7.1: Incentive Theory of Motivation and Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation

According to incentive theory, behavior is primarily motivated by the incentive of extrinsic factors.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

- Differentiate between intrinsic and extrinsic incentives as related to theories of motivation

KEY POINTS

- Motivations are commonly separated into two different types based on the nature of the motivator: intrinsic (arising from internal factors) or extrinsic (arising from external factors).
- Incentive theory argues that behavior is primarily extrinsically motivated: people are more motivated to perform activities if they receive a reward afterward, rather than simply because they enjoy the activities themselves.
- Intrinsically motivated behaviors are performed because of the sense of personal satisfaction that they bring.
- Extrinsically motivated behaviors are performed in order to receive something from others—such as a promotion, praise, candy, money, or attention.
- Studies have shown that intrinsic motivation will decrease over time if extrinsic incentives are introduced for behaviors that an individual already found motivating.
- The efficacy of extrinsic motivators varies depending on factors such as self-esteem, locus of control, self-efficacy, and neuroticism.
TERMS

- **incentive** Something that motivates, rouses, or encourages; an anticipated reward or aversive event from the environment.
- **extrinsic** External; inessential.
- **intrinsic** Innate; inherent; essential.

FULL TEXT

Motivation refers to a desire, need, or drive that contributes to and explains behavioral changes. In general, motivators provide some sort of incentive for completing a task. One definition of a motivator explains it as a force “acting either on or within a person to initiate behavior.” In addition to biological motives, motivations can be either intrinsic (arising from internal factors) or extrinsic (arising from external factors). Incentive theory argues that people are primarily extrinsically motivated—meaning that most motivations stem from extrinsic sources.

Intrinsically motivated behaviors are performed because of the sense of personal satisfaction that they bring. According to Deci (1971), these behaviors are defined as ones for which the reward is the satisfaction of performing the activity itself. Intrinsic motivation thus represents engagement in an activity for its own sake. For example, if you are in college because you enjoy learning new things and expanding your knowledge, you are intrinsically motivated to be there.

Extrinsically motivated behaviors, on the other hand, are performed in order to receive something from others or avoid certain negative outcomes. Theorists define extrinsic motivation as “engaging in an activity to obtain an outcome that is separable from the activity itself” (deCharms, 1968; Lepper & Greene, 1978). The extrinsic motivator is outside of, and acts on, the individual. Rewards—such as a job promotion, money, a sticker, or candy—are good examples of extrinsic motivators. Social and emotional incentives like praise and attention are also extrinsic motivators since they are bestowed on the individual by another person.

Extrinsic rewards are often used to impact someone who shows little interest in a potentially useful activity. For example, if a child shows no interest in memorizing new vocabulary words, her teacher might employ external rewards to get her to engage in and work hard on that activity. Similarly, a child might be motivated to do his chores by the extrinsic motivation that he will get his allowance afterward, rather than any intrinsic sense of accomplishment. Grades offer extrinsic motivation as well: students are generally motivated to do a better job if they know their performance will be judged (Stockdale & Williams, 2004).

Incentive theory is based on the idea that behavior is primarily extrinsically motivated. It argues that people are more motivated to perform activities if they receive a reward afterward, rather than simply because they enjoy the activities themselves.

There is controversy concerning how and for how long motivators change behavior. For instance, some data suggest that intrinsic motivation is diminished when extrinsic motivation is given—a process known as the overjustification effect. If extrinsic incentives are used to stimulate behaviors that an individual already finds motivating (even without external reinforcement), intrinsic motivation for that behavior may decrease over time. In those cases, extrinsic motivators can backfire: instead of serving as an incentive for the desired behavior, they undermine a previously held intrinsic motivation. This can lead to extinguishing the intrinsic motivation and creating a dependence on extrinsic
rewards for continued performance (Deci et al., 1999).

A classic research study of intrinsic motivation illustrates this problem clearly. In the study, researchers asked university students to perform two activities—solving puzzles and writing newspaper headlines—that they already found interesting. Some of the students were paid to do these activities, the others were not. Under these conditions, the students who were paid were less likely to continue to engage in these activities after the experiment, while the students who were not paid were more likely to continue—even though both groups had been equally interested in the activities to begin with (Deci, 1971). The extrinsic reward of payment, it seemed, interfered with the intrinsic reward of the activity itself.

Other studies suggest that intrinsic motivation may not be so vulnerable to the effects of extrinsic reinforcements, and in fact, reinforcements such as verbal praise might actually increase intrinsic motivation (Arnold, 1976; Cameron & Pierce, 1994). Several factors may influence this: for one, physical reinforcements (such as money) have been shown to have more negative effects on intrinsic motivation than do verbal reinforcements (such as praise). Furthermore, the expectation of the extrinsic motivator by an individual is crucial: if the person expects to receive an extrinsic reward, then intrinsic motivation for the task tends to be reduced. If, however, there is no such expectation, and the extrinsic motivation is presented as a surprise, then intrinsic motivation for the task tends to persist (Deci et al., 1999).

Other studies provide evidence that the effectiveness of extrinsic motivators varies depending on factors like self-esteem, locus of control (the extent to which someone believes they can control events that affect them), self-efficacy (how someone judges their own competence to complete tasks and reach goals), and neuroticism (a personality trait characterized by anxiety, moodiness, worry, envy, and jealousy). For example, praise might have less effect on behavior for people with high self-esteem because they would not have the same need for approval that would make external praise reinforcing. On the other hand, someone who lacks confidence may work diligently for the sole purpose of seeking even a small amount of recognition.

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