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“Whether you think you can, or you think you can't - you're right.”

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In this blog post Simon Cassidy (Senior Lecturer in Psychology, University of Salford: s.cassidy@salford.ac.uk ^[1]) discusses his research exploring the links between perceived self-efficacy, resilience and student success.

The quote in the title (and variations of it) is attributed to Henry Ford, the prolific American pioneer, leader and industrialist. And he could be right according to initial findings of a study conducted here in the Directorate of Psychology and Public Health at the University of Salford examining psychological resilience, also referred to as emotional or psychosocial resilience. What the quote suggests is that people's beliefs about their abilities determine their chances of completing a task successfully (or not). We—psychologists I mean—refer to these beliefs about ability as *self-efficacy*. You could call it confidence but that would be too easy for us scientists. In actual fact calling it confidence would be an oversimplification and a little inaccurate. Self-efficacy emerged in the 1970s as a central construct in Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (subsequently Social Cognitive Theory); he defines it as “the belief in one's capabilities to organise and execute the course of action required to manage prospective situations”. Studies of self-efficacy have been pretty consistent in finding that it is associated with, and in many cases, predictive of, positive outcomes and performance. So our judgements and beliefs about our capabilities are important in real terms. It seems that judging yourself to be capable of success increases your chances of actual success, while judging yourself as not capable of success reduces your chances of actual success. Henry was right!

This raises the question of what *exactly* is it that people who believe that they are capable of success do? We know in general terms that self-efficacious (big unwieldy term I know, but hey I'm a scientist) individuals are more persistent and more motivated, but what we are less clear on is the specific actions that individuals with positive self-efficacy beliefs take that makes them more likely to succeed. Not knowing this makes it difficult to fully exploit the potential advantages of positive self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy and resilience

We know from Bandura that self-efficacy is particularly important when individuals face adversity. Adversity is generally defined as difficult, challenging or unpleasant events, situations or circumstances. Faced with adversity, some people have the capacity to ‘bounce back’ from failure, to ‘beat the odds’ [terms often used in resilience research] and do better than

might be expected given the circumstances. These people are considered to be *resilient* and resiliency is considered an asset because of its obvious benefits. One way to explore the specific behaviours associated with self-efficacy is to investigate how it relates to resilience and resilient (or adaptive) responses. Looking at how individuals respond when faced with adversity and how these behaviours are connected to self-efficacy may give us some insight into why self-efficacious (there's that term again) individuals are more likely to succeed and may help us develop interventions aimed at building resilience.

Both self-efficacy and resilience make most sense when studied and measured in specific contexts - it's difficult to accept that someone has the same belief in their capabilities or responds to adversity in the same way irrespective whether we are talking about relationships, bereavement, learning or health. Because of this and because understanding issues of student achievement and wellbeing is a priority for those of us working in the field of psychology and education, my study focussed on *academic* self-efficacy and *academic* resilience in undergraduate students. Once students' academic self-efficacy had been measured, they were presented with a case study describing academic adversity and failure and asked to select, from a list of potential behaviours, how they would respond. A second version of the case study described a fellow student who was facing the same academic adversity and students were now asked to select, from the same list of behaviours, how their colleague should respond.

Findings

OK, what did the study find? Well initial results were presented at the BPS Division of Educational and Child Psychology Annual Conference in Durham in January, although detailed analysis is still underway. So far findings show that academic self-efficacy is a strong predictor of academic resilience. Positive self-efficacy beliefs predict increased resilience in undergraduate students when faced with academic adversity. This finding is important but was anticipated, so no surprises there. What is more valuable is that the study measured resilience by asking students to select specific responses to adversity that were either more or less resilient and compared the responses of low and high self-efficacy students. Further analysis of this will provide, I hope, some of the details we are missing about how students who believe in their academic capability behave in different ways to those students who doubt their capability. When responses to personal adversity and adversity faced by a fellow student were compared, students showed greater resilience for their colleague. That is, students selected more resilient responses for colleagues than they did for themselves. This is an important finding for two reasons. Firstly it suggests that students are aware of what are the most adaptive responses to academic adversity, but don't necessarily select them. Secondly, students are likely to be a good source of resilience for colleagues who are facing challenging situations, which is encouraging for peer assisted learning and mentoring schemes.

What I'm working on at the moment is extracting the detailed information about differences in specific responses to adversity of *believers* and *non-believers* (in the self-efficacy sense). The goal is to use this as a device to instil greater resilience in students. It's tough out there and applying our knowledge and skills as psychologists can help. For now though the message is clear "Whether you think you can, or you think you can't—you're right."

That should have been the end of the piece but as I'm writing about resilience I couldn't resist adding another of Henry Ford's quotes (and in doing so ruining the dramatic end to the post): "*Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently*". I think the quote

captures a lot of what there is to capture about resilience. Thank you Henry for your contribution to psychology and to this post.

Discussion

What are common examples of 'behaviours' exhibited by students in response to academic failure at university? How can we 'recognise' a resilient undergraduate student? What and how can we learn from resilient undergraduates?

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