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Need Theory



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Synonyms

[Livability theory](#)

Definition

The view that happiness depends on the gratification of innate human *needs*, rather than on the meeting of socially constructed *wants*.

Description

Need theory of happiness is linked to affect theory, which holds that happiness is a reflection of how well we feel generally. In this view, we do not “calculate” happiness but rather “infer” it, the typical heuristic being “I feel good most of the time, hence I must be happy” (Schwarz and Strack 1991).

Tenets

In this line of thought, one question is how we take stock of our affective experience. Another question is what makes us feel good or bad, and this links up to the wider question of the functions of affect.

Frequency of Affect

It would seem that our overall evaluation of life is geared by the most salient affective experiences and that these are typically intense affects. This view is common in fiction and is more or less implied in life reviews. Yet research using the Experience Sampling Method shows that it is rather the relative frequency of positive to negative affect that matters (Diener et al. 1991).

Mood as Informant

How do we assess that relative frequency? The cognitive view on affect procession suggests that we compute an affect balance in some way, using estimates of frequency and duration. A competing view is that this occurs automatically and that the balance is reflected in mood. In this view, mood is an affective meta-signal that, contrary to feelings and emotions, is not linked to specific objects. Emotions denote an affective reaction to something and prepare the organism to respond, while a negative mood signals that there may be something wrong and urges us to find out what that is.

Gratification of Needs

Why do we feel good or bad at all? Probably because it provides us information on how well we are doing. Affects are an integral part of our adaptive repertoire and seem to be linked to the gratification of human needs. “Needs” are vital requirements for survival, such as eating, bonding, and exercise. Nature seems to have safeguarded the gratification of these needs with affective signals such as hunger, love, and zest. In this view, a positive mood signals that all our needs are sufficiently met at that moment.

“Needs” in this theory should not be equated with “wants.” Needs are inborn and universal, while “wants” are acquired and can vary across cultures. Wants can coincide more or less with needs and explained in Veenhoven (2008a, 2009). This theory is summarized in the scheme below (Fig. 1).

Which Needs?

Unlike “wants,” human “needs” cannot be observed directly but must be inferred from universal motivation and from the consequences of non-gratification. There are several theories about what these universal needs are, and the most accepted theory is that of Maslow’s (1943, 1954) theory. Maslow distinguishes between “deficiency needs” and “growth needs” and assumes that the former preponderates over the latter. Deficiency needs involve, in order of preponderance, (1) physiological needs, such as food and shelter; (2) safety; (3) companionship; and (4) esteem. Growth needs involve the use and development of one’s capacities, which is called “self-actualization.” Since the human repertoire is quite broad, this growth need can manifest in more diverse behaviors.

The notion of a need “hierarchy” has received little support in empirical research, but the assumption that these needs are part of a universal human nature still stands. From an evolutionary view, it is plausible that we share several needs with other animals, in particular the physiological needs (1) and the need for safety (2). The needs for sex should be added in this context, since this need is required to the continuation of the species. The need for companionship (3) is probably

hardwired in all social animals, since bonds are essential in the survival strategy of these species. Likewise, the need for esteem (4) is functional for social animals that organize hierarchically, which is the case with most primates. The need to “grow” is not uniquely human either. Animals also have an innate drive to use and develop their potentials, which the young typically do through play. The difference is in the variety and therefore in the uniqueness of behavioral manifestations: in humans, actualization of potentials is more biased to *self*-actualization than that seen in other animals.

Theoretical Plausibility

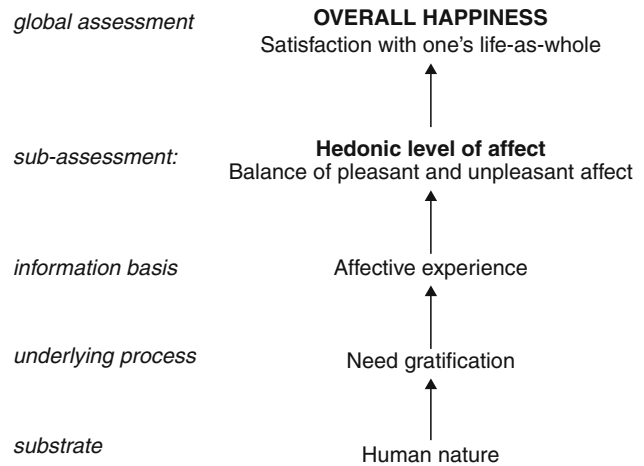
This theory makes sense in an evolutionary perspective. It is likely that evolution has developed ways of monitoring needs gratification, in particular, in organisms that can make choice, as can primates, among which humans. It is unlikely that rational thinking is the main way, since this mental capability has developed late in evolution. It is quite likely that adaptation is guided by affective signals in the first place and that all higher animals can feel more or less well. It is unlikely that humans are an exception to this rule. The ability to think has been added on an existing affect system, and it has not replaced it. This can be seen in the structure of the human brain, where the affect system is located in the older parts that we have in common with other animals. Our ability of rational thinking is situated in the complex neocortex, something that is typical for homo sapiens, but not seen in such complexity in the higher primates and other social animals.

Empirical Support

Unlike “wants,” “needs” cannot be measured and nor can “need gratification.” A direct test of this theory is therefore not possible. Still we can test the implications of this theory. One implication is that people will be unhappy in conditions where basic human needs remain unmet, such as where they are subjected to chronic hunger, danger, and loneliness. This prediction is supported by the finding that average happiness is low in poor countries with failed states. Support for this view can also be seen in the rising happiness in modern

Need Theory,

Fig. 1 Need theory of happiness



nations (Veenhoven 2010). At first sight, the prediction is contradicted by absence of a correlation between individual happiness and income in rich nations, but this may mean that the material needs of even the poor are gratified. Gratification of social needs is less well secured in rich nations, and consequently, we do see a substantial impact of life events such as marriage and bereavement on happiness.

Another testable implication is that happy people must thrive better biologically. This has been shown to be the case, happy people live longer. Well-controlled long-term follow-up studies show sizable effects of happiness on longevity, comparable to smoking or not (Veenhoven 2008b).

Cross-References

- ▶ [Affective Component of Happiness](#)
- ▶ [Livability Theory](#)
- ▶ [Subjective Well-Being](#)

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