

An Interactional Study of The Effect of Social Disadvantage on Humane Motives



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Abstract

Among frequently used motivation theories some are built on the premise of work happening in the 60s and 70s. Since work life has changed dramatically the question arises whether these theories are still valid. This study validates the long-standing need theory of McClelland (Am Psychol 40(7):812–825, 1985. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.40.7.812) using neuroscientific methods as a new lens of analysis. It neurally tests the assumptions that (1) heterogeneous rewards may result in similarly rewarding effects and (2) that these effects are enhanced if a reward closely matches an employee's need. Therefore, we conducted an fMRI-study ($n = 44$; 29♀; $M_{age} = 25.00$, $SD_{age} = 2.26$) in which participants completed decision tasks before receiving the heterogeneous rewards high income, respectful leadership and a company car. Additionally, participants provided information on their need for achievement, affiliation and power. Results show that the heterogeneous types of rewards lead to overlapping neural activations in parts of the brain's reward circuitry, such as the putamen or caudate. Additionally, each of these rewards uniquely activates brain areas not stimulated by other reward types. A closer matching between the type of reward and the participants' individual needs results in stronger neural activations in the reward circuitry. These findings support and enhance key assumptions of need theory on a neural level and further promote a personality-based approach to work motivation. From a practical standpoint they suggest need-tailored reward systems for organizations and an increased use of rewards other than money.

Motivated employees are considered a key factor in competition, for which reason it is in companies' best interests to motivate their staff. The importance of employee motivation has led to much research devoted to this topic. Despite this effort, Steers et al. (2004) concluded that the research on work motivation has not kept pace with developments in other fields of management and that recent textbooks still rely on theories from the 1960s and 1970s. In spite of these theories' value, it is evident that they are shaped by the understanding of work happening in the 1960s and 1970s. However, work in general and work environments in particular have changed dramatically over the last few decades: increasing diversity, shifting job requirements, new information technologies, innovative forms of organization, changed power distributions and hierarchies as well as increasing globalization are just a few characteristics that describe modern work settings (Steers et al. 2004). Therefore, there is a clear need to carefully consider whether motivation theories commonly used today but rooted in earlier times are still valid. The current study accounts for this requirement and aims at validating a long-standing motivation theory.

Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Motivation is considered a key driver of performance because it is linked to numerous benefits at work (Campbell and Pritchard 1976; Maier 1955; Pinder 2008). Motivated employees are more engaged in their work (Rich 2006), their performance is of higher quality (Cerasoli et al. 2014) and they profit more from occupational training (Massenberg et al. 2015). Additionally, they are more strongly committed to their work, work longer hours, pick more challenging goals to achieve (Becker et al. 2015), and are more willing to share knowledge at the workplace (Lin 2007). Due to its positive consequences, motivation plays a central role in the field of management, both in theory and management practice.

1) Work motivation and its behavioural background

Work motivation refers to factors that energize, direct and maintain employee behaviour over time (Steers et al. 2004). In their overview, Steers et al. (2004) and Latham and Pinder (2005) summarize three major directions of motivation theory: first, *content theories* aim at identifying factors positively associated with motivation. Major content theories include, for instance,

Maslow's (1943) theory of hierarchical needs, Herzberg et al.'s (1959) motivator-hygiene theory, and McClelland's (1987) need theory. Second, *process theories* focus on the processes underlying work motivation and regard motivation from a dynamic perspective. Some of the most prominent process theories are, for instance, goal-setting theory (Locke and Latham 2002), social-cognition theory (Bandura 1977), or expectancy theory (Vroom 1964). Third, *justice theories* add a sociological perspective to work motivation with the premise that fair procedures in an organizational context enhance motivation (Latham and Pinder 2005).

2) Sample

In total, 44 (29 females) healthy MBA students with a mean age of 25 years ($SD = 2.26$) participated in this study. Because handedness, vision, and neurological illness may systematically impact brain activations (e.g. Knecht et al. 2000), all students were right-handed, with normal or corrected-to-normal vision and not a single person reported a history of neurological illness. Participants were screened for exclusion criteria (e.g. metal in the body, physical impairment, pregnancy, psychosis) and all provided written informed consent as part of the university's ethics committee protocol.

3) Study design

The study consisted of two main parts: (1) a pre-scanning part and (2) a scanning part. At the beginning of *the pre-scanning part* participants were told a cover story to help them establish an employee role. As is common in neuroscientific experiments, the cover story was approved by the university's ethical protocol. They were told that they had the chance for an internship and that depending on their task performance in the MR-scanner they would be compensated with different rewards in the internship. In the pre-scanning part, participants also received information about the task they had to complete in the scanner—which in fact was only a distraction task—and about the hypothetical rewards they could receive. The distraction task and the rewards are described in Sects. 3.2.1 and 3.2.2, respectively.

Discussion and conclusion

Motives refers to states within a person or animal that drive behavior towards some motives can be broadly classified as biological and social . There arev several social motives.

The findings of this study help to validate McClelland's (1957) need theory on a neuroscientific level. In fact, current results validate theoretical assumptions upon which that theory is built. First, it is shown if and how far different management rewards are perceived as rewarding and may contribute to work motivation. Second, based on these results we show that rewards that closely match a person's needs are perceived as more rewarding than rewards that match those needs to a lesser extent. This finding neurally validates McClelland's key assumption of a personality-based approach to work motivation. In addition, our findings extend neuroscientific literature by investigating management-relevant rewards that have not been studied before (i.e. respectful leadership, company car). In that regard, we observe that high income, respectful leadership, and a prestigious company car activate important parts of the brain's reward circuitry and are thus perceived as rewarding. In line with previous research (e.g. Sescousse et al. 2013b) these rewards trigger reward modality-dependent as well as modality-independent brain areas.

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