

A Research Justification for the

SAPIEN Needs Model

Origins, Cross-Disciplinary Convergence, and Applied Rationale

A companion paper to *Wired for Peace: Using 7 Neuroscience-Based Principles to Resolve Conflicts*

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Prepared as a peer-reference resource. Synthesizing 23 needs frameworks across psychology, neuroscience, economics, and conflict studies into six universal needs.

Executive Summary

The SAPIEN Needs Model proposes that human beings share **six universal basic psychological needs** — **S**afety, **A**ffiliation, **P**ositive self-concept, **I**ndependence, **E**ngaging activities, and **N**oble pursuits. These needs are as fundamental to our neural architecture as physical needs, and they generate just as much conflict when they are threatened, depleted, or impeded.

This paper makes the case for SAPIEN on two grounds. First, **convergent validity**: across more than two dozen independent needs frameworks — spanning humanistic psychology, neuroscience, economics, conflict studies, developmental psychiatry, motivation theory, and moral psychology — the same six categories reappear under different names. Second, **neurobiological grounding**: each need maps onto well-characterized brain and stress-system functions, which explains why a threat to a psychological need produces a measurable physiological stress response. The model is not a new invention so much as a *parsimonious synthesis* of what the field already largely agrees upon.

1. The Problem the Model Solves

There have been dozens of basic psychological needs theories proposed over the last century, from Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs to Manfred Max-Neef's human-scale development model, from Richard Ryan and Edward Deci's self-determination theory to Tony Robbins's six human needs. Each is useful, but the proliferation creates a practical problem: a practitioner trying to *diagnose a conflict* has no common vocabulary. One framework speaks of “relatedness,” another of “belonging,” a third of “affection” — yet all three point to the same underlying drive.

The SAPIEN model resolves this by asking a different question. Rather than proposing yet another list, it asks: **when the existing lists are laid side by side, how many genuinely distinct needs remain?** The answer, repeatedly, is six. SAPIEN is therefore best understood as a **unifying taxonomy** — a way to translate the field's many dialects into a single working language that a mediator, manager, or individual can actually use under stress.

2. Why Psychological Needs Drive Conflict

Wired for Peace defines escalated conflict as the perception of a threat or impediment to one's fundamental needs, goals, or values that subsequently produces a stress response. The crucial insight is that **all values are construed and all goals are developed to serve underlying, irreducible needs**. Needs are always the end game. Every escalated conflict — every acute stress response — therefore erupts from a real or perceived threat to one or more basic physical or psychological needs.

This is not merely metaphorical. Psychological pain caused by the depletion of, or perceived threat to, our psychological needs is processed in many of the same brain regions that process physical pain and threat. Humans become escalated and even violent in reaction to perceived threats to these needs *even when all physical needs are satisfied*, and they shut down and withdraw when they feel helpless about meeting them. Conversely, when these needs are consistently met, the brain's predictive systems register the environment as nonthreatening, the prefrontal cortex stays online, parasympathetic tone

is maintained, amygdala reactivity is downregulated, and unnecessary HPA-axis activation is suppressed — lowering baseline cortisol and buffering against chronic stress.

3. The Six Needs at a Glance

The acronym **SAPIEN** names the six needs in a memorable order. Each has been labeled many ways across the literature; the table below gives the canonical definition used in *Wired for Peace*.

SAPIEN Need	Synonyms across the literature	Core definition
S — Safety	security, stability, certainty, predictability, protection	Predictable environments + psychological safety to take risks without humiliation.
A — Affiliation	relatedness, belonging, love, attachment, connection	To be cared for and to belong to a group, family, or community.
P — Positive Self-Concept	identity, status, self-esteem, significance, competence, worth	To be accepted and valued across the dimensions of one's identity.
I — Independence	autonomy, agency, power, freedom, control, self-determination	To feel control over one's life and to decide autonomously.
E — Engaging Activities	stimulation, pleasure, fun, eustress, variety, challenge	To occupy the mind with stimulating, positively challenging experience.
N — Noble Pursuits	achievement, growth, mastery, meaning, purpose, self-actualization	To feel on a meaningful path with purpose and direction.

4. The Core Argument: Cross-Disciplinary Convergence

The strongest justification for any needs taxonomy is **convergence**: when researchers working in unrelated fields, using different methods and starting assumptions, independently arrive at the same categories, those categories are unlikely to be arbitrary. The appendix that follows maps 23 influential frameworks onto the six SAPIEN needs. A few patterns are worth highlighting before the full matrix.

Safety is the most universally recognized need

Nearly every framework names it directly: Maslow's *safety needs*, Rock's *certainty*, Max-Neef's *protection*, Glasser's *survival*, Schore's *feeling safe and secure*, and Robbins's *certainty*. This unanimity is expected: safety is the most fundamental and irreducible need, a psychological manifestation of the brain's most basic operation — prediction. We share it with virtually every animal that has survival instincts.

Affiliation is treated as irreducible, not derivative

Maslow's *love and belongingness*, Ryan & Deci's *relatedness*, Bowlby-influenced *attachment* (Grawe, Schore), Fiske's *belonging*, and Haidt's *care/harm* foundation all converge here. The model treats affiliation as evolving as a layer above safety — because human infants cannot survive alone — that became its own irreducible need over evolutionary time.

The self, autonomy, stimulation, and meaning each recur independently

Positive self-concept appears as Maslow's *esteem*, Rock's *status*, McClelland's *power*, and Glasser's *significance*. Independence appears as Ryan & Deci's and Rock's *autonomy*, Max-Neef's and Burton's

freedom, and Glasser's *freedom/autonomy*. Engaging activities surfaces as Glasser's *fun*, Schwartz's *hedonism and stimulation*, Max-Neef's *leisure and creation*, and Grawe's drive to *maximize pleasure and minimize distress*. Noble pursuits appears as Maslow's *self-actualization*, McClelland's *achievement*, and Fromm's *transcendence and effectiveness*.

Where frameworks disagree is granularity, not substance

Some theorists collapse needs (Glasser's five basic needs), others split them finely (Schwartz's ten universal values; Haidt's moral foundations). SAPIEN sits deliberately at a **mid-level grain**: coarse enough to be memorable and usable in the heat of conflict, fine enough to distinguish, for example, a threat to *status* (positive self-concept) from a threat to *control* (independence) — two drivers that look similar on the surface but call for different interventions.

5. Neurobiological Grounding

Convergence alone could reflect shared intellectual fashion. The second pillar of justification is that each need corresponds to identifiable neural and physiological machinery, which is why the model belongs in a *neuroscience-based* approach to conflict rather than a purely philosophical one.

- **Safety** is the psychological expression of *predictive coding* — the brain's continuous effort to reduce uncertainty. Uncertainty is experienced as dangerous; predictability is experienced as safe.
- **Affiliation** recruits attachment circuitry; social rejection and isolation register in pain- and threat-processing regions, explaining why exclusion feels physically painful.
- **Positive self-concept** is tied to consistency of one's self-model; challenges to “being right” threaten identity coherence and provoke defensive arousal.
- **Independence** links to the drive for agency and cognitive closure; loss of control increases stress and the motivation to restore influence over outcomes.
- **Engaging activities** reflect the need for *eustress* — positive, stimulating challenge that keeps the nervous system optimally aroused rather than bored or under-stimulated.
- **Noble pursuits** engage goal-directed and meaning-making systems; a sense of purpose supports regulation and resilience over the long term.

6. Why Use SAPIEN in Practice

1. **A shared diagnostic language.** It lets co-mediators, teams, and disputants name what is actually at stake without committing to one school's jargon.
2. **It points beneath positions to needs.** Because goals and values serve needs, identifying the threatened SAPIEN need reveals the real interest a solution must satisfy.
3. **It is memorable under stress.** Six items and a pronounceable acronym survive the cognitive narrowing that accompanies an acute stress response.
4. **It supports self-regulation.** Rating one's own satisfaction of each need (1–10) and applying targeted questions and affirmations is a concrete intervention the book operationalizes.
5. **It is evidence-anchored.** Every category is independently corroborated by multiple peer-reviewed frameworks, as the appendix documents.

7. Scope and Honest Limitations

SAPIEN is a **practitioner taxonomy**, not a claim that exactly six needs are the final word in motivation science. The boundaries between needs are porous — autonomy and competence, for instance, are entangled in several source frameworks, and some entries in the appendix could reasonably be filed under more than one heading. The model's value lies in its *usefulness and convergent support*, not in asserting that no alternative carve-up is possible. Readers seeking the deeper academic treatment of each need and its supporting literature are directed to jeremypollack.com/needs.

Appendix A — Crosswalk of 23 Needs Frameworks to SAPIEN

The matrix on the following page maps each source framework's terminology onto the six SAPIEN needs. A dash (—) indicates the framework does not explicitly name a need in that category; parentheses indicate a term the source places primarily elsewhere but which also bears on this need. Empty cells are themselves informative — they show which needs a given tradition foregrounds and which it leaves implicit.

Appendix A — Full Crosswalk Matrix

Twenty-three frameworks across psychology, neuroscience, economics, conflict studies, and moral philosophy, each translated into the six SAPIEN needs.

Source (Field)	Safety	Affiliation	Positive Self-Concept	Independence	Engaging Activities	Noble Pursuits
Maslow (1943) <i>Humanistic Psychology</i>	Safety needs	Love needs (love, affection, belongingness)	Esteem (reputation, recognition, importance)	Esteem (strength, independence, freedom)	—	Self-actualization
Burton (1990) <i>Conflict Resolution & Peacebuilding</i>	Safety/security; cultural security	Belongingness; love	Self-esteem; identity; participation	Freedom	Personal fulfilment	—
Grawe (2017) <i>Neuroscience</i>	Orientation/control	Attachment	Self-esteem	Orientation/control	Maximizing pleasure / minimizing distress	—
Max-Neef et al. (1992) <i>Economics & Development</i>	Protection	Affection	Participation; identity	Freedom	Leisure; understanding; creation	—
Rock — SCARF (2008) <i>Leadership Psychology</i>	Certainty	Relatedness	Status; fairness	Autonomy	—	—
Fromm (1955) <i>Humanistic Psychology</i>	—	Relatedness; Unity	Identity; rootedness; frame of orientation	Transcendence	Excitation and stimulation	Transcendence; effectiveness
Fisher, Ury & Patton (1987) <i>Anthropology & Law</i>	Security	Sense of belonging	Recognition	Control over one's life	—	—
Tay & Diener (2011) <i>I/O Psychology</i>	Safety and security	Social support & love	Feeling respected; mastery	Self-direction & autonomy	—	Mastery
Fiske (2009) <i>Social Psychology</i>	Understanding; control/competence; trust	Belonging; trust	Self-enhancement	Control/competence	—	Self-enhancement
Ryan & Deci (2000) <i>Social Psychology (SDT)</i>	(Autonomy, Competence)	Relatedness	Competence	Autonomy	—	Competence
Schore (2015) <i>Developmental Neuroscience</i>	Feeling safe and secure	To feel positive affect	To feel understood	Learn to handle feelings	—	—
Rosenberg — NVC (2005) <i>Clinical Psychology</i>	Physical well-being	Interdependence / connection	Integrity; meaning	Autonomy	Recreation / play	—
McClelland (1965) <i>Motivation Psychology</i>	(Affiliation)	Affiliation	Power	Power	—	Achievement
Murray (1938) <i>Personality Psychology</i>	(Power)	Affection; social-conformance	Ambition; status; power	Power	Materialism; information	—
Glasser (1999) <i>Psychiatry</i>	Survival	Love / belonging / connection	Power / significance / competence	Freedom / autonomy	Fun	—
Hull (1943)	—	—	—	—	—	—

Source (Field)	Safety	Affiliation	Positive Self-Concept	Independence	Engaging Activities	Noble Pursuits
<i>Neobehaviorism</i>						
Coutant, Worchel & Hanza (2001) <i>Social Psychology</i>	—	—	—	—	—	—
Sarno (2001) <i>Mind-Body Medicine</i>	To be immortal	To be liked, to be taken care of	To be perfect	To be physically invincible	To be soothed	—
Schwartz & Bilsky (1987) <i>Universal Human Values</i>	Universalism; Conformity; Security	Benevolence; Conformity	Achievement; Tradition	Power; Self-direction	Hedonism; Stimulation	—
Brazelton & Greenspan (2001) <i>Developmental Psychiatry</i>	Physical protection, safety & regulation	Ongoing nurturing relationships; supportive communities	Limit-setting; structure & expectations	Experiences tailored to individual difference	Developmentally appropriate experiences	—
Haidt — Moral Foundations <i>Moral Psychology</i>	Authority; Sanctity; Fairness	Care/harm	Loyalty/betrayal	Liberty/oppression	—	—
Robbins <i>Self-Help / Personal Growth</i>	Certainty	Connection/love; contribution	Significance; contribution	Growth	Uncertainty/variety	—
Ryan et al. (2010) <i>Eco/Nature Psychology</i>	—	—	—	—	—	Nature

Source: Appendix A, *Wired for Peace needs-system research compilation*. Full citations appear in the References below.

References

Frameworks compiled in Appendix A, each verified against the publisher of record. DOIs are given for journal articles and ISBNs for books; where a source has been reissued, the original publication and the current reprint are both noted.

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