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Instrumental Motivation is Extrinsic Motivation: So What???

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The present anticipation of future goals creates instrumental motivation for immediate actions that are expected to be instrumental for achieving those future goals. Instrumental motivation is however by definition extrinsic motivation. Based on empirical research in educational settings, it is commonly argued that extrinsic motivation is of lower quality than intrinsic motivation. More recent developments in motivational psychology – in particular the development from the Cognitive Evaluation Theory into the Self-Determination Theory – replaced the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation by the more relevant distinction between autonomous and controlled motivation or behavioral regulation. Some types of extrinsic motivation belong to the category autonomous motivation, that is the case when the individual integrates or identifies with the external reason for doing the activity. We review empirical research from our research group that shows that instrumental motivation that is based on anticipated future goals can be autonomous and hence have a high quality. What matters is the content of the future goals and how they regulate behavior. Intrinsic future goals which are not perceived by the individual as externally controlling but as creating autonomous motivation/behavioral regulation are almost as adaptive as intrinsic motivation.

KEYWORDS: Motivation; Future time perspective; Instrumentality

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Ask students why they make their home work, learn their lessons, prepare their tests or exams. Some students may say that they like doing those things as such (e.g., I love geography; I really want to understand the phenomenon of earthquakes; I want to be able to speak fluently a few foreign languages) but many of the reasons given – even by optimally motivated students – are unrelated to those activities as

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such, but refer to antecedents or consequences of such activities (e.g., When I do my best, I will receive a reward; My mother forces me to study, otherwise I will be punished; I want to succeed and go to college to become a teacher, a psychologist, etc.). A third alternative implies the combination of both types of reasons (e.g., I am really interested in how to do regression analysis but also because it will be helpful, when I'll be in graduate school, to analyse my research data and understand what they are telling me about my research question). Students can have many different reasons and motives to study and their teachers to teach (Covington, 1992; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008; Stipek, 2002).

In motivation psychology these two distinct types of motivation are called intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Atkinson, 1964, Deci, 1975; White, 1959). An action is intrinsically motivated when the goal of the action is the action itself. The activity is inherently satisfying. People can be intrinsically interested in gaining knowledge, in striving for (more) competence, in playing cards, doing sports etc... An activity is extrinsically motivated when it is instrumental for reaching a goal that is not inherently related to the activity as such (e.g., studying to receive a reward or to succeed in the exam; learning how to play very good tennis to become a professional and make a lot of money).

Very often, however, people are both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated at the same time (Abreu, 2002; Deci, 1975; Lens, 2001; Lepper & Greene, 1978). Students study hard because they are thrilled by insight in and understanding of a particular phenomenon (e.g., human motivation) but also because they want to succeed in the exams and please their parents. This means that the total motivation for many of our daily activities must be conceived of as the sum of an intrinsic and an extrinsic component. The strength of the total motivation to study, to work, etc. can hence be increased by intensifying the intrinsic or the extrinsic component, or both.

Motivational problems in education are most frequently related to students' lack of intrinsic motivation. This may sound strange given that all animals – also human beings – have an innate need to know, to explore, to manipulate things, to understand. Children are highly curious, they continuously ask “why”. It seems however that at the end of primary education not much is left of this drive. Most students in high school and college are to a very large extent predominantly extrinsically motivated. For Bruner (1966) it seems that schools kill rather than nurse this need for knowledge and understanding.

The observation that a person's total amount of motivation at each moment in time is based on the sum of his intrinsic and extrinsic motivation does, however, not imply that these two types of motivation are additive over time. The title of