

It is Only Risky if I Don't Truly Believe That I Will Succeed

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Abstract

This project looks at the relationship between academic risk taking and positive thought-action fusion. Thought-action fusion (TAF; Rachman, 1993) is a cognitive distortion, in which a person believes that his/her thoughts have a direct influence on events.

Past research with thought-action fusion has generally maintained a focus on people's beliefs that negative events may result as a consequence of their personal thoughts.

Rather than investigating negative TAF, this project applied the cognitive theory of obsessions (Rachman 1997, 1998) to investigate the relationship between participants' perceptions of academic risk and their level of *positive* thought-action fusion. For example, a person may believe that the more he thinks positively about getting away with cheating, the better his chances of not getting caught.

Results indicate a significant relationship between positive thought-action fusion and perceived risk.

Implications are explored in relation to interventions that are designed to decrease academically risky behaviour.

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Background

Thought – Action Fusion

The concept of thought-action fusion (TAF) originated in research with people who displayed behaviours consistent with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD; Rachman, 1993). TAF represents a cognitive distortion in which a person believes that he or she is personally responsible for random thoughts which are subsequently assigned unjustified importance. For example, one of these people may have a random thought that there is a possibility that his or her mother might have a car accident, then assume responsibility for the thought (I must want my mother to have a car accident), and assign unjustified importance to that thought (Since I thought about my mother being in a car accident, she will probably have a car accident). TAF is supported by the cognitive theory of obsessions (Rachman, 1997, 1998), which describes how the perceived importance of normal thoughts can become inflated if one suffers from certain cognitive biases.

Amir, Freshman, Ramsey, Neary, and Brigidi (2001) investigated a positive form of TAF. They focused on harm prevention from positive thoughts, such as "If I think of a friend being able to avoid a car accident, this increases the chance that he will be able to avoid a car accident." However, this construct was only investigated for its relationship to OCD. While past research has kept the thought-action fusion construct within the boundaries of OCD and the clinical environment, the current project examined positive TAF as a distinct construct that is relevant to academic risk-taking behaviour.

Methodology

Measures Completed Online

Positive TAF Scale

Created specifically for this study, the Positive TAF Scale (P-TAF) is based on research by Shafan, Thordarson, and Rachman (TAF, 1996). The P-TAF showed evidence for convergent, discriminant, and construct validity during a pilot study at the University of Windsor. Cronbach's alphas for subscale internal reliability ranged from adequate to excellent (Self-Harm-Avoidance, $\alpha = .78$; Self-Gain, $\alpha = .87$; Others-Harm-Avoidance, $\alpha = .86$; Others-Gain, $\alpha = .91$; Moral, $\alpha = .71$).

Cognitive Appraisal of Risky Events Scale (CARE)

The CARE scale was developed by Fromme, Katz, and Rivet (1997), who were able to demonstrate good content, construct, and criterion validity. This scale was based on the idea that risky behaviour can result in positive or negative consequences. For example, missing class could provide more time to study, resulting in higher grades, or it could result in missed information and lower grades. Two of the subscales assessed perceived benefits and perceived consequences. Additional subscales were also used to assess past involvement and expected future involvement.

Participants

262 undergraduate students drawn from the University of Windsor Psychology Participant Pool (83.6% Female; 16% Male)

Limitations and Conclusions

Limitations

It is possible that the students did not feel comfortable reporting their past involvement or their expected future involvement with academically risky behaviours, since this study was conducted in a university setting.

Another limitation is that possible mediating factors were not investigated. Since positive TAF is a newly identified construct, future research is necessary to further define its relationship to risky behaviour.

Conclusions

Results indicated that positive thought-action fusion was related to the students' perceptions of academic risk. Students who reported high levels of positive thought-action fusion also reported that they perceived a high number of positive benefits from academically risky behaviour. They also reported that they perceived relatively few negative consequences from academically risky behaviour.

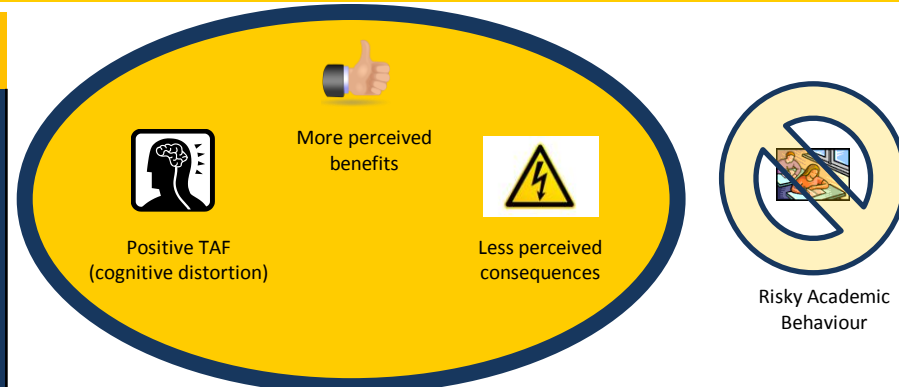
The efficacy of interventions designed to reduce academic risk-taking may benefit from the inclusion of cognitive intervention strategies used for other cognitive distortions (e.g., Beck, 1976), as perceptions of high benefits and low consequences could influence students' academic choices.

Results

	Perceived Negative Consequences	Perceived Positive Consequences	Past Risk- Taking Behaviour	Expected Future Risk-Taking Behaviour
Positive TAF	-.111 *	.115 *	.042	.011
Self-Harm Avoidance Subscale	-.104 *	.087	.054	.032
Self – Gain Subscale	-.028	.111 *	.091	.044
Others-Harm Avoidance Subscale	-.147 **	.117 *	-.006	-.017
Others-Gain Subscale	-.106 *	.053	-.010	-.029
Moral Subscale	-.135 *	.117 *	.012	-.010

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level



Positive thought-action fusion was related to high perception of benefits, and low perception of consequences from academic risk-taking. However, there was no significant relationship with the action of risky academic behaviour.

References

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