Incentive Theory of Motivation

CORE CONCEPT

Incentive theory proposes that behavior is motivated by external stimuli that attract or repel us. Positive incentives (rewards) pull us toward behaviors, while negative incentives (punishments) push us away. Unlike drive theory, which emphasizes internal states pushing behavior, incentive theory focuses on external goals pulling behavior. Both work together in practice.

TYPES OF INCENTIVES

✓ Positive Incentives (Attract Behavior):

- Money and financial rewards
- Praise and recognition
- Privileges and perks
- Social approval and status
- Achievement and success

✗ Negative Incentives (Repel Behavior):

- Punishment and penalties
- Loss of privileges

INTRINSIC VS. EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Extrinsic Motivation

External rewards drive behavior

Examples:

- Study for grades
- Work for salary
- Exercise for appearance

Can feel controlling; stops when rewards removed

Intrinsic Motivation

Internal satisfaction drives behavior

Examples:

- Study from curiosity
- Work from passion
- Exercise from enjoyment

Feels autonomous; better quality and persistence

⚠️ THE OVERJUSTIFICATION EFFECT: When Rewards Backfire

The Problem:

Adding external rewards to intrinsically motivated activities can DECREASE internal motivation. When you reward someone for doing something they already enjoy, the activity shifts from "play" to "work"—done for reward rather than for its own sake.

Classic Study (Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973):

Children who enjoyed drawing were given expected rewards, unexpected rewards, or no rewards. Those who received expected rewards spent LESS time drawing later. The reward undermined their intrinsic interest.

When Rewards DON'T Harm Intrinsic Motivation:

- Unexpected rewards (not anticipated during activity) • Verbal praise (if informational, not controlling)
- Rewards for activities with NO initial interest • Rewards tied to competence feedback (acknowledging skill growth)

WHAT DETERMINES INCENTIVE VALUE?

Individual Differences:

- Personal values and goals
- Past experiences
- Personality traits
- Current needs and states

Situational Factors:

- Availability and timing
- Effort required
- Probability of attainment (expectancy)

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