

Action as a goal may be too broad, new research suggests

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A series of experiments conducted by researchers at the University of Illinois suggest that society's emphasis on action over inaction may lead to unforeseen consequences.

"Our research highlights how the pressures of society to be active may produce fairly unregulated behavior," said Dolores Albarracín, a professor of psychology who led the work. The new analysis appears this month in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

According to Albarracín, the findings could help understand how common words used in everyday life may influence conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and bipolar disorder. While such conditions have genetic roots, Albarracín said, the social and cultural factors that exacerbate them are not well understood.

In a series of experiments, researchers primed participants with a set of words suggesting action or inaction and then observed their behavior. The primes list consisted of words such as "go" and "motivation" that represented an active thought, or words like "rest" and "stop" that indicated inaction.

In previous studies, Albarracín said, behavior and stimulus were always tightly linked. For example, participants primed to be hungry would eat more. In this research, however, Albarracín noted that the association between the word primes and outcomes was very weak.

In the new analysis, Albarracín and colleagues subjected participants to different sets of word primes and then asked them to perform a task. The tasks ranged from doodling to eating, and in some cases, learning new information. The intensity of the behavior was measured, and in two of the studies participants could choose to do none of the tasks and instead rest.

The studies demonstrated that participants primed with an action word were more likely to choose active tasks. But what was most compelling to Albarracín was that the same stimulus triggered a diverse array of tasks that are normally not seen together, such as eating, learning and doodling.

The researchers successfully reproduced this paradigm in the laboratory. In one setting, the active word prime enhanced learning, but in a different context the same stimulus encouraged participants to doodle or eat.

"What you actually end up promoting is a very general message to be active," Albarracín said. "You can be active by exercising or learning, but you can also be active by driving fast or taking drugs. That is the danger of a global message to be active."

The studies suggest that it is important to provide more specific cues about how to be active. It also rings a note of caution about how children are educated, Albarracín said.

"If you think about the number of activities that kids are engaged in these days – going to school, playing the piano, etc. – to what extent is this pattern desirable?" Albarracín said. "Are you conveying that specific activities are valuable or that being busy and active all the time is what you are supposed to be doing?"

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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