anxiety-producing stimuli.

**Intelligence**

An abstract concept whose definition continually evolves and often depends upon current social values as much as scientific ideas. Modern definitions refer to a variety of mental capabilities, including the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, learn quickly, and learn from experience as well as the potential to do so.

Several theories about intelligence emerged in the 20th century and with them debate about the nature of intelligence, whether it is hereditary, environmental or both. As methods developed to assess intelligence, theorizing occurred about the measurability of intelligence, its accuracy and this field known as psychometrics. As the 20th century drew to a close, publication of The Bell Curve by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray in 1994 stirred the controversy. Their findings pointed to links between social class, race, and IQ scores, despite questions by many about the validity of IQ tests as a measurement of intelligence or a predictor of achievement and success.

Part of the problem regarding intelligence stems from the fact that nobody has adequately defined what intelligence really means. In everyday life, we have a general understanding that some people are “smart,” but when we try to define “smart” precisely, we often have difficulty because a person can be gifted in one area and average or below in another. To explain this phenomenon, some psychologists have developed theories to include multiple components of intelligence.

Charles Darwin’s younger cousin, Sir Francis Galton, inspired by the Origin of the Species, developed a forerunner of 20th-century testing in the 1860s...