

Intentionality in Helping Relationships:

The Influence of Three Forms of Internal Cognitions on Behavior.

Stacy Hockaday and William W. Purkey

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Keith Davis

The University of South Carolina, Columbia

**Abstract**

Intentionality is a vital element in professional counseling. This article provides evidence that by reframing general internal cognitions into clearly stated internal dialogue; individuals are in a better position to reach their goals and are more likely to do so.

**Intentionality in Helping Relationships:**  
**The Influence of Three Forms of Internal Cognitions on Behavior.**

The concept of intentionality in personal and professional functioning was first introduced by Rollo May (1969) who viewed intentionality as a major variable in connecting inner consciousness with overt behavior. As used in this study, intentionality is the ability of individuals to link their inner consciousness and perceptions with their purposes and actions. The degree to which people accomplish this linkage is a measure of their level of intentionality. This human capacity of intentionality has great value for counselors and their clients. By raising the internal level or clarity of intentionality, individuals are more likely to direct their behavior in healthy and productive ways.

The research reported here was to determine if the level or clarity of intentionality, as measured by three forms of internal cognitions (“I thought to myself” “I said to myself” “I reminded myself”) would influence professed overt behavior. The hypothesis is that clearly enunciated internal language (“I said to myself”) is most likely to be acted upon.

Language is an important part of intentionality, for it gives structure and meaning to the thinking process. While mental processes can occur without language, the words people use greatly enhance thinking and influence behavior. When seeking to define themselves, understand the world, or solve a problem, individuals hold private conversations with themselves (Purkey, 2000). This inner dialogue has been described in many ways, including self-talk, internal dialogue, inner voices, the whispering self, private speech, inner voice, and covert conversation, to name a few. In fact, internalized self-talk may be thought itself, a theory supported by research (Butler, 1981; Ellis, 1979; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Meichenbaum, 1977).

Intentionality, as reflected in internal dialogue, has important implications for professional counselors. According to Sokolov, (1972) in all instances people think, remember, imagine and act through the use of private conversations. This inner speech is a critical component in the helping relationship. As explained by Anderson (1990), this voice of the self is “The form-giving, meaning-making part, the narrator who at every waking moment of our lives spins out its account of who we are and what we are doing and why we are doing it,” (p. 137). In other words, internal conversations are the interpretative, evaluative thoughts regarding what is happening to us. Through influencing this subtle internal narration, both perceptions and behaviors can be altered.

By encouraging clients to be intentional with their mental processes, to move from thinking about a change in behavior to directly voicing the change internally, counselors can help bring about meaningful changes in the lives of their clients. The more internally vocal and unambiguous the mental process, the more likely it is to be acted upon. In other words, “thinking” to oneself about something tends to be abstract, whereas “talking” to oneself about something tends to be more concrete.

**Rational Therapy**

One popular approach to changing self-talk has been presented by Beck (1979), Ellis (1979), Maultsby (1977), and Zastrow (1994). This approach, called “Rational Therapy” is widely used in psychotherapy to change unwanted emotions and dysfunctional behaviors in clients. Working to change negative and dysfunctional self-talk to a more

rational and positive inner speech is the key psychotherapeutic agent in making beneficial changes in clients.

This paper seeks to expand on Rational Therapy. Over and above changing unwanted emotions and dysfunctional behaviors, this paper hypothesizes that the more clearly stated a person's self-talk, the more likely the inner dialogue will result in overt action. This process would seem to offer counselors an added means to help clients with their decision-making by teaching them to be more intentional in their thinking by reframing general thoughts into clearly stated internal dialogue.

### **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of the research reported here was to determine the influence of three forms of mental functioning that relate to intentionality and that result in overt action: (1) "I thought to myself," (2) "I said to myself," (3) "I reminded myself." The general hypothesis of the research is that the more a person's intentionality is explicit, that internal dialogue is clearly articulated, the more likely it is that he or she will purposefully act on his or her intentions.

In the present study, two questions were asked: (1) Are individuals more likely to act when they ~y something to themselves than they are to act when they think something to themselves? (2) Will there be any differences in behavior when the terms "thought", "said", and "reminded" are inserted into otherwise identical hypothetical situations? These questions address the general hypothesis of the study: the more clearly articulated is internal dialogue, the more likely it is to be acted upon.

### **Method**

The method employed in this study was to prepare three forms of a survey to be completed by undergraduate students at a North Carolina public university.

#### **Subjects**

Participants were 286 undergraduate students enrolled in sections of Helping Skills, Career/Life Planning, and Management of Organizations courses. The courses were elective and students came from a variety of undergraduate departments and majors. Of the 286 participants, 72% were female and 28% were male.

#### **Survey Instrument**

A survey was developed by the researchers that consisted of three forms: "A". "B", and "C". Each of the three forms described the same three identical situations, with two exceptions: (a) the terms "thought", "said", and "reminded" were rotated, in turn, into the three situations on each form and (b) the three situations were rotated on each of the three forms to avoid response bias.

The three forms were randomly distributed. One third of the students received Form A, one third Form B, and one third Form C. Students were unaware that not all the forms were identical. (The three forms of the survey are in appendix.)

Subjects were instructed to read each of the three described situations and then predict their response to each on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (definitely will not) to 10 (definitely will) to indicate the degree to which they would act on each of the three

described situations. Each questionnaire yielded raw scores with a possible range of 3 to 30 on the three variables (“thought”, “said”, and “reminded”).

### Procedures

The three survey forms were mixed together evenly and distributed by the researchers to instructors in thirteen sections of three undergraduate courses entitled Helping Skills, Career/Life Planning, and Management of Organizations. Participation in the study remained voluntary and anonymous. Participants were asked to indicate their gender and age so that possible gender and age differences in the results could be investigated. Each survey took less than five minutes to complete, and students returned their form of the survey to their instructor upon completion. The instructors then returned the instruments to the researchers. Any questionnaires that were incomplete were discarded.

The surveys from 286 undergraduates were hand-calculated and then computer-scored, yielding raw variables for each of the three variables: thought, said, and reminded. The mean score and standard deviations were calculated for each variable. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to compare the means. According to Bray and Maxwell (1985), the use of MANOVA is justified when evaluating mean differences on several criterion variables. The use of MANOVA is further justified to control the overall alpha level and to examine relationships, if any, among variables.

### Results

The overall omnibus MANOVA revealed statistically significant findings. An affirmative answer to the first question was supported. There was a significant difference in professed behavior between people who thought to themselves as opposed to people who reminded themselves. Students who thought to themselves regarding a desired behavior reported that they were more likely to act than those students who reminded to themselves,  $F(1, 285) = 6.8, p < .01$ .

An affirmative answer to the second question was also supported. There was a significant difference in reported behavior between people who thought to themselves as opposed to people who reminded themselves regarding a desired behavior. Students who reminded themselves are more likely to act than those who thought to themselves,  $F(1, 285) = 8.35, p < .004$ .

A third comparison was made between students who thought to themselves regarding a desired behavior and students who reminded themselves. No statistically-significant differences were found between the two groups,  $F(1, 285) > 0.03, p < .86$ .

To summarize the results:

1. - I “said” to myself is more likely to be acted upon than I “thought” to myself.
  2. - I “reminded” myself is more likely to be acted upon than I “thought” to myself.
  3. - I “said” to myself revealed no significant difference from I “reminded” myself.
- Based on these results, the general hypothesis was supported: the more clearly articulated (through internal self-talk) a mental process is, the more likely the process is to be acted upon. This finding may have value for professional counselors who are seeking fresh and innovative ways to help clients find ways to help themselves.

### **Limitations**

The results from this study should be interpreted in light of the limitations of the instrument and the select population used. One limitation of external validity is that the subjects in this study were all university undergraduates, a small portion of the general population. Another limitation of external validity is that it may be difficult to generalize results because the subjects were all attending the same university.

An additional limitation of external validity is the fact that all the subjects were volunteers. Lastly, there was a limitation of internal validity due to the use of a self-report instrument. The findings of self-report instruments are limited to what people are willing and able to reveal about themselves.

### **Discussion and Implications**

According to Ivey (1994), Ivey and Simek-Downing (1980), Purkey and Schmidt (1996) and others, intentionality is a vital element in professional helping. Counselors can assist clients in intentionally focusing their thought processes by formulating clear and unequivocal self-talk. By reframing general thought processes into clearly stated internal dialogue, clients are in a better position to reach their goals.

The findings of this study support the general research hypothesis: the more internally vocal and unambiguous the mental process, the more likely it is to be acted upon. Talking to oneself, or reminding oneself, is more likely to be acted upon than is thinking to oneself.

Results provide affirmative support for the first question asked. Participants indicated that they were more likely to take action when they said something to themselves, or when they reminded themselves, than they were to act when they thought something to themselves.

An affirmative answer was found for the second question. There were significant differences among “thought,” “said,” and “reminded” when these terms were inserted into otherwise identical hypothetical situations. Those who said to themselves, or who reminded themselves, were more likely to act than those who thought to themselves.

Although “said” and “reminded” were significantly different from “thought,” there was no significant difference between “said” and “reminded.” The lack of difference between “said” and “reminded” may be explained by their similarity in meaning. These terms indicate clearer focus and intentionality, while “thought” appears to be less sharply focused, somewhat vague, and may lack sufficient intentionality. Therefore, the data supports the general hypothesis that the more intentional a mental process is, as measured by clearly articulated internal dialogue, the more likely it is to be acted upon. By intentionally talking to oneself, and listening to this self talk, the individual is more likely to act on these inner conversations.

The major finding of this study is that the more clear and specific the mental process is, the more likely it is to be acted upon. Future research could expand on this finding and look more in-depth at the forms of self-talk people use as well as the impact of those forms. Do most people listen to themselves? What are the consequences of self-talk being acted upon if it is positive versus negative? To what degree does internal dialogue magnify intentionality? What impact would affective variables (“I felt”) have on intentionality? Answers to these and related questions would enhance the research-based

intentionality knowledge of professional counseling. Once clients discover that positive, realistic, and explicit self-talk helps them accomplish more, the greater likelihood there is that clients will intentionally voice their internal dialogue, monitor this process, formulate productive goals, and speak to themselves privately in healthy and productive ways.

### References

- Bray, J. H., & Maxwell, S. E. (1985). Multivariate analysis of variance. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publication.
- Beck, A. T. (1979). Cognitive therapy and emotional disorders. New York: New American Library.
- Butler, P. E. (1981). Talking to yourself: Learning the language of self-support. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row.
- Ellis, A. (1979). Rational-emotive therapy. In R. Corsini (Ed.), Current Psychotherapies (2nd ed.), (pp. 185-229). Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock.
- Ivey, A. E. (1994). Intentional interviewing and counseling: Facilitating client development in a multicultural society (3rd ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Ivey, A. E. & Simek-Downing, L. (1980). Counseling and psychotherapy: Skills, theory, and practice. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Markus, H. & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. American Psychologist, 41: (9) 954-969.
- Maultsby, M. C., Jr. (1977). The ABC's of better emotional self-control. In C. Zastrow & D. Chang (Eds), The personal problem solver (pp. 2- 18). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- May, R. (1969) Love and will. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Purkey, W. W. (2000). What students say to themselves: Internal dialogue and school success. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press: Sage Publications.
- Purkey, W.W. & Schmidt, J. J. (1996). Invitational counseling: A self-concept approach to professional practice. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.
- Sokolov. A. N. (1972). Inner speech and thought. New York: Plenum Press.
- Zastrow, C. (1994). Conceptualizing and changing the self from a Rational Therapy Perspective. In Brinthaupt, T. M. & Lipka, R. P. (1994). Changing the Self: Philosophies, techniques and experiences (pp. 175-199). Albany. NY: State University of New York Press.