

# Overjustification Effect

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

October 5, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Overjustification Effect*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=33561>

## Overjustification Effect

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Social Psychology, Behavioral Economics, Education

### 1. Core Definition and Underlying Mechanisms

The **Overjustification Effect** is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when an expected external incentive, such as a monetary reward or a prize, decreases a person's intrinsic motivation to perform a task. Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity for its inherent satisfaction, enjoyment, or personal interest, without any obvious external inducement. Conversely, extrinsic motivation involves performing an activity to obtain an external reward or avoid punishment. The effect suggests that when individuals are rewarded for activities they already find inherently enjoyable, they may begin to attribute their engagement to the external reward rather than their genuine interest, thus undermining their internal drive.

This cognitive shift transforms the perception of the activity. What was once seen as a pleasurable pastime undertaken for its own sake becomes reinterpreted as a means to an end--a task performed to secure the promised reward. The initial joy or satisfaction derived from the activity diminishes as the focus shifts to the external compensation. Consequently, if the external reward is later removed, the individual's motivation to engage in the activity often drops below its original level, sometimes ceasing altogether, because the primary perceived reason for performing it no longer exists.

The fundamental mechanism behind the overjustification effect lies in how individuals explain their own behavior. According to Self-Perception Theory, people infer their attitudes and motivations by observing their own behavior and the circumstances under which it occurs. When an external reward is salient, individuals may attribute their behavior to that reward ("I'm doing this for the money") rather than to their internal interest ("I'm doing this because it's fun"). This re-attribution process is central to the dampening of intrinsic motivation. The presence of an external incentive essentially "overjustifies" the behavior, providing a readily available external explanation that overshadows the internal one.

### 2. Historical Development and Foundational Research

The conceptual roots of the overjustification effect can be traced back to the broader field of motivation research, but its distinct articulation emerged in the early 1970s. One of the seminal studies that rigorously demonstrated this phenomenon was conducted by Edward Deci in 1971. In his research, college students were observed performing an interesting puzzle task. Some students were paid for their participation, while others were not. Deci found that the group receiving monetary rewards subsequently spent less free time on the puzzle when no reward was offered, compared to the group who had never been paid. This suggested that the external reward had

undermined their intrinsic interest in the puzzle.

A particularly illustrative and frequently cited study, which mirrors the example provided in the source content, was conducted by Mark Lepper, David Greene, and Richard Nisbett in 1973. They observed preschool children who enjoyed drawing. The children were divided into three groups: one group was promised a "Good Player Award" for drawing, another group drew without any prior expectation of a reward but received an unexpected award afterwards, and a control group drew without any reward. A week later, when given the opportunity to draw again without any rewards, the children who had been promised and received an award spent significantly less time drawing than they had initially. In contrast, the children who received an unexpected award, and the control group, showed no decrease in their intrinsic motivation.

This groundbreaking research with children's play provided compelling empirical evidence for the overjustification effect. It demonstrated that when an activity--which was inherently fun and intrinsically rewarding--became associated with an external reward, the children's perception of the activity fundamentally changed. It transitioned from being a source of enjoyment to becoming a task performed for compensation, akin to "work." This shift highlights the powerful psychological impact of extrinsic incentives on an individual's internal motivation, particularly when those incentives are expected.

### 3. Key Characteristics and Modulating Factors

The manifestation and strength of the overjustification effect are influenced by several key characteristics of the rewards and the context in which they are given. One critical distinction is between **expected and unexpected rewards**. As demonstrated by Lepper, Greene, and Nisbett's study, only expected rewards tend to undermine intrinsic motivation. When a reward is given unexpectedly after an activity is completed, it does not typically diminish intrinsic interest because the individual's initial engagement was not driven by the anticipation of a payoff. The unexpected reward serves as a pleasant surprise rather than a controlling factor.

Another crucial factor is the nature of the reward contingency. Rewards can be classified as **task-contingent** or **performance-contingent**. Task-contingent rewards are given simply for engaging in an activity, regardless of the quality of performance. These types of rewards are more likely to trigger the overjustification effect because they emphasize external control over participation. Performance-contingent rewards, on the other hand, are given for achieving a certain standard or level of excellence. While even these can sometimes undermine intrinsic motivation if perceived as controlling, they are less detrimental, especially if they convey positive feedback about competence and progress, rather than simply coercing participation.

Furthermore, the **informational versus controlling aspects of rewards** play a significant role. According to Cognitive Evaluation Theory, a sub-theory of Self-Determination Theory, every

reward has both a controlling aspect and an informational aspect. The controlling aspect relates to how much the reward is perceived to coerce behavior, thereby diminishing autonomy. The informational aspect relates to how much the reward conveys feedback about one's competence. If a reward is primarily perceived as controlling, it is more likely to undermine intrinsic motivation. However, if it is primarily perceived as informational--affirming competence and achievement without undue pressure--it can actually enhance intrinsic motivation or at least mitigate the negative effects. This is particularly true for verbal praise or constructive feedback, which rarely undermines intrinsic motivation and often enhances it.

## 4. Psychological Explanations and Theories

The overjustification effect is primarily explained through two influential psychological frameworks: Self-Perception Theory and Cognitive Evaluation Theory. As previously mentioned, Self-Perception Theory, proposed by Daryl Bem, suggests that individuals determine their own attitudes and feelings by observing their own behavior and the circumstances under which that behavior occurs. When a person engages in an activity for which there is a clear and salient external reward, they are likely to attribute their motivation to that external factor. For instance, if someone is paid to read, they might conclude, "I must be reading for the money," rather than, "I read because I enjoy it." This external attribution then overshadows any pre-existing intrinsic interest.

Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET), developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, offers a more nuanced explanation by focusing on how external events, such as rewards, feedback, or threats, affect intrinsic motivation by influencing a person's feelings of autonomy and competence. CET posits that individuals have innate psychological needs for autonomy (feeling in control of one's own actions) and competence (feeling effective and capable). When a reward is perceived as controlling, it diminishes the individual's sense of autonomy, thereby undermining intrinsic motivation. For example, if a child is told they "must" clean their room to get a toy, their sense of choice is removed, and the activity becomes externally regulated.

Conversely, if a reward or feedback is perceived as primarily informational, it can enhance a person's sense of competence and potentially boost intrinsic motivation, or at least prevent its decline. For instance, receiving an award for exceptional performance, especially when it is unexpected or conveys genuine recognition of skill, can affirm competence without necessarily diminishing autonomy. The key differentiator between these two theories lies in their emphasis: Self-Perception Theory focuses on how individuals interpret their own behavior, while Cognitive Evaluation Theory delves into how external factors impact fundamental psychological needs for autonomy and competence, thereby modulating intrinsic motivation.

## 5. Applications Across Various Domains

The implications of the overjustification effect are far-reaching, influencing strategies in education, workplace management, parenting, and even public health initiatives. In the realm of **education**, understanding this effect is crucial for fostering a genuine love of learning. Educators who rely heavily on external rewards like grades, prizes, or tangible incentives for classroom participation or academic achievement risk turning learning into a chore rather than an intrinsically fulfilling endeavor. While rewards can be useful for initially engaging students in less appealing tasks, over-reliance can reduce their innate curiosity and drive to learn for learning's sake. The emphasis should instead be on creating engaging curricula, providing constructive feedback, and promoting a sense of autonomy and mastery.

In the **workplace**, the overjustification effect challenges traditional views that higher pay automatically leads to better performance or higher job satisfaction. While competitive compensation is essential for attracting and retaining talent, simply increasing extrinsic rewards for tasks that employees might otherwise find fulfilling can inadvertently decrease their intrinsic motivation and creativity. For complex, creative, or challenging jobs, where intrinsic motivators like autonomy, mastery, and purpose are critical, excessive reliance on bonuses or performance-based pay can backfire. Managers are encouraged to focus on creating environments that support employee autonomy, provide opportunities for skill development, and offer meaningful work, alongside fair compensation.

For **parents**, the overjustification effect offers insights into motivating children. Rewarding children for chores, good behavior, or academic achievements can sometimes transform these activities into transactional exchanges. A child who initially helps around the house out of a desire to contribute or an intrinsic sense of responsibility might, once regularly rewarded, come to expect payment and cease helping if no reward is offered. Parents are advised to use rewards judiciously, prioritizing verbal praise, quality time, and fostering a sense of contribution and competence, rather than solely relying on tangible incentives that might undermine a child's natural willingness.

## 6. Critiques and Limitations of the Effect

While the overjustification effect is a well-established phenomenon in psychology, it is not universally applicable and has faced various critiques and limitations. One significant point of discussion revolves around the **conditions under which the effect is strongest or weakest**. Research indicates that the effect is most pronounced when the initial intrinsic motivation for an activity is high. If an activity is inherently uninteresting or tedious, the introduction of external rewards is less likely to undermine intrinsic motivation simply because there was little to undermine in the first place. In such cases, extrinsic rewards can be effective tools for encouraging engagement.

Furthermore, the **type and context of the reward** are crucial moderators. As discussed,

unexpected rewards, verbal praise, or performance-contingent rewards that convey positive information about competence are far less likely to cause the overjustification effect, and can even enhance motivation. Tangible, expected, and task-contingent rewards are the primary culprits. Critics also point out that in real-world scenarios, motivations are often complex and multi-faceted, involving a blend of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that interact in intricate ways, making it difficult to isolate the pure effect of overjustification.

Some scholars also argue that the long-term impact of the effect might be overstated in certain contexts, particularly when rewards are part of a larger, supportive environment that also fosters autonomy and competence. The debate also extends to methodological considerations in studies, with some critiques suggesting that experimental designs might not always fully capture the dynamic interplay of motivations in natural settings. Despite these debates, the core insight--that carelessly applied extrinsic rewards can diminish intrinsic motivation--remains a powerful and widely accepted principle in motivational psychology.

## 7. Counteracting the Overjustification Effect

Recognizing the potential pitfalls of extrinsic rewards, strategies for mitigating or even counteracting the overjustification effect are essential for maintaining and fostering intrinsic motivation. One primary approach is to **prioritize and cultivate intrinsic motivators**. This involves designing tasks and environments that are inherently engaging, provide opportunities for challenge and mastery, and allow for a sense of autonomy and choice. For instance, in educational settings, allowing students to choose projects or learning methods can enhance their sense of control and intrinsic interest, making them less susceptible to the negative impacts of external rewards.

When rewards must be used, it is critical to employ them judiciously and with an awareness of their psychological impact. Opting for **unexpected rewards** or making rewards contingent on **high-quality performance rather than mere participation** can significantly reduce the risk of undermining intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, ensuring that any reward is accompanied by positive, informational feedback that highlights competence and effort, rather than solely serving as a controlling incentive, can help preserve or even enhance intrinsic interest. For example, praising a child's effort and skill when they complete a task, rather than just handing over a prize, helps them internalize their success.

Ultimately, the goal is to shift the focus from "doing it for the reward" to "doing it because it is valuable, enjoyable, or meaningful." This involves fostering a perception of the activity as originating from internal choice and personal interest. By emphasizing the inherent benefits of an activity, providing opportunities for self-direction, and offering constructive, competence-affirming feedback, individuals and institutions can leverage rewards effectively without inadvertently

extinguishing the very intrinsic drive they aim to encourage. The delicate balance lies in using extrinsic motivators as catalysts or recognition, rather than as the sole justification for engaging in a task.

## Further Reading

[Overjustification Effect - Wikipedia](#)

[Intrinsic Motivation - Wikipedia](#)

[Extrinsic Motivation - Wikipedia](#)

[Self-Perception Theory - Wikipedia](#)

[Cognitive Evaluation Theory - Wikipedia](#)

[Self-Determination Theory - selfdeterminationtheory.org](#)

ARABPSYCHOLOGY.COM