

Spring 2014

Selecting and Striving for Goals

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Citation of this paper:

Allan, Angela, "Selecting and Striving for Goals" (2014). *Undergraduate Honors Posters*. 7.
https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/psychd_posters/7

Abstract

Mental Contrasting (MC) is a self-regulating strategy in which one identifies a goal, visualizes a positive outcome, and then considers a current personal obstacle to that goal. Agency thinking signals an individual's confidence in her ability to execute the necessary goal-directed behaviours (Snyder, 2002). 99 university students selected an academic goal and conducted either a MC or control exercise. Subjects completed agency scales before and after treatment and goal commitment scales following treatment. How does Mental Contrasting impact students' sense of agency and commitment toward an academic goal? It was hypothesized that goal commitment scores would be greater for the MC group than for the control group, and that the treatment would not produce a change in agency scores from pre-test to post-test. The control group reported higher goal commitment scores, and both groups' agency scores increased following their MC or Control exercise, with no significant difference between the two groups.

Background

Academic (grade) goals account for 40% of the variance in final course grades (Diseth, 2010).

A+

Goal commitment (GC)

- Determination, perseverance, and refusal to abandon pursuit of a goal.
- GC is highest when the goal is challenging but realistic.
- GC is also influenced by the expectation that you can achieve the goal, called **agency thinking** (Snyder, 2002).

Mental Contrasting (MC)

- A self-regulation strategy that produced an increase in GC, for goals including quitting smoking, and eating fruits and vegetables.
- MC involves three steps: set a goal; imagine a positive outcome; and identify a current obstacle to achieving that goal.
- MC motivates action by linking a desired future to impending reality.
 - *This strategy increases GC only for goals for which the person feels high self-efficacy.*



Hypotheses

Goal commitment

- Scores will be greater for the MC group than for the control group.
- *Tested with an independent groups t-test*

Agency thinking

- Scores will not be affected by the mental contrasting manipulation, thus will not change from pre-test to post-test (so that the effect of mental contrasting on goal commitment cannot be traced to a change in agency thinking).
- *Tested with a one-within, one-between ANOVA*
 - Within factor: pre-test vs. post-test
 - Between factor: mental contrasting vs. Control

Method

Participants

- 99 participants participated for course credit.
- 76 women, $M = 19$ years old; $M = .59$ years of post-secondary education

Measures

- *Goal Commitment Scale* ($\alpha = .74$; Klein et al., 2001)
- Measures commitment to specific goal.

Agency Thinking Score = State Agency subscale + Trait Agency subscale

- *State Agency subscale of State Hope Scale* ($\alpha = .86$; Snyder et al., 1996a, 1996b). Measures situation-specific hope.
- *Trait Agency subscale of Trait Hope Scale* ($\alpha = .82$; Snyder et al., 1991). Measures hope independent of situation or time.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Participants completed the following activities in order: Documented goal, State and Trait Hope Scales, either the mental contrasting or control exercise, the State and Trait Hope Scales a second time, and finally the Goal Commitment scale.

Mental Contrasting Exercise

1. Imagine a positive outcome of achieving your academic goal
1. Identify a current obstacle that might prevent you from achieving your goal



Control Exercise

1. Describe what you did last summer
2. Describe the events of one day last summer

Results

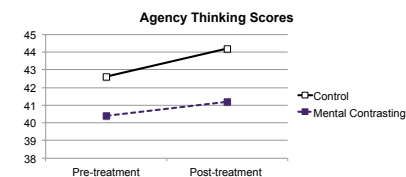
Goal Commitment

Participants in the control condition ($n = 47$; $M = 23.43$; $SD = 1.57$) reported significantly higher mean goal commitment than those in the mental contrasting condition ($n = 52$; $M = 22.37$; $SD = 2.25$), ($t(92) = 2.69$, $p < .01$).



Agency Thinking

There was a significant main effect of test ($F(1, 97) = 16.90$, $p < .0001$). Mean scores increased in the second administration of the tests. The difference between treatment groups fell just short of being significant ($F(1, 97) = 3.40$, $p = .068$). The control group scored higher during both administrations of the hope scale. There was no interaction between treatment and time ($F(1, 97) = 8.47$, $p = n.s.$).



Discussion

Neither hypothesis was supported

- Goal commitment was higher for the Control group
- Significant increase in agency thinking scores for both groups
- No significant difference in agency scores between groups



Goal Commitment

- MC only increases commitment to goals for which person feels high agency thinking. For goals for which person feels low agency thinking, MC reinforces how difficult goal-directed behaviour truly is.

Agency Thinking

- MC exercise increased agency thinking
- Control exercise of recalling a summer day may have increased agency thinking by elevating mood. That would suggest that agency thinking is different from self-efficacy.

Selected References

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