

research update



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Good Intentions: Using a Corrective Entreaty to Predict Physical Activity

Intending to do something is the best way to predict whether you will actually do it (Ajzen, 1985, 1991). For example, saying that you intend to go to a kickboxing class should predict whether or not you will actually attend the class.

Intentions are studied in both hypothetical and real situations. As you might expect, intentions made in a hypothetical situation are often different than intentions made in a real situation. Intentions made in a real situation better predict behaviour than intentions made in a hypothetical situation (Ajzen, Brown, & Carvajal, 2004).

WHAT IS A "CORRECTIVE ENTREATY"?

A corrective entreaty is a script encouraging participants in a hypothetical situation to form their intentions as if they were in a real situation (Cummings & Taylor, 1999).

This script tells participants how intentions formed in a hypothetical situation are different than intentions formed in a real situation, why this might be a problem, and why this difference might occur. When a corrective entreaty is used, intentions made in a hypothetical situation are more like intentions made in a real situation and better predict behaviour (Ajzen et al., 2004).

A CORRECTIVE ENTREATY AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

We wanted to look at the effect of a corrective entreaty in a physical activity setting. Our study aimed to find out whether:

- Intentions made in a hypothetical and a real physical activity setting were different.
- Using a corrective entreaty influenced intentions made in the hypothetical physical activity setting so that the intentions better predicted behaviour.

Method

A total of 168 undergraduate students (males = 20; females = 148) responded to a questionnaire about their intention to attend a fitness class at the University of Alberta if we gave them a free pass. We randomly divided participants into three groups:

- Hypothetical (H): Completed the questionnaire and then received a free pass to a fitness class. Participants did not know about the pass when they filled out the questionnaire. Thus, they formed their intentions in a hypothetical situation.
- Hypothetical with corrective entreaty (HE): Same as the H group, but participants were read a corrective entreaty before filling out their questionnaire.
- Real (R): Participants received the free pass for a fitness class before filling out the questionnaire.

To find out whether participants actually used their free fitness passes (i.e., behaviour), we collected all fitness passes from the fitness coordinator one month after the pre-test assessment.

Results

Percentages of the groups that said that they intended to use the fitness pass were as follows:

- 87% of the H group
- 79% of the HE group
- 74% of the R group

However, not one participant actually attended a fitness class. As expected, intentions better predicted behaviour in the R group than in the H group. Interestingly, the HE group more closely matched the R group than the H group.

Intentions that accurately predicted behaviour ranked as follows:

- 13% of the H group
- 21% of the HE group
- 26% of the R group

Intentions formed in a hypothetical physical activity situation are different than intentions formed in a real physical activity situation and do not represent actual behaviour. Administering a corrective entreaty helps to influence intentions made in the hypothetical situation so that they more closely match intentions made in the real situation and actual behaviour.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

In our study, intentions made in the hypothetical situation did not accurately predict behaviour. This result has very practical implications.

For example, an organization might ask people, "If we build a multi-million dollar fitness facility in your neighbourhood, will you use it?" The organization is in fact asking for intentions in a hypothetical situation.

Based on our results, intentions would not accurately predict behaviour (i.e., fitness facility use).

To use another example, say an organization planned an expensive promotional strategy. It would not be useful to ask people, "If we provide a personal fitness trainer at your workplace, would you make an appointment with him/her?" This is again asking about intentions in a hypothetical situation, which may not represent actual behaviour.

Administering a corrective entreaty before asking people their intentions in a hypothetical situation may lead to more realistic intentions in both of these scenarios and result in intentions that more closely match actual behaviour.

Jenny Burgess, MA, Research Coordinator, Alberta Centre for Active Living, and John Spence, PhD, University of Alberta.