Achievement Motivation

Context: Theories of motivation

For many years, the study of motivation was dominated by Behaviourism. This viewpoint looks at motivation in a carrot-and-stick way: we are motivated to seek rewards and avoid punishments. This approach was researched by B.F. Skinner who came up with the theory of OPERANT CONDITIONING. Skinner was able to motivate lab rats to press levers either by rewarding them with food (positive reinforcement) or by cancelling electric shocks (removing punishment, or negative reinforcement). This Behaviourist approach is reductionist, since it tries to explain motivation entirely on the basis of stimuli in the environment and observed actions and ignores cognitions.

In recent years, this Behaviourist view has fallen out of fashion and psychologists are more interested in the personal (DISPOSITIONAL) motives that people have. For example, even when rewards are offered, some people seem to be very motivated to win them, whereas others don't seem to be bothered! This led David McClelland (1961) at Harvard University to begin a lifetime of research into motivation as a personality trait. For example, McClelland asked his students to throw rings over pegs. Most people threw rings rather at random, at any peg that caught their fancy. Some students chose their pegs carefully: not too close to make the task too easy, not too far away to make it impossible. These people have a high NEED FOR ACHIEVEMENT (n-Ach).

McClelland & Atkinson et al. (1964) – Achievement Motivation

McClelland measured n-Ach using the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). This is a projective test (a bit similar to the inkblot test). Respondents look at 30 images and have to create a story to explain what's going on in the picture. The story must include what has led up to the scene in the picture, what is happening right now, what the characters are thinking or feeling and how the story is going to end. The test is supposed to take two 1-hour sessions, each a day apart. The test is scored based on the sort of ideas and emotions the respondent projects into the picture.

Achievement Motivation leads people to set realistic but challenging goals. In weightlifting, for example, you won't increase your strength with weights that can be lifted easily or weights that cause damage to your muscles - only difficult but manageable weights will stretch and strengthen muscles. Achievement-motivated people are not gamblers and don't like leaving things to chance. "Gamblers" prefer big risks because they can rationalise away failure as being outside their control; "conservatives" prefer small risks with guaranteed gains and no blame; only "achievement motivated" people take the middle ground of challenge and moderate risk where their skills will affect the outcome.

This approach was further refined by John William Atkinson (1964) - which is why the theory is called the McCLELLAND- ATKINSON MODEL OF MOTIVATION. Atkinson suggests that Achievement Motivation could be calculated mathematically by measuring a person's desire to succeed and subtracting their fear of failure. High-achievers have a great desire to succeed and are not put off by the fear of failure. Atkinson recognises that Achievement Motivation can be affected by situational variables:

- Task difficulty (the percentage probability of failure)
- The incentive value of success (how much do you stand to gain by succeeding?)


**Contribution to sport psychology**

Achievement Motivation is very relevant for sport psychology. High-achievers tend to enjoy challenges (opponents who are equal to them or slightly superior to them); they need feedback and respond well to constructive criticism; and they do not fear failure, which means they persist at sports. McClelland counted the amount of achievement imagery in the respondents' stories. When this was repeated with Navaho children, achievement imagery still turned up in the stories, suggesting that achievement motivation may be universal. However, studies show that Achievement Motivation does not reliably predict performance in sport (Diane Gill, 1986). For this reason, researchers like Gill have gone on to develop sports-specific models of motivation.

**Evaluation**

This approach comes from the HUMANIST perspective. Psychological humanism was founded by thinkers like Carl Rogers (1902-87) who appreciated Freud’s “deep” approach to human experience but didn’t like his reductive view (ie reducing everything to sex and parent-issues). Rogers also rejected Freud’s bleak view that the unconscious was completely unknowable. Humanists reject DETERMINISM, claiming that people can change their own lives for the better, and they emphasise the importance of healthy growth. The theory of Achievement-Motivation puts individuals “in the driving seat”, making them responsible for their own behaviour and capable of changing.

Of course, psychologists from other perspectives would regard this as wishful thinking. Behaviourists argue that Humanists take too little account of situations and conditioning and exaggerate human freedom; Freudians are critical of the idea we can weigh up our unconscious urges and do mathematical sums with them in a straightforward way.

Projective tests like the TAT have been heavily criticised for being both unreliable and invalid, since different interpreters can come to different conclusions about what the stories mean. There are scoring systems, like the Defence Mechanism Manual (DMM), and these make the tests more reliable and produce quantitative data. The TAT remains the most popular projective test widely used by psychologists.

Others argue that Achievement Motivation is too general and complicated to be treated as a single personality trait - basically, it is reductionist to simplify motivation like this. However, the McClelland-Atkinson model does take into account cognitions as well as situational variables, so it is fairly holistic. Also, the TAT is a fairly holistic way to measure personality traits because the respondents get to describe their reaction to the images in their own words, uninterrupted and in detail.

**Comprehension**

1. What is meant by “Behaviourism”?
2. How B F Skinner explain motivation?
3. What is n-Ach and how does it affect behaviour?
4. Give a difference between high-achievers and low-achievers.
5. Describe the Thematic Apperception Test.
6. How did is Achievement Motivation calculated?
7. How do athletes with high Achievement Motivation like to be coached?
8. Explain the Humanist approach in psychology.

**Exam Question**

(a) Outline the Achievement Motivation model of motivation in sport. [8 marks]
(b) Evaluate psychological explanations of motivation. [14 marks]