Relations between Intention to Self-change and Cognitions of benefit and Cost to Self-change in University Students

Yuta Chishima

University of Tsukuba, Japan

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between self-change intention and perceived costs and benefits of this self-change among university students. Although it is well known that many university students desire to change themselves, few studies have examined how students perceive the benefits and costs of these changes. It was hypothesized that the self-change intention would be positively correlated with positive cognitions related to that change. A questionnaire survey was administered to 91 Japanese university students (men = 39, women = 49, non-respondents = 3; mean age = 18.66, SD = 2.08) in October and November 2012. Participants responded to the five items assessing self-change intention on a 5-point Likert-type scale and wrote about their cognitions related to the benefits/costs of self-change/maintenance. The number of descriptive comments ranged from 0 to 3. There were 116 descriptive comments related to the benefits of change, and most of them fell within the "self-growth" category. There were 70 descriptive comments related to the costs of change, and most of these descriptive comments fell within the "energy demands" category. Conversely, there were 86 descriptive comments related to the benefits of maintenance, with most falling within the "easiness" category. There were 96 descriptive comments related to the costs of maintenance, with most falling within the "increasing negative thoughts about myself" category. A correlation analysis between scores on the self-change intention and the number of descriptive comments regarding the benefits/costs toward self-change/maintenance indicated that the self-change intention was positively correlated with only costs of self-maintenance (r = .24, p < .05). Thus, it appears that weighing the perceived costs of maintenance rather than perceived benefits of change would likely promote self-change intention.

Keywords: Self, Self-change, Benefits and costs, University students

Introduction

Intentional self-change among university students

Many university students are eager to change themselves (Hatase, 2000; Mizuma, 2003). Therefore, concepts related to intentional self-change have been examined, such as "self-improvement motivation" (Taylor, Neter, & Wayment, 1995) and "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986). However, only a few studies have examined how or why university students want to change themselves. The willingness to change one's self is referred to as "self-change intention" (exemplified by statements such as "I want to change myself" and "I don't want to continue to be what I am now"). The current study empirically examined the self-change intention. Assessments of self-change intentions could provide important knowledge for understanding mental adjustment among university students. For instance, Polivy & Herman (2002) showed that failures of self-change attempt could lead to disappointed mood states. Moreover, Klingemann, Sobell, & Sobell (2010) indicate a lack of research regarding the mechanisms individuals use when deciding to make self-changes.

Mizuma (2003) mentions that the intention to change one's self can encourage self-development. Moreover, Tanaka (2011) revealed that around 88% of university students want to change. Therefore, it appears that the self-change intention is an important factor in university students' growth and development. One limitation of past studies, though, is that the characteristics that influence a student's desire to change have not been assessed.

Aspects university students desire to change

Kiecolt & Mabry (2000) observed 6 categories of self-change for university students: "improve work habits, be more goal-oriented," "become a better or nicer person," "improve appearance or physique," "be more outgoing or engaged," "be more confident or optimistic," and "manage negative emotions." These are types of desirable self-images for university students. However, a couple of questions remain: how does self-change intention occur and what aspects do individuals want to maintain rather than change?

Model of intentional self-change

Kiecolt (1994) developed a 4-part model for self-change decisions (Figure 1), which

details the process by which an individual comes to the decision of changing an aspect of the self. First, there is the "impetus to change oneself" (A), including unfavorable reflected appraisals and reduced self-esteem. The second is the "conditioning factor" (B) that can include the following: a stressor that is identity-relevant, a belief that self-change is possible, and the cognition that the benefits of change outweigh the costs. The third component is the "critical event" or "turning point" (C). However, some individuals do not go through this step and move directly to the final step. The final step is the "appraisal" (D), which refers to the actual decision to change oneself. The current study focused on "reduced self-esteem" and the "benefits of self-change," specifically addressing the benefits and costs of change.

Purpose & hypotheses

Based on previous research, the current study examined information related to self-change intentions with a focus on self-esteem and cognitions related to the benefits of change. The first hypothesis is that self-change intention will be negatively related to self-esteem. The second hypothesis is that self-change intention will be positively related to the perceived benefits of self-change. These hypotheses are based on Kiecolt's (1994) model of self-change.
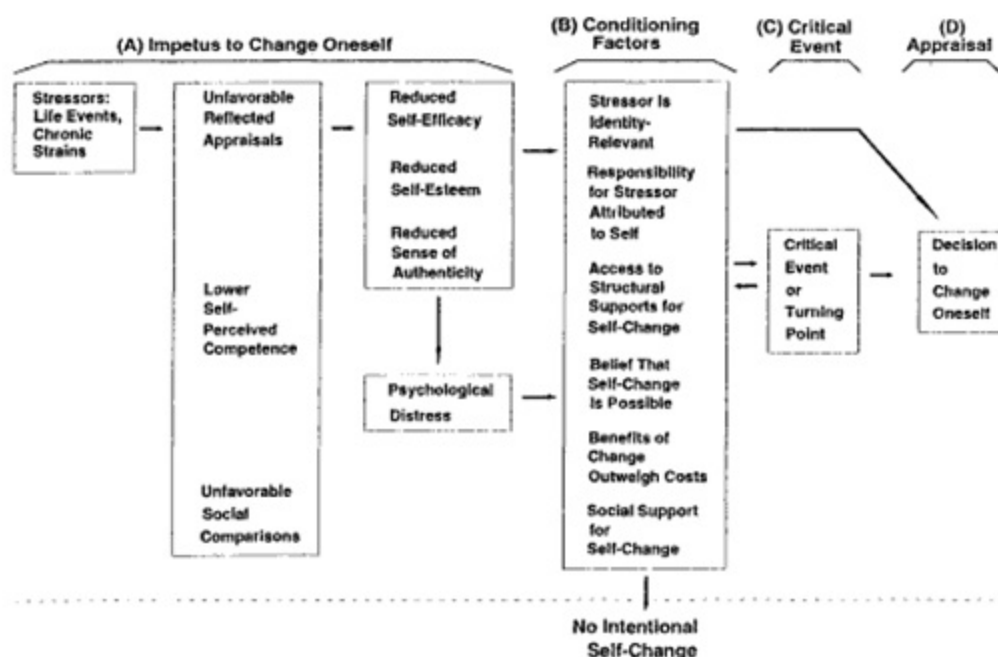
Figure 1 Model for the decision to change oneself (Kiecolt, 1994)

Methods

Participants

Participants were 91 Japanese university students aged 18–25 years (39 men, 49

women, 3 who did not provide their gender; mean age = 18.66 years, $SD = 2.08$).

Measures

Self-change intention scale. This scale was developed specifically for the current study. The scale consists of 5 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) "does not apply at all" to (5) "applies exactly," with higher scores reflecting stronger intentions toward self-change. Examples of some items are, "I want to change myself" and "I want to stay the way I am."

Self-esteem scale. This 10-item scale was developed by Rosenberg (1965) and consists of 10 items. Each item uses a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) "does not apply at all" to (5) "applies exactly," with higher scores reflecting higher self-esteem.

Aspects one intends to change. To examine what the university students wanted to change about themselves, the following open-ended sentence was prepared: "I want to change _____ about myself." Students could also answer, "I don't want to change anything about myself." by checking a box on the questionnaire. Additionally, students were asked what they did not want to change: "I don't want to change _____ about myself." Again, students could also answer, "I don't have anything I don't want to change about myself" Students gave 5 responses to each question. The answers were then counted. If a student said they had nothing they wanted to change, or had nothing they did not want to change, the response was counted as 0.

Perceived benefits/costs of self-change/self-maintenance. Space was provided in the questionnaire to collect descriptive comments of the perceived benefits/costs of self-change/maintenance. Students were also allowed to check a box saying, "I think there aren't any benefits of change." The number of descriptive comments was counted, and checking the box was counted as 0.

Procedures and ethical considerations

This study was conducted in October and November 2012. The questionnaires were distributed to the participants and picked up during lecture sessions. Participants were instructed that they could skip any questions they did not wish to answer, and that they would not be individually associated with their data.

Results

Categorization of aspects related to intended changes

The 274 descriptive comments of traits students wanted to change were placed into 5 categories based on similarity (Table 1): *lazy*, *not assertive*, *inconsiderate*, *inactive*, and *not self-confident*. The category with the greatest number of responses was Lazy. Two participants checked the sentence, "I don't want to change anything about myself." The average number of descriptive comments for each student was 3.11.

The 163 descriptive comments of traits students did not want to change were placed into 6 categories (Table 1): *persevering*, *being authentic*, *communicating well*, *having a positive attitude*, *goal oriented*, and *having social circumstances*. Twelve participants checked the sentence, "I don't have anything I don't want to change about myself." The average number of descriptive comments for each student was 1.90.

Table 1 Categories of the traits participants desired to change/maintain

Categories participants desired to change		Categories participants did not desired to change	
1 Lazy	83	1 Persevering	39
2 Not assertive	62	2 Being authentic	32
3 Inconsiderate	46	3 Communicating well	32
4 Inactive	38	4 Having a positive attitude	28
5 Not self-confident	38	5 Goal-oriented	16
		6 Having social circumstances	6
Others	7	Others	10
Sum	274	Sum	163

Categorization of benefits/costs and self-change/self-maintenance

Descriptive comments of benefits/costs of self-change/self-maintenance were also categorized (Table 2). The 116 descriptive comments regarding the benefits of self-change were categorized into *self-growth*, *having good relationships*, *gaining confidence*, etc. The 70 descriptive comments regarding the costs of self-change were categorized into *energy demands*, *increased stress*, *loss of identity*, etc. The 86 descriptive comments regarding the benefits of self-maintenance were categorized into *easiness*, *becoming authentic*, *safety and relief*, etc. The 96 descriptive comments regarding the costs of self-maintenance were categorized into *increasing negative thoughts about myself*, *increasing anxieties*, *bad effects on relationships*, etc.

Table 2 Categories of benefits/costs to change/maintenance

	Self-change		Self-maintenace	
Benefits	Self-growth	28	Easiness	42
	Having good relationships	22	Becoming authentic	14
	Gaining self-confidence	19	Safety and releif	11
	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮
Sum		116		86
Costs	Enenergy demands	25	Increasing negative thoughts about myself	22
	Increased stress	21	Increasing anxieties	16
	Loss of identity	12	Bad effects on relationship	14
	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮
Sum		70		96

Correlations between self-change intention and the number of aspects identified as needed for positive change and self-esteem

A correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between self-change intention and the number of aspects identified as needed (or not) for change and self-esteem (Table 3). Self-change intention was positively and significantly related to the number of aspects the students intended to change ($r = .25$, $p < .05$) and vice versa ($r = -.24$, $p < .05$). Self-change intention was negatively and significantly correlated with self-esteem ($r = -.41$, $p < .001$). These results suggest that self-change intention was correlated with the identification of several aspects related to change, as well as self-esteem.

Table 3 Correlations between self-change intention and both the number of aspects intended to change and self-esteem

	Aspects participants intended to change	Aspects participants did not intend to change	Self-esteem
Self-change intention	.25 *	-.24 *	-.41 ***

Note）†$p<.10$,*$p<.05$,**$p<.01$,***$p<.001$

Correlations between self-change intention and the number of benefits and costs to change

A correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between self-change intention and the number of benefits and costs to change (Table 4). Self-change intention was positively and significantly correlated with the number of costs of self-maintenance ($r = .24$, $p < .05$). However, there was no significant correlation

between self-change intention and benefits of change (*r* = .10, *n.s.*). These results suggest that self-change intention was only associated with cognitions related to costs for self-maintenance.

Table 4 Correlations between self-change intention and the number of benefits/costs to change/maintain

	Benefits of self-change	Costs of self-change	Benefits of self-maintenance	Costs of self-maintenance
Self-change intention	.10	.00	-.06	.24 *

Note ）†*p*<.10,*p<.05,**p<.01,***p<.001

Discussion
Conclusion

The first hypothesis was that self-change intention would negatively correlate with self-esteem. The present results support this hypothesis, as well as predictions from Kiecolt's (1994) model. The second hypothesis was that self-change intention would positively correlate with cognitions related to the benefits of self-change. The present results did not support the second hypothesis. However, the costs of self-maintenance were positively correlated with the intention to change. This result suggests that the decision to change the self is a more present-focused intention than a future-focused intention. In other words, people who want to change themselves likely think more about their current selves as opposed to their future selves. Thus, self-change intention might be driven by a desire to escape the current self rather than seeking a possible self. In sum, the present study revealed that self-change intention is strengthened by having many traits that can be targeted for change, low self-esteem, and realization of the costs of maintaining the current self.

Further research

The current study highlighted the relationship between self-change intention and the perceived benefits/costs of change. However, the current study examined benefits and costs separately. Most students who desire change will address both benefits and costs, which can lead to conflict associated with change. Therefore, conflicts that arise due to expectations from both benefits and costs should be examined in future research. Miller & Rollnick (2002) suggest that conflict resolution is important in order to encourage change. Lewin's 3-conflict pattern (1935) is useful when examining

conflicts to self-change. For example, the Approach-Approach conflict refers to the notion that, "changing has benefits, and maintenance also has benefits." Avoidance-Avoidance conflict refers to the notion that, "changing has costs, and maintenance also has costs." Approach-Avoidance conflict refers to the notion that, "changing has both benefits and costs." Future research should clarify the conflicts that arise with self-change by using these conflict patterns in order to help university students change toward a desired self.

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