People believe optimism is better for pursuing self-exploration than for pursuing self-control

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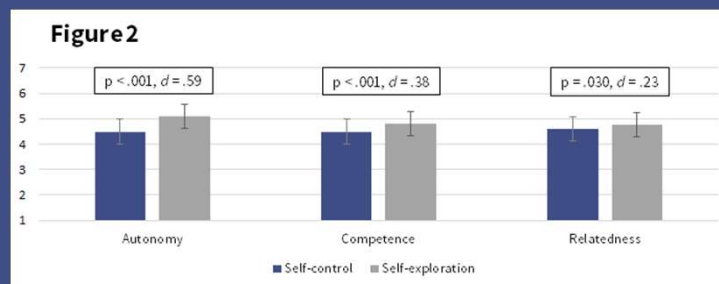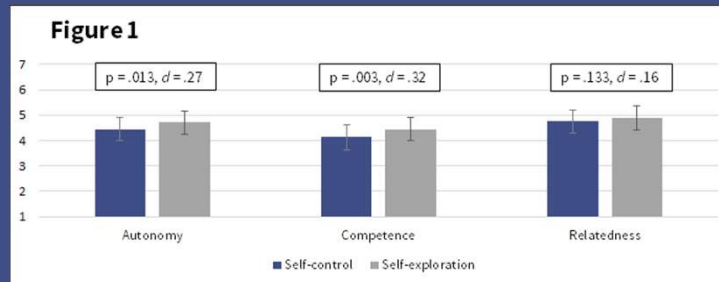
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More in-depth content and full methodology here

Highlights

- Things go well when people have support of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.
- People can motivate themselves by considering how things could go well or not well.
- Motivational beliefs about self-exploration involve thinking optimistically about things going well.
- Motivational beliefs about self-control involve thinking of things not going as well.

Method

This was a within-subjects experiment with two 91-person samples. Participants in Sample 1 were American undergraduates, and those in Sample 2 were MTurk workers residing in the US and Canada.

In randomized order, participants were asked to describe a self-exploration or self-control goal and report how much they thought about having high need support of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in order to motivate themselves to pursue the goal. For this measure of metamotivation, we modified the Balanced Measure of Psychological Needs (Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012) so that each item began with, "I motivate myself by thinking about…" Respectively, Cronbach's alphas in Sample 1 for autonomy, competency, and relatedness were .62, .64, and .60 in the promotion condition and .65, .74, and .53 in the prevention condition, while Sample 2's alphas were .72, .65, and .53 in the promotion condition and .57, .69, and .53 in the prevention condition.

Summary

Metamotivation is how we regulate our own motivation (Scholer et al., 2018). Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) distinguishes between two motivational orientations: promotion focus, which is about growth, and prevention focus, which is about security. Earlier research (Vaughn, 2017) suggests that people believe they can motivate themselves in a promotion focus by thinking more optimistically than in a prevention focus. We operationally defined optimistic thinking as thinking about having high support for the needs proposed by self-determination theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008). In randomized order, participants were asked to describe a self-exploration or self-control goal and report how much they thought about having high need support in order to motivate themselves to pursue it. The results indicated that participants thought more optimistically about having more need support when pursuing self-exploration goals than self-control goals.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of the current research included the different randomization patterns and different participant populations between studies, which makes interpreting results between different studies a challenge. Sample 1 was college students and Sample 2 was MTurk workers, and MTurk workers showed evidence of more complex metamotivational beliefs, but this could also be because of the easier-to-follow randomization pattern they received. Future research could see whether the current results replicate with a between-subjects design in samples from these populations.

Results

Analyses were paired samples t-tests. Results for Samples 1 and 2 are displayed in Figures 1 and 2, respectively. Error bars indicate SDs.

Figure 1

Figure 2

References

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