

Importance of Instincts in Human Behaviour

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Abstract: *Instincts serve as the baseline evolutionary architecture of human behavior. Defined as unlearned, genetically hardwired behavioral patterns, instincts provide innate responses to environmental stimuli without requiring conscious deliberation or prior experience. While lower animals rely heavily on fixed action patterns, human instincts interact dynamically with high-level cognition, cultural learning, and environmental conditioning. The relationship between instincts and human behavior represents the intersection of evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and psychology. While instincts provide the foundational baseline for survival, human behavior is distinct in its capacity to override, refine, and integrate these innate drives through high-level cognition and social learning.*

Key Words: Instincts, Human behaviour, Animal behavior, Curiosity, innate, Creative, Environmental

The science that studies human behavior is known as psychology. Upon minute observation and analysis, behavior is seen to be of two types: natural (inborn) and acquired (learned). In humans, acquired behavior develops through education, culture, environment, and other factors. In other living beings, behavior is mostly natural. In humans, however, some behaviors are natural, while others are acquired. A human expresses gratitude (Thanks) at every step and shows respect toward elders; all such behavior is acquired through education. Those behaviors that originate naturally without prior knowledge are called instinctive (based on basic instincts). The scientist named Preyer (1842–1897) first used the word "Instinct" to describe human behavior.

The view of Watson and others is that animal behavior manifests as a reaction to external stimuli. In their view, the mind plays no role, and external stimuli alone are the cause of behavior. Contrary to this, the psychologist named McDougall (1871–1938) states that "all behavior is produced by some specific internal force, and behavior is purposive." He defined psychology as "the science that studies behavior." Here, the word "behavior" used by him carries a broader meaning than the term used by behaviorists. This word indicates the purposeful action performed by living beings. According to this theory, the root cause of behavior is analyzed as follows: certain innate traits residing naturally

within living beings are the cause of behavior; these basic tendencies are called Instinct in English.

Here, an example is given: a female crow, right from the time of egg laying, tries to build a nest. The knowledge of the need for construction, choosing a suitable site, gathering materials, constructing the nest, and the uniformity in its method—all of this she knows without any instruction. Cats and similar animals also seek an appropriate location during birth/labor. A female wasp, at the time of laying eggs, constructs a nest out of mud in a suitable place, places her egg inside, and brings a caterpillar into the nest for the nourishment of her offspring that will hatch from the egg. She pierces the caterpillar with her needle-like organ to paralyze it, covers the opening of the nest, and goes away. All wasps of that species do the exact same thing. The wasp offspring emerging from the egg eats the caterpillar, gradually gains the strength to fly, breaks the nest, and leaves. Even this offspring of the wasp performs the exact same behavior at the time of laying eggs; this is recognized as an unlearned tendency. Nowhere, at any time, was it ever taught that "this must be done." That this process continues unchanged from the time of creation until today is a matter of wonder. The female wasp performs all this without being taught, and there is a purpose in doing so—both of these points deserve attention here. Such behavior is observed in both animals and humans. Seeing a charging bull, a child immediately runs away. Here, the fear arises first that "the bull might strike me." This fear that arises first is an emotion connected to the instinct of self-preservation. Running away is an instinctive behavior, and self-preservation is its purpose.

Mr. McDougall defines instinct in multiple ways: "Instinct is an innate or natural power that enables purposeful action." Noting intelligence as well, he demonstrates the difference between instincts and intelligence: "That by which basic instincts are enhanced/developed through past experience is called intelligence."

Is there a difference of opinion regarding whether such instincts observed in animals and birds exist in humans? Some hold the view that humans possess a greater number of instincts than other living beings. Others contend that: "Instincts do not exist in humans because they act thoughtfully through discretion/reasoning. Where behavior is unlearned, the presence of instinct is accepted there; where an action is performed through reasoning, instinct is not the

cause." However, this latter theory is not widely accepted. Just as human actions vary at different times due to reasoning, the actions of animals and birds also vary due to discretion. It should not be thought that their behavior is always uniform. Human beings, even though driven by innate instincts, alter their behavior according to their environment.

When there is a need for food, other living creatures eat whatever they find. Humans, however, seek proper and suitable food before eating. There is no doubt that this behavior originates from instinct, but the key distinction is that it manifests with a slight delay. In human life and in fulfilling human needs, instincts hold a primary and significant position.

There is indeed a distinction between instinctive actions, reflex actions indicated by behaviorists, and general behaviors. Reflex actions are usually simple, occurring through the function of nerves in certain parts of the body. Instinctive behaviors, however, are complex. These function to assist both the body and the mind. Whatever way animal behaviors arise, human behaviors can be transformed through intelligence. Some common characteristics of behavior mentioned earlier should be remembered here as well.

Scientists debate regarding the number of instincts. Some accept even up to forty instincts. In the end, Mr. McDougall specifically pointed out fourteen instincts of human beings. Arranging each tendency in the form of a lock, he describes the motivating nature of the instinct as a key capable of opening it.

1. Parental Instinct (Desire for Offspring)

This instinct is aroused by seeing, smelling, or hearing the cries of one's child. Once aroused, it impels the living being to protect its child. Reminiscence of offspring can also awaken this instinct. This tendency is stronger in founders/caregivers of orphanages. Therefore, barren or childless individuals show love in nurturing other people's children and in protecting pets like cats.

2. Combat/Pugnacity Instinct

The instinct of pugnacity is awakened by trouble caused to one's child by others or by encountering an obstacle. When an obstacle arises in one's work, anger arises first toward the creator of the obstacle, followed by battle to eliminate it. First, an attempt is made to remove the obstacle; if prevention fails, an effort is made to destroy the obstacle creator. In earlier times, this instinct was linked with the food-seeking instinct.

3. Curiosity Instinct (Inquisitiveness)

This instinct, like other instincts, is linked with another instinct. When a well-perceived object fails to evoke a specific other instinct, it awakens this instinct. This tendency impels a living being toward a thorough

understanding of the object. For example, upon seeing something resembling a mouse, a cat approaches it, touches it with its paw, and observes it. Here, this instinct is also connected with the food-seeking instinct.

4. Food-Seeking Instinct

This must, in fact, be the very first instinct. Occupied by this very tendency, a living being is able to preserve itself. It is produced upon seeing food, smelling it, or due to a state of the stomach/digestive system appropriate for digestion. From this, it is known that its functioning also arises from an internal drive. The activity of this instinct involves searching for food and consuming it.

5. Repulsion Instinct (Aversion)

This instinct is awakened upon seeing an undesirable, highly despicable, or extremely unattractive object. In humans, seeing excessive unrighteousness or injustice can also evoke this instinct. The mind feels disgust toward cruelty, falsehood, wickedness, impure substances, ugly objects, and sin. The outward behavioral expressions here include condemnation, expression of contempt, spitting, and similar actions.

6. Escape Instinct (Self-Preservation)

This is generated by many causes. It arises from a sudden, harsh sound, the sight of a terrifying object, hearing distress cries from members of one's own species, physical pain, and unknown objects. The behavioral expressions include fleeing, hiding, fear, crying out, and other similar actions.

7. Gregariousness Instinct (Herd Instinct, Sociality)

This instinct is awakened by seeing, hearing the sound of, or smelling members of one's own species. Living beings, driven by these motivators, attain the instinct of gregariousness and desire the proximity of their own group. In humans, this instinct manifests even by mere remembrance of members of one's group.

8. Self-Assertion Instinct (Self-Pride Instinct, Self-Display Instinct)

This is awakened upon seeing members of one's own species who are weaker than oneself. Here, one displays one's strength and superiority through various means. In humans, behaviors such as walking with a serious gait, self-praise, and self-adornment are observed.

9. Self-Abasement Instinct (Inferiority Instinct)

This instinct arises upon seeing a member of one's own species who is superior to oneself. It impels living beings toward humility, excessive modesty, and gestures showing respect for others. Consider the tail-wagging and similar behaviors shown by a dog kept in a house in front of the

master of the house. Upon seeing a stronger dog, this same instinct impels a weaker dog to tuck its tail between its hind legs and move away.

10. Sex Instinct (Mating Instinct)

This instinct is awakened upon seeing an individual of the opposite sex belonging to one's own species, or upon perceiving traits associated with that sex. This instinct also requires physical vitality in a living organism. Just as the food-seeking instinct functions primarily when hunger is present, this instinct arises according to bodily nature only when desire exists. It is well known that Mr. Freud considers the sex instinct to be the root cause of all behaviors.

11. Acquisition Instinct (Hoarding/Collection Instinct)

This is awakened upon seeing materials useful for food and other needs. In children, it is expressed even through the collection of useless objects. Sometimes, this instinct is also engaged in protecting acquired possessions, showing envy toward anyone who tries to take them away. This instinct is seen more intensely in misers and beggars. Even creatures like ants collect food grains for the rainy season.

12. Constructive Instinct (Creative Instinct)

This instinct is awakened upon seeing materials useful for construction. It is manifested in birds when building nests. Children also build houses out of sand and decorate their playhouses.

13. Appeal Instinct (Begging/Surrender Instinct)

This instinct is engaged when the combat (pugnacity) instinct fails to work. As understood, the combat instinct itself arises when another instinct is blocked; when combat is obstructed, this appeal instinct is resorted to. Chicks run to their mother in times of distress. Crying out and running toward help are common signs of this instinct.

14. Laughter Instinct

This instinct is extraordinary and unique to human beings; animals and birds do not possess a laughter instinct. By what key is the laughter instinct unlocked? Why does a human laugh? What is gained through laughter? There are many different theories regarding these questions. In specific contexts, the laughter instinct is awakened within us, leading to laughter. Not laughing, however, causes distress.

Emotions Connected with Instincts

Mr. McDougall states that for every single instinct, there exists an inseparable, essential emotion that acts as the primary driver in motivating a living being. In lower-level organisms, pure instinct alone serves as the cause of behavior. In higher-level organisms, however, behaviors occur through emotion—which exists either as a transformed state or as an integral component of the instinct.

Sl. No.	Instinct	Associated Emotion
1.	Parental Instinct	Parental Affection / Tenderness
2.	Combat/Pugnacity Instinct	Anger
3.	Curiosity Instinct	Wonder/Curiosity
4.	Food-Seeking Instinct	Hunger
5.	Repulsion Instinct	Disgust/ Repolshion
6.	Escape Instinct	Fear
7.	Gregariousness Instinct	Feeling of Loneliness
8.	Self-Assertion Instinct	Self-Pride / Elation
9.	Self-Abasement Instinct	Sense of Inferiority/ Subjection
10.	Sex Instinct	Lust/ Desire
11.	Acquisition Instinct	Feeling of ownership/ Possessiveness
12.	Constructive Instinct	Creative Joy/ Feeling of Creation
13.	Appeal Instinct	Distress/ Helplessness
14.	Laughter Instinct	Amusement

A scientist named James Drever (1873—1950), while accepting the existence of instincts proposed by Mr. McDougall, does not agree with his assertion that emotions are inseparable from instincts or that emotions assist instincts in their function. He contends that even without emotion, action certainly occurs through instinct at times. For instance, he objects by asking: what emotion can be seen directly corresponding to the constructive instinct? He maintains that emotion arises only when the instinct is obstructed from functioning automatically on its own.

Key Roles of Instincts in Human Behavior

Survival and Homeostasis: Primitive biological instincts—such as the fight-or-flight response, hunger drive, and the startle reflex—ensure immediate physical protection and somatic regulation without waiting for slow, complex mental processing.

Reproduction and Kin Selection: Mating preferences, pair-bonding behaviors, and protective parental drives ensure species continuity and the preservation of offspring.

Social Cohesion and Bonding: Innate social drivers, including baseline empathy, cooperation, and group affiliation, allowed early humans to form complex tribes, forming the evolutionary basis of modern societal structures.

Rapid Cognitive Shortcuts: Instinctual behavioral tendencies feed into modern heuristics and intuitive decision-making, allowing humans to assess danger or opportunities rapidly in high-stakes, time-sensitive situations.

Use of Instincts in Teaching

A doubt may arise regarding what purpose teachers have in knowing about instincts. If a teacher teaches in a favorable manner or according to children's natural instincts, only then does their teaching become easy and successful. Just as swimming against the current of a river causes exhaustion, similarly, teaching conducted against a child's natural disposition causes fatigue for both the child and the teacher. Knowing that a student acts according to their instincts in the classroom, the teacher must search for the root cause of the behavior and act accordingly.

Children in this stage have no knowledge of morality or good character. Therefore, during times of misbehavior, there is no scope for mere moral lecturing. An instructor who resorts to inflicting punishment on a child acting under the impulse of an instinct only exposes their own ignorance of human nature. At the time of misbehavior, the teacher should only awaken instincts like disgust, self-preservation, or self-pride. Good behavior should be cultivated in place of bad behavior. Teaching conducted by utilizing instincts and demonstrating a praiseworthy goal becomes engaging. Students become enthusiastic, and what is learned remains well-established in the mind.

Application of Certain Instincts in Teaching

Curiosity Instinct: Curiosity arises when encountering an unknown or unseen topic after first experiencing the emotion of wonder. There is no interest at all in something that is completely unknown. Therefore, curiosity should be generated by presenting something already known. All modern science has indeed emerged through the curiosity instinct. Man is first astonished by the unknown and later understands it. Children show great reverence for things they have personally seen, touched, or known.

Teacher's Role: A teacher should teach in such a way that children learn by themselves, rather than telling them everything directly. Curiosity regarding the topic to be taught must be fostered. Here lies the utility of the introductory setup (or lesson plan introduction). Presenting an unknown goal in the introduction awakens the curiosity instinct. The heuristic method (self-discovery method) and the problem-solving method function by relying on this instinct. Curiosity should not be directed toward meaningless, useless, or hair-splitting tasks (akin to examining crow's teeth). Similarly, the constructive instinct can also be successfully applied in teaching tasks should be applied. Initially, a child performs random actions by moving their hands. By doing so, they gradually gain the ability to move their hands as desired and execute whatever they conceive in their mind. Action skills are acquired only through such practice. In modern schools, arrangements are made to develop action skills.

Constructive Instinct: This instinct holds prominence in Kindergarten, Montessori schools, and the Basic Education

(Wardha) system. Children are introduced to crafts like mat weaving and other handiworks.

Combat/Pugnacity Instinct: This instinct finds sublimation (redirection) through sports, games, and academic debates.

Acquisition Instinct: This instinct should be utilized in uplifting mental activities, such as collecting appropriate and useful objects.

Conclusion: Human instincts form the invisible substrate of our behavior, offering rapid, evolutionary blueprints for survival and social connection. While these deep-seated impulses drive our initial reactions, human behavior ultimately remains remarkably dynamic—guided by conscious thought, cultural context, and personal choice. Ultimately, our actions reflect a continuous balance between biologically hardwired responses and the learned ability to reason, adapt, and override them.

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