

# Study suggests having both extrinsic and intrinsic goal motivators can be detrimental to success

July 1 2014, by Bob Yirka

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(Medical Xpress)—A team of researchers with Yale's School of Management (and one member from Swarthmore College) has found evidence during a study that suggests that having both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations for setting goals when embarking on career path can be detrimental to success. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the team describes how they studied entrance exams, scholastic achievement, and career success and

longevity for 10,238 cadets at the United States Military Academy at West Point and found that those that held a single desire to achieve something personal, tended to do better than those that had multiple external goals.

Psychologists define two types of motives for goals with most people: extrinsic, where goals come from external motivations, such as a desire to achieve good grades or to get promotions at work and intrinsic, where people feel a deep desire to do something. A real-world example would be one young person aspiring to be a rock star with all the trappings, versus another that simply loves to sing or play guitar and pursues a career doing it mainly for that reason rather than for the glory.

To learn more about how the two different types of motivations behind goal setting impact the likelihood of success for the people that possess them, the researchers used data provided by cadets, West Point administrators and the military. Entrance examinations were given over the period 1997-2006, to 10,238 new arrivals. Follow-ups were then conducted to see if they remained at the academy, and then to see if they stayed in the military after completing a compulsory five years of service, and whether they were considered for promotions.

In analyzing all the data, the researchers found that having goals overall was a positive thing for cadets—no surprise there—and having intrinsic motivations, such as a strong desire to serve one's country, proved to be a positive thing as well. But, having both intrinsic and extrinsic [motivations](#) tended to impair outcomes. This, the researchers claim, suggests that people who hold multiple motives for achieving [goals](#), experience a negative impact on persistence and overall performance in both an educational and occupational setting.

**More information:** Multiple types of motives don't multiply the motivation of West Point cadets, Amy Wrzesniewski, *PNAS*, [DOI](#):

[10.1073/pnas.1405298111](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1405298111)

## **Abstract**

Although people often assume that multiple motives for doing something will be more powerful and effective than a single motive, research suggests that different types of motives for the same action sometimes compete. More specifically, research suggests that instrumental motives, which are extrinsic to the activities at hand, can weaken internal motives, which are intrinsic to the activities at hand. We tested whether holding both instrumental and internal motives yields negative outcomes in a field context in which various motives occur naturally and long-term educational and career outcomes are at stake. We assessed the impact of the motives of over 10,000 West Point cadets over the period of a decade on whether they would become commissioned officers, extend their officer service beyond the minimum required period, and be selected for early career promotions. For each outcome, motivation internal to military service itself predicted positive outcomes; a relationship that was negatively affected when instrumental motives were also in evidence. These results suggest that holding multiple motives damages persistence and performance in educational and occupational contexts over long periods of time.

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