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## Social motives

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**Social Motives**


*Social motives* are the psychological processes that drive people's thinking, feeling and behavior in interactions with other people. Because social situations confront people with the preferences and needs of others, and not just their own, they require a broader perspective in which the interests of others are incorporated. Social motives reflect the way people value these interests in relation to their own. How they do so has a crucial impact on their understanding of the interaction and on the decisions they make within its context. For this reason, understanding social motivation is crucial for understanding social interactions.

This entry explains how social motivation may be shaped by the features of the people who compose the interaction and the features of the interaction situation. It addresses how social motives may affect social behavior and, finally, explains *social orientations* or (fairly) stable tendencies toward particular social motives.

## Understanding Social Motivation

In social life, people are continuously confronted with situations in which their individual preferences or interests are different from, or even opposed to, the interests of others. Consider, for example, interactions in close relationships, at the workplace, or on the larger societal level. In many of these situations, actions that correspond with individual preferences are incompatible with those of others. For example, one's partner may not share one's preference for symphonic heavy-metal music. One's friends may not share one's preference for showing up late at appointments. And a society's environmental policy may not correspond with one's preference for long showers. In each of these cases, the actions that are dictated by one individual's motives are incompatible with, or even harmful to, the interests of others.

These examples illustrate why it is necessary for people to reinterpret such situations in terms of *social implications* in order to navigate their social lives effectively. Social situations require that individuals move beyond their individual interests and understanding of the situation to a *social perspective* on the interaction. This means reinterpreting the situation to consider its implications for others, in addition to for oneself, and deciding how to value their interests, relative to one's self-interest. The relative importance one assigns to the interests of oneself and others constitutes one's social motives within the interaction.

The following major motives are typically cited:

- *Self-interest* or maximizing one's personal outcome without any concern for the interests of others

- *Competition* or maximizing the difference between one's personal outcome and the outcomes of others

- *Cooperation* or maximizing the joint outcomes of oneself and others

- *Equality* or minimizing differences between the outcomes of oneself and others

- *Altruism* or maximizing the outcomes of others without any concern for one's personal outcome

As a result of this evaluation process, people may shift from an individual interpretation of the situation, and from individual goals, to a social interpretation of the same situation, and to social goals. For example, one might decide to go to a concert that one's partner likes, too (equality), to leave earlier for an appointment (altruism), or to moderate one's time in the shower (cooperation) – even though none of these behaviors matches one's initial, individual preference.

Although a range of possible motives may exist, they will not be relevant to every interaction. Rather, the features of the situation, in combination with the preferences and needs of the individuals therein, determine the type of challenge the interaction represents and

the motives that are relevant to it. For example, if people share the same goal, the situation is unlikely to evoke selfishness or competition, and a competitive setting, like a sports match, is unlikely to evoke altruism. To better understand how the features of the interaction may shape people's social motives, I turn to interdependence theory.

## How Patterns of Interdependence Shape Social Motivation

*Interdependence theory* understands social motives as the product of the features of interacting persons and those of the situation in which they interact. Together, these features determine the challenges the parties are faced with and the motives that therefore are relevant to their interaction.

To understand this process, the theory advances a classification system by which interaction situations can be analyzed according to six key dimensions. First, *level of dependence* indicates the extent to which people are exclusively dependent on the interaction (and the interaction partner(s)) for their needs or outcomes. In effect, this dimension defines whether persons have alternatives by which to fulfill their needs outside of the interaction or are fully dependent on it. Interactions on which one is highly dependent (e.g., romantic relationships) tend to evoke a longer-term orientation, which serves to perpetuate the relationship and the fulfillment of one's needs. Thereby, interactions characterized by high dependence can evoke motives like cooperation and altruism, while interactions characterized by low dependence may evoke motives like selfishness.

*Mutuality of dependence* indicates whether each person's dependence on the interaction is balanced or not. That dependence can be equal (i.e., both persons depending much or little on each other) but also unequal (i.e., one person is more dependent on the other). In a context of unequal dependence, the less-dependent person can display motives like selfishness or altruism. In contrast, interactions on which both parties depend are conductive to motives like cooperation and equality.

*Basis of dependence* indicates which person controls the outcomes of the interaction, that is, whether people can influence their own outcomes or whether the outcomes are controlled by the other. In case of partner control (e.g., the love one receives from one's partner in a close relationship), people cannot fulfill their own needs and rely completely on each other. This tends to evoke exchange-based strategies (e.g., iteratively benefiting or harming each other). In contrast, in case of joint control (e.g., buying a house with one's partner), neither person has exclusive control over the other, and each therefore must compromise, which evokes cooperation.

*Correspondence of outcomes* refers to whether people's preferences or needs correspond or conflict in the interaction. In situations where each person's needs correspond (i.e., both persons want the same outcome) no tension exists, and motives like cooperation and equality are likely to emerge. In contrast, in settings where each person's needs are opposed, their interests are irreconcilable, and motives like selfishness and competition are likely to dominate. Particularly interesting are interactions between these extremes, where people's interests are neither completely in line nor completely opposed. Mixed-motive situations like these can evoke both cooperative and competitive motives. Decisions in such interactions, therefore, are particularly indicative of people's personality and their social orientations.

*Temporal structure* reflects whether the interaction represents a single event (e.g., an interaction with a stranger) or is part of an extended interaction (e.g., interactions between romantic partners). Temporal structure can have a powerful impact on people's motives. In single interactions, motives apply exclusively to the present interaction, and there is no direct need to consider future consequences. Such contexts therefore evoke motives like selfishness, targeted at attaining the best possible outcome for oneself (e.g., negotiating the best possible price). In contrast, interactions that are extended are part of a sequence of interactions, such

that current decisions will also affect the future of the relationship with the other.  Here, people's motives are also shaped by considerations beyond the present situation, such as long-term strategies and goals.  This often evokes more cooperative and strategic motives, whereby immediate self-interest is sacrificed for better, long-term outcomes.

Finally, *information* refers to the extent to which people possess complete and accurate information within the interaction.  This dimension primarily conveys the extent to which people understand or misunderstand each other's dependence (for example, their reliance on the relationship, potential alternatives, felt control), goals and motives.  But it can also refer to uncertainty in a broader sense (i.e., the scope of mistakes or misunderstanding).  Incomplete information can evoke selfishness and distrust.  More generally, it may obscure the relationship between people's motives and their actions, as their decisions may produce different outcomes than they intended.

## Transformation of Motivation

What does this, admittedly complex, classification system reveal about social motives?  Importantly, by explaining how the structure of an interaction shapes or constrains motivation, it identifies the motives relevant to a specific interaction and thus expressible within it.  The next step is to understand how the context may be meshed with people's preferences and needs to form their social motives within the interaction – a process called *transformation of motivation*, which is attributed to Kelley  and Thibaut.

Transformation of motivation refers to the process by which people expand their initial, self-centered interpretation of an interaction (i.e., the *given structure* of the situation – the options and outcomes that would suit their *individual* goals best, irrespective of the consequences for others) to a *social* interpretation, which contains its meaning for others and for people's long-term strategies or goals.  Depending on how people value these considerations in relation to their immediate self-interest, the result is a re-interpretation of the

situation according to its meaning for their social goals (i.e., the *effective structure* of the situation – the options and outcomes that would suit their social preferences best). Following this transformation, actions that would benefit one's personal needs may seem unappealing, but actions that may be suboptimal (or even detrimental) to one's immediate self-interest now may be preferred, as they may better satisfy one's social goals.

To illustrate, consider the earlier example of going to a concert with one's partner. Should transformation of this situation favor one's interests over the partner's (e.g., one really wants to see the symphonic heavy-metal band, and whether one's partner will have a good time is less important), this situation is likely to evoke selfish motives, which will best be satisfied by going to the concert. In the event that transformation values the partner's interests as much as one's own (e.g., one also wants one's partner to have a good time), the situation is likely to evoke cooperative motives, which will best be satisfied by visiting a different concert that also appeals to the partner. Here, transformation therefore leads one to prefer an outcome that in fact is adverse to one's immediate self-interest.

What if the situation does not afford outcomes that match one's preferences? For example, imagine having a nasty fight with one's partner and wanting to deny him or her a good time subsequently (i.e., to act spitefully). If the partner generally likes to go to concerts, this situation is unlikely to produce outcomes that are truly negative for him or her (i.e., the situation does not provide the opportunity for spite). In this case, spite is likely to be manifested as selfishness: Although one's self-interest may no longer be important in the present context, the symphonic heavy-metal concert is the least desirable option for one's partner – and thus will be the most personally appealing. Therefore, when one's preferences are not directly afforded by the situation, people's transformations will favor the outcomes that best approach their outcome preferences.

In sum, by understanding social motives as the product of the structure of the situation, the features of the partner, and one's own preferences, it is possible to explain why the same individual may pursue different motives in different interactions in his or her life and may display behaviors that, at first glance, seem inconsistent.

**Habitual Transformations: Social Orientations**

Although I have primarily discussed social motives as a product of a specific interaction, people's social motives are also shaped by their experiences or history of interaction. The idea that people may adapt to their prior experiences means that people may consistently display particular motives in repeated interactions with specific partners (e.g., self-sacrifice for one's children). However, it also means that people may display a general tendency toward specific motives across *a range* of situations and interaction partners. Such motives are defined as *social orientations*.

Social orientations represent fairly stable preferences for specific types of outcomes in one's interactions with others. They are adaptations that result from one's upbringing and one's history of interactions. The outcome of this process is that people may habitually transform their social interactions according to a particular perspective (for example, interpreting them in terms of their self-interest or in terms of their meaning for the collective) and thus may display consistent preferences and behaviors across a range of situations and partners.

The concept that has been studied most extensively in relation to social orientations is *social value orientation* (SVO), which distinguishes between people with a consistent preference for maximizing their self-interest, irrespective of consequences for others (an *individualistic orientation*), people who seek to maximize joint interest and equality in outcomes (a *prosocial orientation*), and people who seek to maximize their advantage over others (a *competitive orientation*). These types of orientation have been shown to have

substantial stability and to predict behaviors across a range of situations, such as social dilemmas, negotiations, workplace behavior, donations to charitable causes, volunteering, pro-environmental behavior, and political preferences.  So-called  prosocials show greater cooperativeness and self-sacrifice than do those with the other orientations. Note, however, that SVOs are only relevant to situations that afford the motives (cooperation, selfishness, and competition) they correspond to.  Even then, their expression may be contingent on other factors, such as partner impressions or behavior, interaction history, and so forth.  For this reason, recent models of SVO characterize these orientations more as *probabilities* that people will display specific motives – a conceptualization that acknowledges that preferences may not be absolute and unchangeable, and that not everyone may hold the same orientation to the same degree.

*Chris Reinders Folmer*

*See also:* close relationships, cooperation, motivation and personality, perception and motivation, personality traits versus situations, reasoning and decision making, relational theory, social influence.

**Recommended Readings**

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