The Effects of Self-Talk on the Level of Success in College Students

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study is to examine the effects of self-talk on the level of success in college students. One hundred and fourteen participants were recruited from an Introductory Psychology class for the study, 33% (N =37) were males and 67% were females (N=76) with an age range of 18-48. The participants completed a questionnaire about their use of self-talk, their level of goal achievement, job performance, relationship satisfaction and they self-reported their GPAs. Results indicated that there were significant differences between students who used more positive self-talk in the areas of academics and goal achievement; the data trends indicated the positive self-talk group did have higher levels of job performance. Smaller sample size might have affected the results for the relationship satisfaction. Overall, it was found that students with positive self-talk had higher levels of performance.
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Self-talk refers to statements people make to themselves, either internally or aloud, and has been defined as an “internal dialogue in which the individuals interpret feelings and perceptions, regulate and change evaluations and cognitions and give themselves instructions and reinforcement” (Hackfort & Schwenkmezger, 1993, p. 355). Originally, researchers discriminated between two broad dimensions of self-talk: positive, which involves statements involving praise and encouragement and negative, which involves statements involving criticism and self-preoccupation (Moran, 1996). More contemporary approaches further discriminate self-talk into instructional, statements related to attentional focus, technical information, and tactical choices and motivational, statements related to confidence building, effort input, and positive moods (Zinsser, Bunker, & Williams, 2001). Self-talk has become central to cognitive and cognitive-behavioral interventions (Conroy & Metzler, 2002) and has recently received significant research interest in the applied sport psychology field. For example, positive self-talk has been found to have positive effects on performance of experimental tasks involving golf (Johnson-O’Connor & Kirschenbaum, 1982), endurance (Weinberg, Smith, Jackson, & Gould, 1984), basketball (Hamilton & Fremour, 1985), skiing (Rushall, Hall, Roux, Sasseville, & Rushall, 1988), and dart throwing (Van Raalte et al., 1995). Given the findings in the sport psychology field, the purpose of this study is to examine if the effects of self-talk can also be translated into the performance of college students in the areas of academics, relationship satisfaction, goal setting and goal achievement and performance in the work place.

Akari, Mintah, Mack, Huddleston, Larson and Jacobs (2006) conducted a two-fold purpose study with 125 undergraduate students (39 females, 86 males) to examine the
relationship between one’s belief in self-talk and performance and the influence of positive and negative self-talk on performance. The performance task utilized was a stabilometer, where time in balance represented the criterion measure. After performing the task, the students completed two questionnaires; a Belief in Self-Talk Questionnaire (BSQ) and a 7 item post-experimental questionnaire developed for this study to assess the type of self-talk used. Results indicated that belief in self-talk was not significantly correlated with performance; however, those who used positive self-talk performed significantly better than those who used negative/mixed self-talk. These results suggested that the type of self-talk used (i.e., positive or negative) was more important than one’s belief in self-talk.

Meichenbaum (1977), in his self-instructional approach to cognitive-behavior modification, highlighted the significance of examining the functions through which (how) self-statements affect behavioral processes. He suggested that “the goal of a cognitive functional assessment is to describe…the functional significance of engaging in self-statements of a particular sort followed by an individual’s particular behavior” (p. 202). Meichenbaum viewed self-statements as indices of individuals’ beliefs that may play a mediational role in behavioral performance. He supported that self-statement instructions can direct individuals’ attention to task-relevant dimensions, maintain information in the short-term memory, and ward off disturbing thoughts. Furthermore, he claimed that self-statements can influence individuals’ expectations regarding their capacity to handle a situation, can be used in an attempt to reassure themselves, and to note behaviors that should become cues for action. Meichenbaum concluded that internal dialogue influences individuals’ attentional and appraisal processes.

Hatzigeorgiadis, Theodorakis and Zourbanos (2004) examined differences in the effect of instructional and motivational self-talk on 2 tasks in 60 swimming class students (30 males and
30 females). It was hypothesized that instructional self-talk would have a greater improvement on the performance of a precision task (throwing a water-polo ball at a target), while motivational self-talk would have greater improvement on the performance of a power task (throwing a water-polo ball for distance). The researchers were also unable to prove that motivational self-talk would improve power task more than a precision task since the motivational self-talk resulted in significant improvement of both tasks while instructional self-talk only improved the precision task. The results of improved performance in both the precision and power tasks of the motivational self-talk groups was cause to further research the overall impact of self-talk on performance. In 2007, Hatzigeordiadis et al. hypothesized that motivational self talk will enhance performance, increase self-confidence and reduce cognitive anxiety in 72 (36 males and 36 females) competitive young tennis players. The results showed that self-talk had a positive effect on the players’ forehand drive performance evaluated through the Broer-Miller Forehand Drive test, increased self-confidence and reduced cognitive anxiety and that changes in task performance were related to changes in self-confidence.

Hatzigeordiadis and Biddle (2001) examined the relationships between pre-competition anxiety, goal-performance discrepancies, and athletes' negative self-talk while performing. Two studies were conducted with athletes who took part in middle-distance cross-country events. The first focused on the relationships between negative self-talk and the intensity and direction of anxiety in 38 runners (27 males and 11 females). The second study examined anxiety components and discrepancies between performance-goals and performance as predictors of negative self-talk in 36 runner (24 males and 12 females). The findings indicated that pre-competition anxiety and, most importantly, the quality of performance in relationship to pursued goals are important predictors of negative self-talk athletes experience while performing.
Taking the findings from sports psychology, it is hypothesized that college students who use positive self-talk attain higher levels of performance in academics (GPA), relationship satisfaction, goal setting and goal achievement and performance in the work place (promotions, and terminations) compared to college students who have low positive self-talk to negative self-talk.

Method

Participants

Data was collected as a part of a Psychology Research Methods class requirement at the University of New Orleans. One hundred and fourteen college students from the Psyc 1000 class at the University of New Orleans were recruited to participate in the study. The sample comprised of 33% (N =37) males and 67% (N=76) females with a mean age of 21.14 years and an age range of 18 to 48. 60.5% (69=) of the participants were Caucasian, 19.3% (N=22) were African American, 7.0% (N=8) Hispanic, and 13.1% (N=15) were of other ethnic backgrounds.

Measures

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire, where they were asked to provide information regarding their age, gender, race, religion, and relationship status.

Participants completed a questionnaire measuring Self-talk. The questionnaire consisted of 5 items on a 4 point scale (0= Never, 1=Rarely, 2=Sometimes, 3=Always). Items were summed to create an overall Self-talk score, where higher scores equal more use of positive self-talk and lower scores equal use of more negative self-talk. Sample questions include: I tell myself that I am stupid (or another variation such as dumb, idiot, unintelligent) (negative self-
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“I tell myself that “I can do this” and “I tell myself I will be successful at achieving my goals” (positive self-talk).

Participants completed a questionnaire measuring number of Relationships and Relationship Satisfaction. Number of relationships was measured by asking the participant how many committed relationships have you been in?” Relationship satisfaction consisted of 3 items on a 5 point scale (0=Very Dissatisfied, 1=Dissatisfied, 2=Neutral, 4=Satisfied, 5=Very Satisfied). Items were summed to create an overall Relationship Satisfaction score, where higher scores equal more relationship satisfaction and lower scores equal less relationship satisfaction. Sample questions include: “Overall, satisfaction with my relationship” and “Satisfaction with my role in this relationship”.

Participants completed a questionnaire measuring Goal Setting and Goal Accomplishment. The questionnaire consisted of 4 items on a 4 point scale (0= Never, 1=Rarely, 2=Sometimes, 3=Always). Items were summed to create an overall Goal Setting and Goal Accomplishment score, where higher scores equal more goal setting and accomplishment and lower scores equal no goal setting and goal setting and low goal accomplishment. Sample questions include: “I set goals for myself”, “I have failed at the things I have attempted to do” and “I achieve my goals”.

Participants completed a questionnaire measuring Performance in the Work Place. The questionnaire consisted of 2 items on a 4 point scale (0= Never, 1=Rarely, 2=Sometimes, 3=Always). Items were summed to create an overall Performance in the Work Place score, where higher scores equal higher Performance in the Work Place and lower scores equal lower
Performance in the Work Place. Questions include: “I have received promotions at my place of employment”, and “I have been fired from my place of employment”.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from an Introductory Psychology class at the University of New Orleans. The questionnaires were handed out anonymously near the end of class. The participants were told to complete the survey as honestly as possible. They had approximately 15-20 minutes to complete it. All methods were approved and monitored by Dr. Costa and were in accordance with the Institutional Review Board at UNO.

Results

Before conducting analyses to test the main hypotheses, descriptive statistics were computed on the Independent and Dependent Variables. For Self-Talk, the mean was 9.92 (SD = 3.06). For GPA the mean was 2.94 (SD = .49). For Job Performance, the mean was 4.01 (SD = 4.01). For Relationship Satisfaction the mean was 12.80 (SD = 2.27). For Goal Achievement, the mean was 8.20 (SD = 2.20). Two groups were created for Self-Talk based on the median split of 10: 1) Group one: low self-talk to negative self-talk (1-10), 2) Group two (N=54): positive self-talk (11-15). Percentage of people in Group 1 was 52.6% (N=60). Percentage of people in Group 2 was 47.4% (N=54).

Hypothesis 1 stated that students who use positive self-talk will attain higher levels of performance in academics (GPA) than students who use low positive self-talk to negative self-talk. In order to test if differences occurred, an Independent-sample t-test was computed. There were significant differences between Group 1 (Mean 2.85, SD .45) and Group 2 (Mean 3.04, SD
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.51) [Mean difference = -.20, S.E. of mean = .09; t(111) = t -2.16, p = .03]. Given this, the hypothesis was supported.

Hypothesis 2 stated that students who use positive self-talk have greater relationship satisfaction than students who used more negative self-talk. In order to test if differences occurred, an Independent-sample t-test was computed. There were not significant differences between Group 1 (Mean 12.49, SD 2.55) and Group 2 (Mean 13.17, SD 1.89) [Mean difference = -69, S.E. of mean = .57; t(62) = t -1.21, p = .229]. Given this, the hypothesis was not supported. However, the trend of the data indicates that the positive self-talk group (Group 2) did have higher levels of relationship satisfaction than the low self-talk to negative self-talk group (Group 1).

Hypothesis 3 stated that students who use positive self-talk have greater goal setting and goal achievement than students who use low positive self-talk to negative self-talk. In order to test if differences occurred, an Independent-sample t-test was computed. There were significant differences between Group 1 (Mean 7.45, SD 2.25) and Group 2 (Mean 9.03, SD 1.82) [Mean difference = -1.59, S.E. of mean = .39; t(114) = t -4.11, p = .00]. Given this, the hypothesis was supported.

Hypothesis 4 stated that students who use positive self-talk have greater job performance than students who used more negative self-talk. In order to test if differences occurred, an Independent-sample t-test was computed. There were not significant differences between Group 1 (Mean 3.81, SD 1.10) and Group 2 (Mean 4.25, SD 1.28) [Mean difference = -43, S.E. of mean = .23; t(112) = t -1.90, p = .06]. Given this, the hypothesis was not supported. However, the
trend of the data indicates that the positive self-talk group did have higher levels of job performance (Group 2) than the low self-talk to negative self-talk group (Group 1).

Discussion

The present study examined the effects of self-talk on the levels of performance of college students in the areas of academics, relationship satisfaction, goal achievement and performance in the work place. Overall, it was found that students with positive self-talk had higher levels of performance in all areas. However, the effects of positive self-talk in the area of relationship satisfaction were not as significant. The findings of this study were in keeping with what has been discovered in the field of sport psychology where positive self-talk has been found to have positive effects on performance of experimental tasks involving golf (Johnson-O’Connor & Kirschenbaum, 1982), endurance (Weinberg, Smith, Jackson, & Gould, 1984), basketball (Hamilton & Fremour, 1985), skiing (Rushall, Hall, Roux, Sasseville, & Rushall, 1988), and dart throwing (Van Raalte et al.1995).

Students with higher positive talk had significantly higher GPAs, higher goal achievement, and higher job performance. The results of this current study confirmed that positive self-talk can be an effective performance enhancing strategy beyond the field of sport psychology.

In the area of relationship satisfaction, although the numbers were higher for the group with more positive self-talk, the difference was not as significant. A possible cause for the results is that the sample size of the number of students currently in a relationship was half of the overall sample size.
A limitation to this study was due to the restriction on the number of questions that could be included in the questionnaire; the questions did not clearly distinguish and isolate the use of negative self-talk or no use of self-talk. In addition to having more questions, the 4 point response scale needs to be improved for better measurement of the negative possibilities of self-talk.

This study showed the impact of positive self-talk on the performance of college students in the areas of academics, goal achievement and job performance but further studies should explore the impact of negative self-talk on the performance of college students. Understanding the detriment of negative self-talk on the overall performance of college students could lead to implementing programs to teach positive self-talk to Freshmen classes in order to increase the success rate of college students.
References


