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Psychological Mechanisms of Forming Stable Intrinsic Motivation when Achieving Long-Term Goals

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Abstract

The article examines the psychological mechanisms underlying the formation of stable intrinsic motivation in the pursuit of long-term goals, drawing on contemporary empirical and theoretical research within the frameworks of self-determination theory, self-regulation psychology, and organizational psychology. The analysis integrates evidence on contextual, motivational, and regulatory factors of goal pursuit, emphasizing the processual and mediated nature of stable motivation formation. It is shown that intrinsic motivation does not function as a direct predictor of short-term well-being or behavioral intensity, but exerts its influence through mechanisms of goal internalization, restructuring of self-regulation, and reduced dependence on external control. Particular attention is given to the role of supportive social and organizational contexts, as well as proactive motivational states, including self-efficacy, meaningful involvement, and positive emotional experience. The analysis demonstrates that the stability of intrinsic motivation emerges when three conditions converge: a supportive context, internal acceptance of the goal, and an accessible level of task demands that does not exhaust motivational resources. It is argued that the absence of immediate increases in subjective well-being does not contradict the stability of intrinsic motivation, as its core effect is cumulative and manifests in the capacity to sustain self-regulated behavior over time. The article may be useful for researchers and practitioners studying motivation, self-regulation, and the psychological conditions of sustainable long-term goal achievement.

Keywords: *Intrinsic Motivation, Self-Regulation, Goal Internalization, Long-Term Goals, Psychological Needs, Supportive Context, Motivational Stability.*

INTRODUCTION

In the context of accelerating social, organizational, and educational changes, the problem of forming stable intrinsic motivation in the pursuit of long-term goals acquires particular significance. Long-term goals require sustained efforts and the ability to maintain behavioral direction under conditions of uncertainty, frustration, and competing demands [5]. However, in practice, even with external incentives, motivation frequently proves unstable, leading to the interruption of activity and a decline in psychological well-being.

Contemporary research indicates that motivation cannot be viewed as a short-term state based on interest, reward, or volitional exertion [1]. These approaches offer little explanation for the persistence of behavior over time following the loss of novelty and the absence of external control. In this regard, motivational stability should be understood as a dynamic psychological process involving the internal acceptance of goals, self-regulation, and emotional resilience.

Within the framework of self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation is viewed as a mechanism of deep goal appropriation, embedded in a system of personal meanings. Its stability is formed through the experience of autonomy, competence, and psychological relatedness and manifests in the capacity to sustain activity in the absence of immediate results. Here, a key role is played by subjectively experienced progress, the personal significance of the goal, and a supportive social context.

Despite the accumulation of empirical data, a theoretical gap remains in psychology regarding the explanation of intrinsic motivation stability mechanisms in the long term. Many studies record external behavioral or emotional indicators without revealing the internal structure of motivational processes, which complicates the understanding of the transition from a situational impulse to a stable self-regulated system. Thus, the problem lies not in the lack of data on intrinsic motivation per se, but in the insufficient conceptualization of its stability as a prolonged regulatory process. Existing studies rarely explain how motivation maintains functionality upon the loss of novelty, the absence of external reinforcement, and increasing load, which limits the understanding of long-term goal achievement mechanisms.

The aim of the present study is the theoretical substantiation of the psychological mechanisms of forming stable intrinsic motivation when achieving long-term goals. The

work examines processes of internal goal acceptance, the maintenance of directed behavior, and the reduction of dependence on external control under conditions of prolonged activity.

The scientific novelty of the research lies in the conceptualization of stable intrinsic motivation as a systemic regulatory process formed indirectly—through the coordinated interaction of psychological conditions of autonomy, efficacy, emotional involvement, and the restructuring of behavioral self-regulation mechanisms over time.

The research hypothesis posits that the stability of intrinsic motivation in achieving long-term goals is determined not by the intensity of external stimuli or irrational agreement with the goal, but by the degree of its internal acceptance, supported by the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, the formation of confidence in one's own capabilities, and the quality of the social and organizational context.

The boundaries of the study cover processes of long-term goal achievement in educational, professional, and organizational settings characterized by high temporal duration, cognitive and emotional load, and the necessity for prolonged self-regulation and behavioral stability.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study is of a theoretical nature and is aimed at conceptualizing the psychological mechanisms of forming stable intrinsic motivation when achieving long-term goals. The theoretical and methodological basis of the work comprises peer-reviewed international scientific publications published between 2021 and 2025. Sources were selected based on content relevance; specifically, the study included works in which intrinsic motivation is viewed as a process of goal internalization, a mechanism of stable self-regulation, or a factor in the prolonged maintenance of purposeful behavior.

In the study by Audet et al. [1], intrinsic motivation is analyzed as a sequential process linking autonomy support, basic psychological need satisfaction, and sustained goal progress. The review by Barbosa Cano and Gomez-Baya [2] systematizes interventions based on the support of autonomy, competence, and psychological relatedness as conditions for stable motivation. Bradshaw et al. [3] show that the intrinsic content of goals is associated with the satisfaction of basic psychological needs without necessarily ensuring short-term emotional benefits. In the study by Cheng et al. [4], intrinsic motivation is viewed as a mediator between transformational leadership and self-regulated behavior, taking contextual constraints into account. Iqbal et al. [5] show that sustained performance is formed through the institutional internalization of intrinsic motivation within a quality culture. The study by Ling et al. [6] reveals proactive motivational states as internal mechanisms of sustainable behavior under conditions of change. In the work of Ma et al. [7], intrinsic motivation is presented as a psychological mediator between attitudes, social pressure, and sustained intentions. In the study by Randez and Hélie [8], intrinsic motivation is interpreted as a willingness to invest cognitive effort regardless of ability level. In the program described by Sepulveda et al. [9], intrinsic motivation is linked to the formation of a semantic orientation and a reduction in dependence on external evaluation. In the conceptual work of Werner and Berkman [10], intrinsic motivation is viewed as a factor that alters the dynamics of self-control and reduces the need for constant volitional suppression.

Methodologically, the study is based on theoretical synthesis, comparative-logical analysis, and structural-functional comparison of motivation models presented in the literature. The analytical focus was directed toward identifying stable psychological mechanisms ensuring the prolonged maintenance of purposeful behavior, including processes of goal internalization, self-regulation, the formation of confidence in one's own capabilities, and the influence of social context. Empirical results from the source works were used exclusively as a basis for theoretical generalization and conceptual integration, without conducting independent empirical analysis.

RESULTS

The stability of achieving long-term goals is determined not by the direct impact of external factors, but by the process of their psychological internalization, in which intrinsic motivation performs a mediating function. Intrinsic motivation is viewed as a mechanism for transforming an external requirement into self-regulated behavior, where the goal is experienced as personally accepted and psychologically binding, which follows from the transformational leadership model of Cheng et al. [4].

The mediating role of intrinsic motivation manifests in the fact that external sources of influence do not ensure sustainable behavior without a change in the regulation structure. The study by Sepulveda et al. [9] shows that the influence of transformational leadership on employee behavior is realized through intrinsic motivation, rather than through the direct reinforcement of requirements or control. A similar logic of internalization is traced in the longitudinal model of academic goal achievement, where autonomy support contributes to sustained progress only through the formation of internally accepted regulation. Audet et al. [1] show that social support does not lead to sustainable results directly but acts through the satisfaction of basic psychological needs and the subsequent consolidation of intrinsic motivation. This points to the processual nature of internalization, wherein motivation is formed as a result of sequential psychological transformations.

The mediating function of intrinsic motivation manifests at the level of forming stable intentions. In the extended behavioral choice model by Ma et al. [7], it is shown that

attitudes and social norms acquire regulating power only when mediated by intrinsic motivation. This result confirms that rational agreement with a goal does not ensure its psychological stability without internal acceptance. Table 1 presents quantitative indicators of the mediating and moderating effects of intrinsic motivation.

Table 1. Intrinsic motivation as a mechanism of long-term goal internalization (Compiled by the author based on the source: [4])

Psychological mechanism	Quantitative result	Interpretation for long-term motivation
Transformational leadership → intrinsic motivation	$\beta = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$	Leadership consistently enhances intrinsic motivation
Intrinsic motivation → self-regulated behavior	$\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$	Intrinsic motivation supports sustained effort
Mediation effect (via intrinsic motivation)	95% CI [0.105; 0.210]	Intrinsic motivation is a key internalization mechanism
Moderation: organizational virtuousness	$\beta = 0.10$, $p < 0.05$	Supportive context stabilizes motivation
Moderation: job complexity	$\beta = -0.09$, $p < 0.05$	Overload undermines intrinsic motivation stability

The quantitative data presented in Table 1 fix the boundaries of the applicability of the mediating function of intrinsic motivation. A supportive organizational environment enhances the stabilizing influence of intrinsic motivation on self-regulated behavior, whereas high task complexity reduces its regulatory effectiveness [4]. This allows motivation stability to be viewed as a context-sensitive process dependent on the ratio of environmental demands to the subject's regulatory capabilities.

The contextual limitation of the mediating function of intrinsic motivation is confirmed by the analysis of proactive forms of behavior under conditions of change. Ling et al. [6] show that even with the perception of fairness, motivational states lose stability when the load threshold is exceeded. This result aligns with the proposition that intrinsic motivation possesses limited throughput capacity and cannot compensate for chronic overload. The institutional level of goal internalization reveals an additional aspect of the mediating role of intrinsic motivation. Iqbal et al. [5] show that sustained performance is formed through the inclusion of intrinsic motivation in a quality culture, where individually accepted goals are consolidated in collective norms. The aggregate analysis allows intrinsic motivation to be viewed as the central mediator of long-term goal internalization, ensuring the transition from external influence to stable self-regulated behavior, provided there is contextual correspondence between demands and regulatory resources.

The stability of prolonged goal achievement is determined not by the presence of external rewards, but by internal motivational states that maintain activity under conditions of uncertainty and delayed results, as shown in the multi-level model of organizational change by Ma et al. [7]. In this logic, intrinsic motivation manifests not as a static quality, but as a dynamic system of states ensuring readiness to continue action in the absence of immediate reinforcement.

Key components of this system include belief in one's own ability to cope with changes, meaningful involvement in the process, and positive emotional experience arising during the activity, as consistently described in the proactive motivation model by Ling et al. [6]. These states do not replace intrinsic motivation but form its operational basis, through which behavioral stability over time is ensured.

The role of confidence in one's own capabilities as a motivational foundation of stability aligns with the longitudinal logic of goal achievement, where the subjective sense of the ability to progress toward a goal supports the continuation of effort even in the absence of external support, as shown in the academic progress model by Audet et al. [1]. Meaningful involvement in this context reflects the degree of internal goal acceptance and aligns with the concept of intrinsic motivation as an internalization mechanism revealed in the leadership influence studies by Cheng et al. [4]. Of particular importance in the structure of proactive motivational states is positive emotional experience, which performs not a compensatory but an energetic function, supporting activity as load increases, as empirically shown in the justice and change model by Barbosa Cano & Gomez-Baya [2]. Unlike reward, positive emotional experience does not terminate the motivational cycle but, conversely, supports its continuation, which aligns with the dynamic self-regulation model by Werner and Berkman [10]. The quantitative effects of proactive motivational states are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Proactive motivational states as mediators of stable intrinsic motivation (Compiled by the author based on the source: [6])

Mechanism	Indicator	Value	Interpretation for long-term goals
Fairness → Change-oriented OCB	γ	0.50, $p < 0.001$	Fair context triggers proactive motivation
Fairness → Self-efficacy	γ	0.36, $p < 0.01$	Formation of "can do" belief
Fairness → Involvement	γ	0.38, $p < 0.001$	Goal internalization ("reason to")

Fairness → Positive experience	γ	0.74, p < 0.001	Energetic support ("energized to")
Self-efficacy → OCB	γ	0.44, p < 0.001	Persistence through self-regulation
Involvement → OCB	γ	0.34, p < 0.001	Meaning-based sustainability
Positive experience → OCB	γ	0.38, p < 0.001	Emotional stabilization
Mediation (Self-efficacy)	ab	0.19, CI [0.07; 0.35]	Significant motivational mediator
Mediation (Involvement)	ab	0.12, CI [0.04; 0.23]	Significant mediator
Mediation (Positive affect)	ab	0.40, CI [0.23; 0.59]	Strongest mediation effect

Note: The fairness indicator reflects the subjective perception of the fairness of organizational changes. Change-oriented OCB refers to proactive behavior aimed at supporting and improving change processes. Self-efficacy is interpreted as an individual's confidence in their own ability to cope with demands and maintain active engagement under conditions of change. Involvement reflects the degree of meaningful engagement and internal acceptance of change goals. Positive experience (positive affect) characterizes the positive emotional experience arising from participation in change processes and performing an energizing, supportive function. The standardized coefficient γ indicates the strength of the direct effect, the ab coefficient reflects the magnitude of the indirect effect, and CI denotes the confidence interval of the estimate.

Interpretation of the presented data indicates an unequal contribution of various motivational states to behavioral stability, with the greatest mediating effect demonstrated by positive emotional experience, as recorded in the quantitative results of Ling et al. [6]. This result allows the emotional component to be viewed not as a side effect of motivation, but as its structural condition, ensuring energetic stability during prolonged load.

Consequently, intrinsic motivation is supported not by intensifying external stimulation, but through the dynamic interaction of confidence in one's own capabilities, meaningful involvement, and positive emotional experience, which aligns with the concept of the structural restructuring of self-regulation.

Thus, proactive motivational states form the dynamic basis of intrinsic motivation stability, ensuring the continuation of purposeful behavior under conditions of absent reward and increased load via internal regulatory mechanisms rather than external stimuli.

DISCUSSION

The stability of intrinsic motivation in achieving long-term goals is not identical to an immediate increase in subjective well-being, as data indicate a difference between the quality of motivational regulation and short-term emotional effects. Bradshaw et al. [3] show that an orientation toward goals with intrinsic content is associated with higher satisfaction of basic psychological needs, yet it is not accompanied by an additional immediate increase in pleasure or positive affect. This discrepancy points to a fundamentally different mechanism of intrinsic motivation compared to external stimuli, since the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs does not necessarily have to transform immediately into an emotional reward. Within the obtained configuration, intrinsic motivation manifests as a structural mechanism of goal integration, rather than a source of instant emotional reinforcement. Figure 1 examines the differences between goals with intrinsic and extrinsic content according to indicators of psychological need satisfaction and frustration.

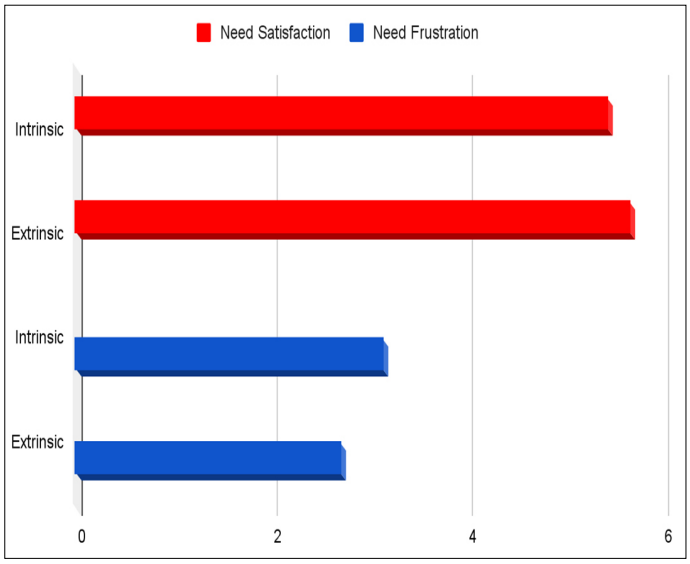

Figure 1. Mechanisms of psychological needs in goals with intrinsic and extrinsic content (Compiled by the author based on the source: [3])

According to the diagram data, differences between goals with intrinsic and extrinsic content in terms of psychological need satisfaction levels are minimal. The average value for intrinsic goals is 5.43 points, whereas for extrinsic goals it is 5.66 points on a seven-point scale, indicating a comparable level of experienced satisfaction. However, more pronounced differences are observed in the need frustration indicator. For intrinsic goals, it is 3.14 points, whereas for extrinsic goals it is 2.70 points, reflecting a higher level of tension when oriented toward internally significant goals. This numerical configuration shows that goals with intrinsic content do not minimize subjective tension despite a high level of need satisfaction, thereby confirming that the stability of intrinsic motivation is not linked to comfort maximization but is formed under conditions of combined need satisfaction and admissible psychological tension.

Such a configuration aligns with the dynamic understanding

of self-regulation, according to which goals internally integrated into the value system come into conflict with alternative desires less frequently and, as a consequence, require lower costs of self-control. In the theoretical model of Werner and Berkman [10], it is shown that intrinsic motivation reduces the frequency of regulatory conflicts themselves, rather than enhancing subjective well-being as a direct result.

From the position of the discussed data, it is more correct to view motivation stability as a cumulative process, in which the repeated experience of goal correspondence to basic psychological needs gradually forms stable self-regulation. In this logic, the absence of an instantaneous emotional gain is not a sign of intrinsic motivation weakness, as its main effect is realized through reducing the dependence of behavior on external control and emotional fluctuations.

Consequently, intrinsic motivation is not obliged to enhance short-term well-being, as its function lies in ensuring the psychological stability of behavior over time through goal internalization and the restructuring of self-regulation mechanisms, rather than through immediate emotional reinforcement.

It is expedient to view the stability of intrinsic motivation in long-term goals as the result of the coordinated action of contextual and intra-psychic mechanisms, rather than as a consequence of a single dominant factor. In the empirical model of transformational leadership, it is shown that external influence acquires regulatory power only when mediated by intrinsic motivation, which ensures the transition from given expectations to self-regulated behavior [4]. This result indicates that context per se does not form stability unless the process of internal goal internalization is triggered.

A comparable logic is revealed in the multi-level model of organizational justice, where stable proactive behavior is formed through a system of motivational states including confidence in one's own capabilities, meaningful involvement, and positive emotional experience [9]. In this case, fairness acts not as a direct stimulus, but as a condition in which intrinsic motivation can transition into stable self-regulation.

Comparing these two models allows for the identification of a common structural principle. External contextual factors influence long-term behavior not directly, but through the restructuring of motivational regulation. In the leadership model, the key link is intrinsic motivation as a mediator between impact and behavior. In the justice model, a similar function is performed by proactive motivational states, which operationalize intrinsic motivation in the dynamics of change.

A critically important element of integration is the role of load. Under conditions of a supportive context, intrinsic motivation retains a stabilizing function only if an accessible level of demands is maintained. In the leadership model, it is shown that high work complexity weakens the influence of intrinsic motivation on self-regulated behavior, despite the presence of supportive influence. Similarly, in the justice model, a decrease in the motivational effect is noted under high subjective load, when cognitive and emotional resources prove overloaded.

Consequently, the stability of intrinsic motivation is formed when three conditions coincide: the presence of a supportive context ensuring psychological safety; internal goal internalization translating external demands into self-regulation; and an accessible level of load at which motivational resources are not depleted. The absence of any of these conditions disrupts the integrity of the regulatory system and shifts motivation into an unstable, reactive mode. From an applied perspective, the obtained results point to the limitations of approaches oriented toward intensifying external stimulation or short-term engagement. Forming stable motivation requires designing conditions that support goal internalization, managed load, and the development of proactive motivational states, rather than maximizing emotional comfort.

Thus, the integration of contextual and motivational mechanisms shows that the stability of intrinsic motivation represents not a non-linear effect of external impact, but the result of structural correspondence between the environment, internal regulation, and load, within which self-regulation becomes psychologically possible and sustainable over time.

CONCLUSION

Stable intrinsic motivation should be viewed as a systemic regulatory resource that increases the probability of sustaining long-term goal achievement but does not guarantee an immediate increase in subjective well-being in itself. Its contribution is realized not via a direct line of "intrinsic motivation – pleasure/energy," but through a sequence of psychological transformations, centered on the process of goal internalization and the restructuring of behavioral self-regulation over time.

It is internalization that acts as the key mechanism translating contextual impacts into stable action. It turns external expectations, norms, and requirements into internally accepted obligation and meaning, reducing the dependence of behavior on external control. Therefore, intrinsic motivation is not an emotional background, but a functional node through which external support and environmental demands are transformed into a self-regulated trajectory of efforts and the stable maintenance of activity with delayed results.

Load in long-term goals performs a dual role. When the available level of demands is exceeded, it destroys the regulatory effectiveness of intrinsic motivation and shifts behavior into a reactive mode of exhaustion; however, when commensurate with resources, it becomes a condition for

strengthening self-regulation and accumulating stability. The final stability of motivation is formed primarily on the basis of the experience of the manageability of one's own progress, the internal consistency of the goal, and the preservation of regulatory resources, rather than from the strength of external stimuli per se. Prospects for further research are linked to the empirical validation of the proposed cascade model of stable intrinsic motivation in longitudinal designs, as well as the analysis of individual differences in sensitivity to load and contextual support.

Thus, the most productive approach to understanding stable intrinsic motivation lies in the cascade model. A supportive context creates conditions of autonomy and psychological safety, internalization translates the goal into a format of internal regulation, and proactive motivational states (self-efficacy, meaningful involvement, and positive emotional experience) ensure energetic and behavioral stability in dynamics. The stability of long-term goal achievement, therefore, is determined not by the presence of a single "strong factor," but by the coherence of context, internal regulation, and managed load, combined into a unified self-regulated system.

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