“I Don’T” Versus “I Can’T”: Verbal Framing For Psychological Empowerment

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The current research is based on the insight that the language we use to describe our choices either enhances or impedes our goal-directed behavior. Specifically, four experiments and a field study demonstrate that verbally framing a refusal as “I don’t” (vs. “I can’t”) increases feelings of empowerment and increases the likelihood of engaging in goal-directed behavior. The studies also demonstrate the mediating role of empowerment, as well as the influence of verbal framing on behavioral responses. Further, a boundary condition is demonstrated: the results are reversed when an external cause for the goal pursuit is made salient.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
In this research, we propose that the language used to communicate self-regulatory efforts serves as a feedback mechanism that signals to oneself either a sense of empowerment or a lack thereof, thus influencing goal achievement. Specifically, with five studies we demonstrate that using the word “don’t” (vs. “can’t”) has a favorable influence on feelings of empowerment and perceived effectiveness of the refusal strategy, as well as on actual behavior.

A stream of research in the judgment and decision-making literature has focused on the influence of different types of framing that are logically equivalent (e.g., ½ vs. 50%; 3% fat versus 97% fat-free). More recently, research in linguistics and persuasion has focused on the influence of words that are not entirely equivalent but nonetheless quite similar and often used interchangeably (e.g., think vs. feel; anytime between vs. only between).

The focus of the current research falls into this latter category of verbal framing. We investigate how the decision not to veer away from one’s goal may be framed in terms of a determined (don’t) versus deprived (can’t) refusal. We theorize that utilizing a determined (don’t) versus deprived (can’t) verbal framing signals the level of empowerment and control one has in achieving one’s self-regulatory goal, resulting in a differential influence on the likelihood that we will engage in goal-directed behavior. Saying “I don’t do X” connotes a firmly entrenched attitude rather than a temporary situation, and it emphasizes the personal will that drives the refusal. Thus, using the word “don’t” serves as a self-affirmation of one’s personal willpower and control in the relevant self-regulatory goal pursuit, leading to a favorable influence on feelings of empowerment, as well as on actual behavior. Saying “I can’t do X” emphasizes an external cause, resulting in less feelings of empowerment and thus also hindering the self-regulatory goal pursuit in question.

In Study 1, 47 undergraduates participated in an experiment based on a dieting scenario. Participants were told that they had come up with a strategy “about how to not eat X,” told to imagine that they did this for their own (a friend’s) sake. A two-way ANOVA with perceived effectiveness as the DV revealed the expected framing x focus interaction (Mdon’t, internal = 5.98 vs. Mdon’t, external = 4.60 vs. Mcan’t, internal = 4.79 vs. Mcan’t, external = 5.81, F(1, 174) = 16.59, p < .001). Further, mediation analysis supported full mediation by the empowerment index of the influence of verbal framing on the effectiveness index in the internal focus condition.

In Study 2b, 120 undergraduates read a scenario in which they imagined that they had a goal to lose weight. A two-way ANOVA with perceived effectiveness as the DV revealed a main effect of focus (Minternal = 3.30 vs. Mexternal = 4.88, F(1, 116) = 20.66, p < .001) and the expected framing x focus interaction (Mdon’t, internal = 4.09 vs. Mdon’t, external = 4.08 vs. Mcan’t, internal = 2.52 vs. Mcan’t, external = 5.63, F(1, 116) = 20.74, p < .001). Further, mediation analysis supported full mediation by the empowerment index of the influence of verbal framing on the effectiveness index in the internal focus condition.

Study 3 provided further support for empowerment as the process mechanism underlying the effectiveness of the “don’t” strategy by using a priming task to induce an increased (vs. decreased) reliance on empowerment via the priming of autonomous (vs. controlled) motivation. A two-way ANOVA with perceived effectiveness as the DV revealed a main effect of verbal frame (Mdon’t = 5.25 vs. Mcan’t = 4.27, F(1, 79) = 4.49, p < .05) and the hypothesized interaction (Mdon’t, autonomous = 5.74 vs. Mcan’t, autonomous = 3.76, Mdon’t, controlled = 4.65 vs. Mcan’t, controlled = 4.83, F(1, 79) = 4.20, p < .05).

In Study 4, 30 working women participated in an intervention exercise in which they adopted a new strategy for healthy living and reported how the strategy was working for them every day for a 10-day period. Participants were assigned to either a “don’t” or a “can’t” framing condition, or a non-specific control condition. Results revealed that 8 (of 10) participants in the “don’t” condition persisted the full ten days, whereas only 1 (of 10) participants in the “can’t” condition and 3 (of 10) participants in the control condition did so. An ANOVA with number of days of persistence as the DV revealed the expected main effect (Mdon’t = 9.20 vs. Mcan’t = 2.90 vs. Mcontrol = 5.20, F(2, 27) = 11.82, p < .001).

REFERENCES


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