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Motivational Interviewing to Support the Goals of College Students. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

This practice report describes a higher education practice to support the aspiration of students while supporting their well-being. The use of Motivational Interviewing (MI), an evidence-based conversational style, in faculty-student conversations can meet the psychological needs of students in consideration of their self-determination. This approach is gaining interest in higher education practice and emerging within published literature. This report suggests goal attainment is a worthy outcome that aligns with MI and provides a report of a small-scale pilot study. The advancement of school-based MI practices for college student development is encouraged. Implications, helpful and formative literature, and future research opportunities are provided.

***Keywords**:* School-Based Motivational Interviewing; self-determination theory; goal attainment, pilot study.

Introduction

Higher education is challenged to properly serve students of various backgrounds, academic levels, and current needs. The relevance of evidence-based practices to support student success comes into focus, particularly for those with recent academic struggles. There is a need for practices to support students' psychological well-being while improving student academic achievement - one that aims to raise autonomous motivation from a strengths-based perspective. Herein, an overview of an approach is offered to support students through the use of Motivational Interviewing (MI) (Miller & Rollnick, 2013) and more specifically School Based Motivational Interviewing (SBMI). A small-scale pilot study is reviewed as an example of current research that uses goal setting. While various theories exist regarding student success for college students, self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017) aligns with the current need in higher education.

SDT offers a strengths-based, student-centered perspective for professionals who work with students. Educational conditions that nurture the holistic development of students optimize learning outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2017). An autonomous-supportive learning environment predicts persistence, higher study effort and enjoyment and value in learning, while controlled motivation classroom environments predict dissatisfaction and higher levels of procrastination (Fokkens-Bruinsma et al., 2022; Mouratidis et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2019), and is associated with student thoughts of program change and dropout in college settings (Dyrberg & Holmegaard, 2019). Measures of psychological needs are also more predictive of amotivation in young-adult students (Bureau et al., 2022), suggesting that if psychological needs are not satisfied, then the absence of motivation is predicted. There is a lack of reproducible SDT-based interventions aimed at academic outcomes in higher education. This may be because the practices using an evidence-based approach under SDT have yet to be considered. MI can address this gap.

What is Motivational Interviewing (MI)?

MI is an evidence-based clinical practice and a conversational technique defined as "a collaborative conversational style for strengthening a person's own motivation and commitment to change" (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 12). Proficient use of MI can help clients (hereafter called student in the tertiary context) begin meaningful changes in their lives. MI holds that the clinician's (hereafter called faculty, but can refer to staff or professionals working with students) interactions with a student affects that student's motivations to change.

Researchers have tested the effectiveness of MI with clientele across a multitude of fields over three decades. A meta-analysis of MI supports the adoption of practices (Lundahl et al., 2010) for use in various settings. Using MI in educational practices is a relatively new application in the field of MI. School Based MI (SBMI) has great potential and a promising future and may be appropriate for the population of college students given the neurodevelopment and cognitive development of adolescents (Strait et al., 2012); this applies to adults as well. Currently, there is limited SBMI literature of use with college students because the application is a contemporary endeavor. Thus, SBMI with demonstrated fidelity in college settings has yet to find significant direct effects on student achievement; though it has promise in supporting dispositions and aspects of learning (e.g., self-efficacy, motivation; Blankenship, 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Wang & Lu, 2020). In college settings, SBMI has been applied internationally to undergraduate students struggling with online learning, students on academic probation/alert, students with procrastination problems, students receiving coaching, and psychology students (Blankenship, 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Oram et al., 2022; Shahbaazi et al., 2021; Strait et al., 2019; Wang & Lu, 2020). When a student expresses ambivalence or a need to change a current self-identified problem, SBMI becomes a helpful tool. In higher education, this aspect of SBMI is particularly necessary to consider in the transitional first year of college (Wang & Lu, 2020), where students experience a myriad of challenges. These approaches typically are provided by professionals trained to proficiency in MI, and most interactions with students follow a protocol or agenda. College SBMI can be delivered virtually (i.e., www.zoom.us) or face-to-face, in a one-to-one setting, small group setting, and a few studies have attempted large group delivery – each approach with its own strength and drawback.

MI is comprised of skills, dispositions, and processes (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Technical skills, partnered with a particular spirit in which to impart those skills and processes, enhance change behavior. The following is a brief overview of these, often in a post-secondary context, as a body of literature is available. In MI, a student's readiness for behavior change can be appraised by the way they talk about the behavior in question. Thus, when using MI, the faculty is to recognize talk that provides opportunity to expand on possible change behavior and to recognize but soften any student talk that would sustain the current status quo. *Change talk* are utterances that support the benefits of a change, or the deleterious aspects of the current status quo. Conversely, *sustain talk* are student remarks that support not making a change, or mention the challenges and barriers associated with a possible behavior change. Throughout a conversation, a faculty adept in MI can filter change and sustain talk and use technical skills to highlight change talk and elicit more of the change talk that the student has presented in order to mobilize actionable behavior. Effective recognition of these two types of speech is empirically related to the relational and technical skills. Relational skills, an underlying and critical component for faculty to honor throughout an MI conversation, is the "spirit of MI". The spirit is vital in maintaining a supportive working relationship with the student through partnership, acceptance, compassion, and empowerment. The skills related to MI within conversation are referred to as *OARS*. These are a) open-ended questions, b) affirmations, c) reflections, and d) summaries.

There are four iterative processes that exist in MI. These are *engagement*, *focusing*, *evocation*, and *planning*. These act as a conversational guide for faculty and students and are necessary to contemplate change fully. In *engagement*, the intention of the conversation is to bring to light long-term goals, values, strengths, and future perspectives of a student. This is often conducted through the use of open-ended questions (e.g., "What do you see yourself doing after college?"). These perspectives are important to use in later processes of the conversation. In the *focus* process, the intention is a conversation over the wide variety of possible behaviors to support the student's goals and future directions. A faculty should work to help students find a targeted and measurable goal, because student goals may be too broad (e.g., be a better student) and not focused enough (e.g., focus on reading for comprehension), clouding a path toward mobilization. In MI, the goal is not the central focus of the processes – rather it is the outcome, it is the *evocation* of the importance of the goal that becomes the highlight. A faculty member proficient in MI will pose evocative questions to a student (e.g., "Why is this so important for you to do?"), in turn raising the student's own awareness of personal importance and readiness for change. This portion of MI raises motivation to autonomous goals, increasing the likelihood of personal success. The *planning* process of MI is a directed conversation about establishing a goal to meet their needs, then a plan is possibly developed to create a path toward change.

An Example in Practice

As reviewed, the MI process helps students identify areas of change, based on their own perceptions of importance. Blankenship's (2021) dissertation study offers an example of SBMI using goal attainment and is the subject of the following report. Blankenship (2021) adapted a SBMI intervention (Hanks; 2021; Shum, 2020) for underperforming first-year college students. The intervention was two MI sessions driven by a protocol, provided by the author. The dissertation study was a mixed-methods small-scale pilot study (N=19) measuring feasibility, participant academic related outcomes (goal attainment and self-efficacy), and exploration of mechanisms of SBMI. The population of the study was a convenience sample of students on academic alert, enrolled in a mandatory success course for first-year students on academic alert. All students in the class received the intervention, however only those that consented to the use of their data – the author was blind to the consenting participants until the intervention was completed. A protocol was used across all meetings, which included two meetings for each participant. The first meeting was intended to [1. *Engage*] explore strengths, values, future goals, and reasons for attending college, [2. *Focus*] help the participant prioritize a target behavior (goal) to discuss further, [3. *Evocation*] elicit change talk through evocative questions, and [4. *Planning*] strategize possible solutions through collaboration and possibly develop a plan of action. The protocol for the second meeting was intended to guide the faculty through a discussion of the action plan, to celebrate successes, and to consider any modifications to the action plan that the student was interested in. The 2021 dissertation publication reported audio from half of the sessions between faculty and student were coded and reported using the MITI 4.2 (Moyer et al., 2015) by Dr. Maggie Sibley's team at the University of Washington, Seattle Children's Hospital. Since then, the remainder of codable audios have been coded by the same professional coding team, and all sessions were found to have proficient use of MI.

The action plan developed during the first MI meeting was used to establish goals and served as a basis for students to report progress. Using Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS) (Kiresuk & Sherman, 1968) each student identified a target goal. A GAS was collected at three time points. Two weeks following the first meeting, participants responded to a GAS in an individualized survey. Participant goals were comprised of steps to complete or reach the goal. Each step was measured by the participant from "None" to "I have done this step" 5 response Likert scale that was converted to a score from 1 to 5. A percentage was computed by taking the participant reported progress divided by the maximum potential score dependent on the number steps. For example, a participant goal had 5 steps time the 5-point Likert, therefor there is 25 maximum potential score. If this participant reported completion of three steps, 3 times 5 (15), then they had completed 60% of their goal (15/25). During the second meeting participants and faculty discussed progress on each step. The second GAS was collected immediately following the second meeting, which was the same goal from the first meeting. At the end of the semester, participants completed the third GAS, reflecting the goal set during the second meeting. Two participants did not complete the third GAS and were not responsive to correspondence. Of the participants, 14 completed the three independent GAS surveys.

Results and Discussion

A multilevel model analysis was run using restricted maximum likelihood to handle the missing data (a full description of the analysis is provided in Blankenship, 2021). The mean percentage of the first GAS was 75.8% of steps completed. This finding is extremely encouraging, as it suggests participants were three quarters of the way to meeting their own established goal and worked diligently two weeks following the first meeting. Goal attainment increased throughout the semester to 85.0% attainment. The findings of the repeated measures analyses conducted were that goal attainment scores increased across the intervention. However, the time fixed effects was not significant ($p = 0.145$), possibly resulting in a ceiling effect from the high first goal attainment collection. Participants were wholly supportive of the intervention. For example, one reported that they appreciated, "The feeling of reassurance that I was actually bettering myself with the good habits I have picked up this semester." One of the more poignant revelations from the study were the relational aspects of MI, and its interaction with outcomes. This is fully explored in the dissertation and forthcoming manuscripts. This pilot was found to be supportive for further development of this SBMI intervention between faculty and students. It also offers a protocol that can be adapted to meet the needs of professionals working with students.

This report has sparked a great deal of thought in the consistency of SBMI and SDT educational practices. For example, Ahmadi et al., (in press, 2023) recently crafted a taxonomy for SDT research of teacher behaviors to meet student psychological needs and increase autonomous motivation. Many of the tenants, conversational skills, and dispositions of MI seemingly align with the SDT taxonomy offered. Consistency between SDT and SBMI is a possible area to explore by seeking to find just how much alignment exists.

Next Steps

To support the further development of SBMI, goal attainment and SDT practices, a host of SBMI research is available in MI training programs and fidelity of implementation of SBMI interventions (e.g., Frey et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2014). Training in MI is essential, as initial training in MI and competency to use the technical and relational skills of MI is an established mechanism (Frey et al., 2020). It is recommended that practitioners refer to MINT (https://motivationalinterviewing.org/), the international MI training network, if interested in training in developing MI knowledge, skills, and proficiency. While college SBMI approaches are new, those interested in more information, and training possibilities, should contact Jon Lee (jon.lee@louisville.edu), an internationally recognized trainer in SBMI, or the author of this report.

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