

Stimulus, Structure, and Relationship: An Integrative Psychotherapy Theory of Motivation

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Abstract

The integrative psychotherapy theory of motivation is composed of three parts: stimulus, structure, and relationship. This theory of motivation determines which theories of personality can be integrated and which are conceptually inconsistent and do not integrate into a unified, comprehensive theory of human functioning. When theories of motivation and personality have an internal validity and consistency, they work together as a conceptual organization for a unified theory of therapeutic method.

Keywords

Stimulus, structure, relationship, motivation, personality, therapeutic methods, integrative psychotherapy, theoretical consistency

In rereading articles published in the *International Journal of Integrative Psychotherapy*, it is apparent that neither other authors nor I have described the concept of *motivation* and how it interfaces with integrative psychotherapy theories of personality development and psychological functioning (Erskine, 2011, 2013a, 2023a; O'Reilly-Knapp & Erskine, 2010). However, the amalgamation of the theories of motivation, personality, and methods are illustrated in detailed case studies of psychotherapy clients who rely on silence and relational withdrawal to self-stabilize (Erskine, 2021a, 2021b) as well as clients who live on the "borderline" between despair and rage (Erskine, 2012, 2013b, 2013c).

The integrative psychotherapy theory of motivation includes the concepts of stimulus, structure, and relationship. These three concepts provide a meta-perspective that encompasses and demarcates the various theories of personality such as unconscious relational patterns, ego states, transference, script beliefs, relational needs, and other sub-theories. For a theoretical school of psychotherapy to be coherent and consistent, there must be an interconnection of three distinct theories: the theory of motivation, theories of personality, and a theory of therapeutic methods. A theory of motivation determines which theories of personality can be integrated and which are conceptually inconsistent and do not integrate into a unified, comprehensive theory of human functioning.

In a developmentally based, relationally focused integrative psychotherapy, the various understandings of personality include, but are not limited to, the concepts of: relational patterns, relational needs, unconscious process, ego states, splitting of the self, introjection, script beliefs, homeostatic functions, transference, and other sub-theories. The concepts of personality have been defined and elaborated in several publications (Erskine, 2021c, 2021d, 2023b, 2015/2025; Erskine & Moursund, 2022; Erskine, et al., 1999/2023).

When theories of motivation and personality have an internal validity and consistency, they work together as a conceptual organization for a unified theory of therapeutic method.

To be coherent, a theory of method must emerge from corresponding theories of human motivation and personality (Erskine, 2015/2025; Erskine & Moursund, 2022; Erskine et al., 1999/2023). A theory of method provides guidelines for how methods may be designed. It

provides an orientation to the practice of psychotherapy. In a developmentally based, relationally focused integrative psychotherapy, the theory of methods is based on the premise that *the healing of psychological destabilization caused by prolonged neglect, continuous stress, and/or relational abuse occurs through the use of a therapeutic relationship that focuses on enhancing the client's capacity for internal, external, and interpersonal contact*. This theory of method provides both an overall framework from which specific methods are designed and a conceptual beacon that serves as a guide to the therapist in the continual monitoring of observations, hypotheses, and specific interventions (Erskine, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2023a).

An Integrative Theory of Motivation

In my teachings about the theory of motivation, I describe the artist Alexander Calder's mobile constructions as a visual metaphor of the intricacy of stimulus, structure, and relationship. One of Calder's sculptures that is particularly alluring is composed of three diverse shapes: an oval, a square, and a triangle. Each differently colored shape appears to dangle in space, yet at the same time each individual form is delicately balanced by the other two shapes. The slightest movement in one of the forms incites a consequent movement in both of the other shapes. And so it is with people; we are physically and psychologically motivated by a delicate balance of stimulus, structure, and relationship. *These are biological imperatives: we cannot live without internal and external stimulus, we crave structure, and relationships provide a felt sense of identity and belonging*. These biological imperatives provide the concepts for a comprehensive theory of motivation.

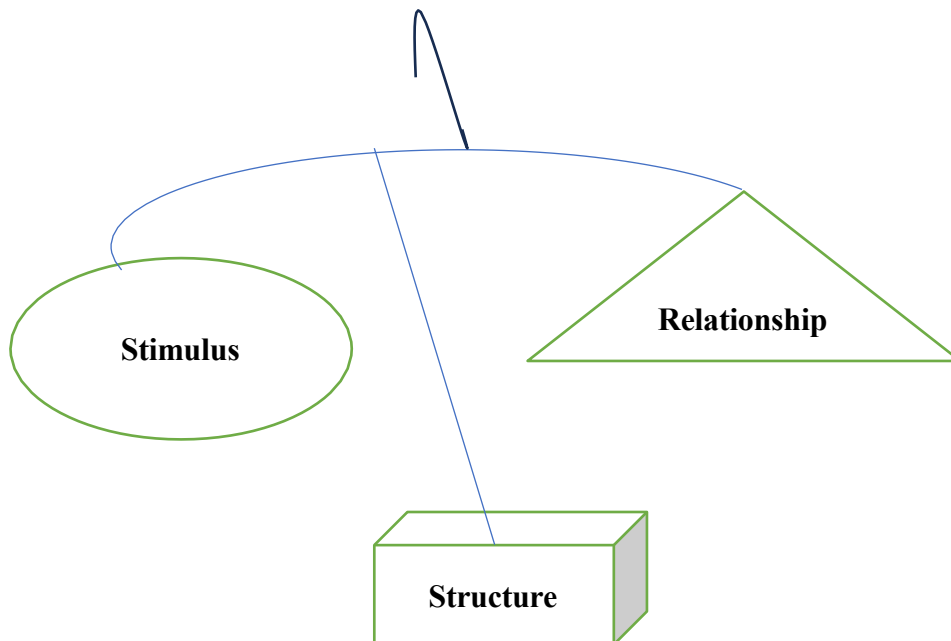


Figure 1. Integrative psychotherapy theory of motivation: a delicate balance of stimulus, structure, & relationship.

Stimulus

Stimulus is necessary for survival. Stimuli operate both internally and externally and provide the informational feedback system that leads to the satisfaction of basic needs. The survival needs for oxygen, water, and food—as well as psychological and relational needs—all begin with internal stimuli that lead to an awareness of a discomfort. As internal biological and psychological processes come to awareness, a person must also become aware of the environment that can supply the resources for survival.

To satisfy that which is needed, a person must make contact not only with their internal sensations and needs, but also with the external environment. Survival and quality of life are ensured through the continual moment-by-moment interplay between internal and external stimuli and the capacity to make full contact both internally and externally. The biological imperative for stimulus is satisfied through the interaction of the central nervous system and the proprioceptive organs. Our “sensory system provides us with an orientation” (Perls, 1973, p. 17) that makes full external and internal contact possible. Full contact is essential for life—it satisfies the biological imperative for stimuli that influences and regulates the drives for structure and relationship.

While reading the paragraph above, you may have been distracted by a sound in another room (external stimuli). At that moment it may not have been possible to concentrate on these written words. Then you may realize that you are thirsty (internal stimuli), so you get up and pour a glass of water (coordinating several external stimuli) and then have a refreshing drink (internal stimuli). Each of these activities involves the processing of several internal and external stimuli, as well as using various cognitive structures such as chair, glass, and water.

Structure

Structure refers to the human drive to organize experience and to form perceptual configurations—visually, auditorily, tactilely, kinesthetically, and cognitively. The experimental Gestalt psychologists demonstrated that there is an innate drive to form perceptual patterns and configurations (Kohler, 1938; Lewin, 1938). The drive to structure perceptual configurations and the inevitability of figure-ground formation creates and organizes patterns, meaning, and predictability in our lives. This, in turn, makes concept formation, categorization, and language possible. The formation of perceptual configurations refers not only to auditory or visual patterns—such as the recognition of a familiar sound or the meaning in these written words—but also to tactile and kinesthetic patterns such as the habitual tensing of muscles in response to fear or anger and to the creation of beliefs about self, others, and the quality of life.

Stern (1985) referred to the three-day-old infant’s capacity to form an olfactory configuration that allows the baby to turn their head toward the smell of breast milk from their own mother rather than in the direction of milk from another woman. This innate tendency to structure configurations that create meaning and predictability and to organize the continuity of experience over time also provides the possibility for perceptual variability and the creation of new organization and meaning. It is only because we form perceptual patterns that it is also possible to perceive novelty, variation, and contrast (Perls, et al., 1951).

Both continuity and variability in perception are necessary for the urge for stimulus and relationship to be satisfied. If there is a disruption in the structuring of sensations or perceptions, then there will also be a disruption in the full processing of internal and external stimuli and/or the satisfaction of relational needs. Thus, the drive to organize and generalize patterns of experience (structure hunger) influences the biological imperative of both stimulus and relationship. Human beings continually strive to make meaning of their experiences and observations.

While some of our clients are in conversation with us, they may rely on old beliefs about themselves and others (mental structures) in order to maintain continuity, confirm their identity, or establish predictability. Predictability, identity, and continuity are mental structures that

maintain both homeostasis and beliefs about themselves and others (structures about relationship). These mental structures provide meaning about life and emotional regulation (stimulus). Through our empathic involvement and presence, we provide our clients with a different, and perhaps unique, quality of relationship—a relationship that influences a change in both their internal sensations and thoughts about themselves and others.

Relationship

A growing body of literature supports the premise that people are born relationship-seeking and continue patterns of bonding and attachment throughout life. Stern's (1985) compilation of research on infant development supports the idea that the infant's and young child's sense of self emerges through interpersonal relationships. In addition, authors writing from a feminist perspective on psychotherapy emphasize the centrality of interpersonal connection and relationship in the formation of a healthy sense of self in both females and males (Bergman, 1991; Miller, 1986; Surrey, 1985). Sullivan's (1953) interpersonal theory also places central importance on establishing and maintaining relationships. Contemporary writings in Gestalt therapy have emphasized the importance of a dialogical, healing relationship (Hycner & Jacobs, 1995; Yontef, 1993). Each of these theorists described a developmental thrust for relationship.

The book *Beyond Empathy: A Therapy of Contact-in-Relationship* (Erskine, et al., 1999/2023) details the biological imperative for relationship. It defines eight specific needs inherent in interpersonal relationship throughout every age of our life. These eight needs include: 1) security within a relationship; 2) validation, affirmation, and significance within a relationship; 3) acceptance by a stable, dependable, and protective other person; 4) the confirmation of personal experience; 5) self-definition; 6) to have an impact on the other person; 7) to have the other initiate; and 8) to express love. There may be more than these eight relational needs; these were the needs most prevalent in the qualitative research.

Relationships are built on interpersonal contact that includes the stimulus of physical touch and a valuing recognition by another person of an individual's being and attributes. Relationships provide the experience from which the configuration of a sense of self, of others, and of the quality of life emerge. Although relationships are built on the stimulus of moment-by-moment verbal and nonverbal transactions, they also reflect the drive to structure pattern and meaning from an individual's whole history of interpersonal experiences. Satisfaction of the biological imperative for relationship depends on the awareness of relational needs (internal stimulus), what the individual believes about self and others in the interpersonal relationships (structure), and the behavior of the other person in the relationship (external stimulus).

The innate urge for relationship is affected by and influences the drives for stimulus and structure. When an individual's needs for relationship are repeatedly not met by a reciprocal response from another person, the individual may overgeneralize and rigidify the conclusions drawn from this experience. The conclusions and decisions are an attempt to make sense of the cumulative rupture in relationship and thus make it (temporarily) bearable. From a perspective of a developmentally based, relationally focused integrative psychotherapy theory of personality, the compensating structure can be viewed as: maintaining physiological survival reactions, forming implicit experiential conclusions, making explicit script decisions, fantasizing and collecting selective evidence that reinforces script beliefs, or splitting the ego into various states (Erskine, 2015/2025).

If the drive to structure experience does not compensate for a lack of need-fulfilling relationship, the drive for stimulus may be employed in its place. The compensating drive for stimulus may be manifested as emotional escalation or physical agitation or, conversely, as disavowal of affect, desensitization, or dissociation. Anxious obsessing is one of many examples of psychological phenomena in which stimulus hunger and structure hunger are both used as overcompensation for a lack of fulfillment of relationship hunger.

My client Janice grew up the youngest child in a five-person family. She describes how her family life was “full of loud accusations and constant arguments.” Each time she tells me another memory about living in the middle of the family's conflicts, her jaw, neck, and shoulders

are tense. As I listen to her, I think about the repeated relational disruption in Janice's young life and realize that she compensated through muscle tension that altered both her internal stimulus and physical structures. As I inquired about the tension in her neck and shoulders, Janice began to weep, "I was never able to cry when my parents and brothers were all fighting." With careful inquiry it became evident that Janice had made sense of her world by believing "I'm insignificant" and "people are only interested in themselves." These beliefs are her cognitive structures that make sense of the child's relational disruptions. Throughout our psychotherapy Janice had difficulty accepting my patience and tender comments. She questioned why I was "kind" and assumed that it was my "professional task." By not accepting my attunement to her affect, she was able to maintain her old mental structure, "I'm insignificant."

Balancing Stimulus, Structure, and Relationship

As already described, the three biological imperatives are in dynamic balance: any disruption in one of the drives causes an overcompensation in at least one of the others. More specifically, the drives for stimulus and for structure, on the one hand, and relationship hunger on the other, are interactive: the satisfaction of one hunger or drive is affected by the satisfaction—or non- satisfaction—of another.

Madeline was a divorced mother of a nine-year-old girl. She came to therapy because she was "despairing" and extremely overweight. In our weekly psychotherapy sessions, I found it difficult to get her to talk about her sense of depression or any internal sensations. She would periodically tell me that my inquiry was "too much to think about." She would bring my inquiry back to her concern about being "fat and unattractive," or she would talk about her daughter's accomplishments at school.

She told me several stories about how she tried to lose weight. I listened with interest and patience. It seemed to me that she was often talking to herself, not to me. Other than a few social friends from church and her activities with her nine-year-old daughter, she had no meaningful relationship. Her time was consumed with her work as a school teacher and caring for her daughter. As I thought about the theories of stimulus, structure, and relationship, it seemed apparent that Madeline's life was marked by an absence of any meaningful relationships. I wondered if her "despairing" was the internal stimuli that reflected the absence of any need- fulfilling adult relationship.

In trying to understand how to provide an effective psychotherapy for Madeline, I thought about the biological imperatives: stimulus, structure, and relationship. Since it was difficult to get Madeline to talk about her feelings or family relationships, my questions were now about how she structured her time. She described how she would finish teaching at 3:30 in the afternoon and then immediately go to a donut shop to purchase a dozen sugarcoated donuts. She talked about feeling a momentary sense of elation when she was buying the donuts. She went on to describe how she did not immediately eat the donuts, but the simple act of taking them home was "jubilant." She would store the donuts in a cupboard out of sight of her daughter; with "delightful thoughts" of eating them later. Madeline explained that once her daughter was asleep, she would consume all the donuts.

I was amazed by how Madeline structured her time and the sense of euphoria in her story. That roused me ask about her experiences after school when she was 8 or 9 years old. She described coming home to an empty apartment; her mother was at work and would not come home until after 7 pm. She cried for the first time as she talked about being "all alone." Madeline said, "When coming home from school I had only one thing to look forward to; my mother always provided something sweet and delicious. The sweet snack was my companion. I remember how good it felt to eat, but then I would get so sad waiting for my mother to come home." The internal sensation of tasting the sweet was a compensation for the hunger for relationship. I thought about Madeline's oral pleasure in eating the donuts as a form of a baby's oral contact with its mother; the intimate contact with mother provides a soothing stimulus.

Integrative Psychotherapy Theories

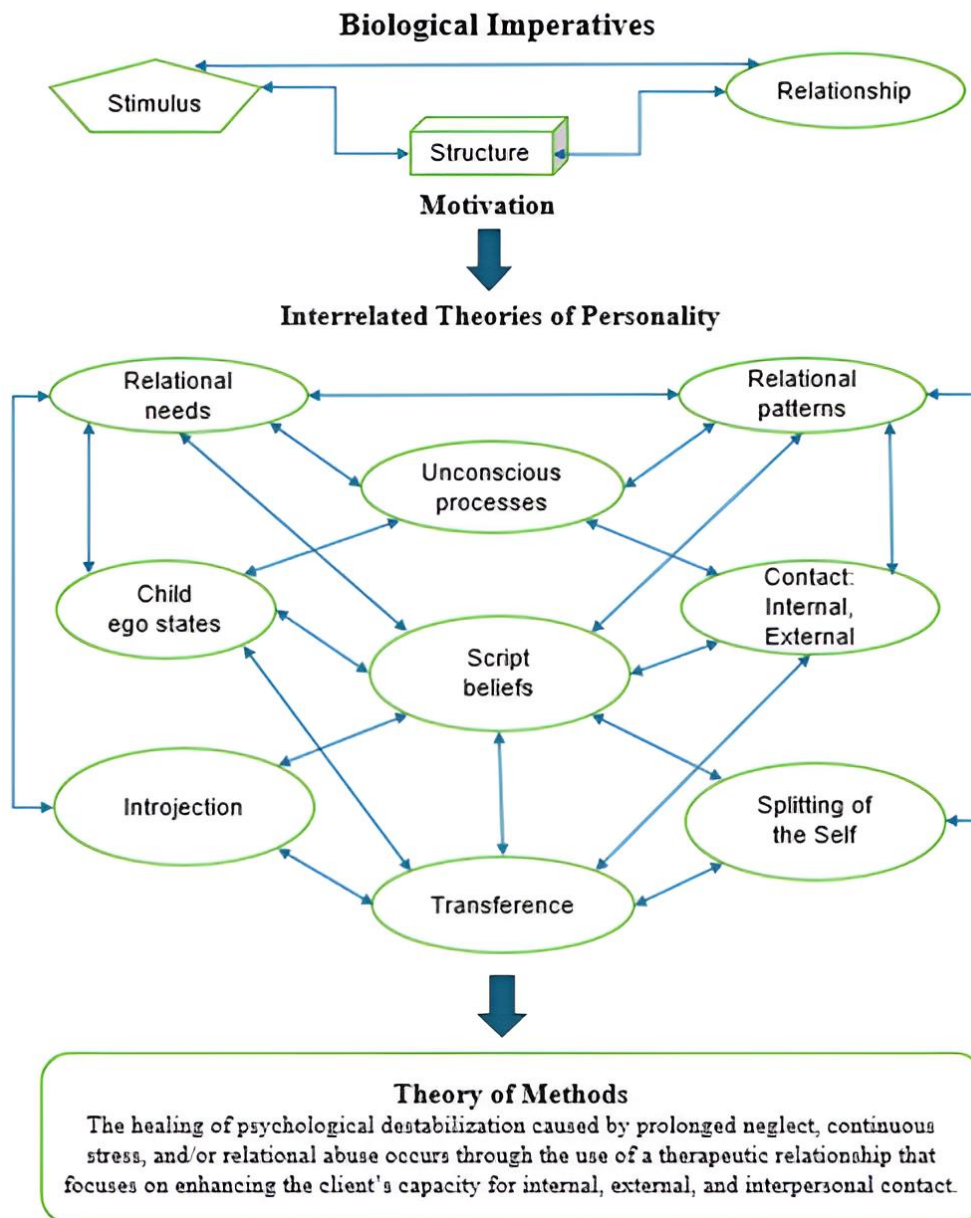


Figure 2. Integrative Psychotherapy Theories of Motivation, Personality & Methods

Conclusion

The biological imperative for stimulus, structure, and relationship provides the conceptual basis for a theory of motivation in integrative psychotherapy. To be coherent the various theories of personality must be consistent with an understanding of these biological imperatives. The theory of methods then emerges from the amalgamation of motivation and personality theories. These interactive theories of motivation, personality, and methods are the core concepts of a developmentally based, relationally focused integrative psychotherapy.

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