Multiple Motives Don’t Always Multiply Motivation

While intuition and lay understanding of motivation would lead one to expect that multiple motives for doing something will be more effective than a single motive, empirical evidence suggests that different types of motives for the same action sometimes compete. Motives to pursue goals that are internal to a given activity (e.g., the motive of a scientist to make an important empirical discovery for its own sake) can be weakened by the simultaneous presence of instrumental motives (e.g., the motive to pursue said discovery to get a promotion or a raise in salary). The presence of both internal and instrumental motives can have a negative impact on outcomes associated with effort and quality of performance across a range of tasks. The current study presents evidence of the negative impact of mixed motivations in a field context in which motives occur naturally and long-term educational and career outcomes are at stake. Specifically, we assessed the impact of the nature and combination of the motives of incoming West Point cadets on the likelihood that they would complete their education and advance to become commissioned officers, extend their service beyond the minimum required period, and be selected for early career promotions. For each outcome assessed, motivation internal or intrinsic to military performance itself predicted positive outcomes, but this relationship was significantly and negatively affected when instrumental motivation was also present. Our results suggest that the impact of holding multiple motivations for courses of action requiring a long and effortful commitment is negative. The presence of multiple motives decreases the likelihood of positive outcomes that reflect persistence and high-quality performance.