

WHY BELIEFS MATTER

AVIA WEBER COL 2026
DR. MARTIN SELIGMAN, ABIGAIL BLYLER & NOAH LOVE | POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY CENTER

Women's Agency

Agency: An individual's belief that they can influence the world (Seligman, 2021)
Research Question: How does agency for men and women change over the last 100 years and how does it correspond to progress?

Lexicon: Validate agency lexicon through labeling of sentences from American National Corpus


Book Corpus: Apply the tool by aggregating a list of popular novels by American female and male authors from 1900 to present in the United States

Data Corpus Review: Use progress variables to help trace female agency (female mortality rate, average income by age and race, voter turnout, etc.)

Hypotheses: The goal is to investigate where women's agency is high and if it correlates with real events

Key Finding: When agency is high, progress occurs, when it is low, stagnation occurs


Personal Narrative



Key Finding: The personal narrative is closely correlated with one's identity. Narratives closely follow the structure of a story and are heavily defined by the past (experiences) and future goals.

Future

Past < Future



Imagination holds an important role in the structuring of the future (Schubert, 2020)

People think more about the future than the past (even though people clearly know more about the past) (Baumeister, 2016)

Key Finding: Beliefs about the future may influence the actions of the current moment and overall affect. However, the future is driven immensely by past experiences.

My Questions for the Future

How do some beliefs endure while others easily dissolve given opposing information? I.e. politics

Will there ever be a collective belief system? → shared/agreed upon all cultures I.e. human rights

Abstract

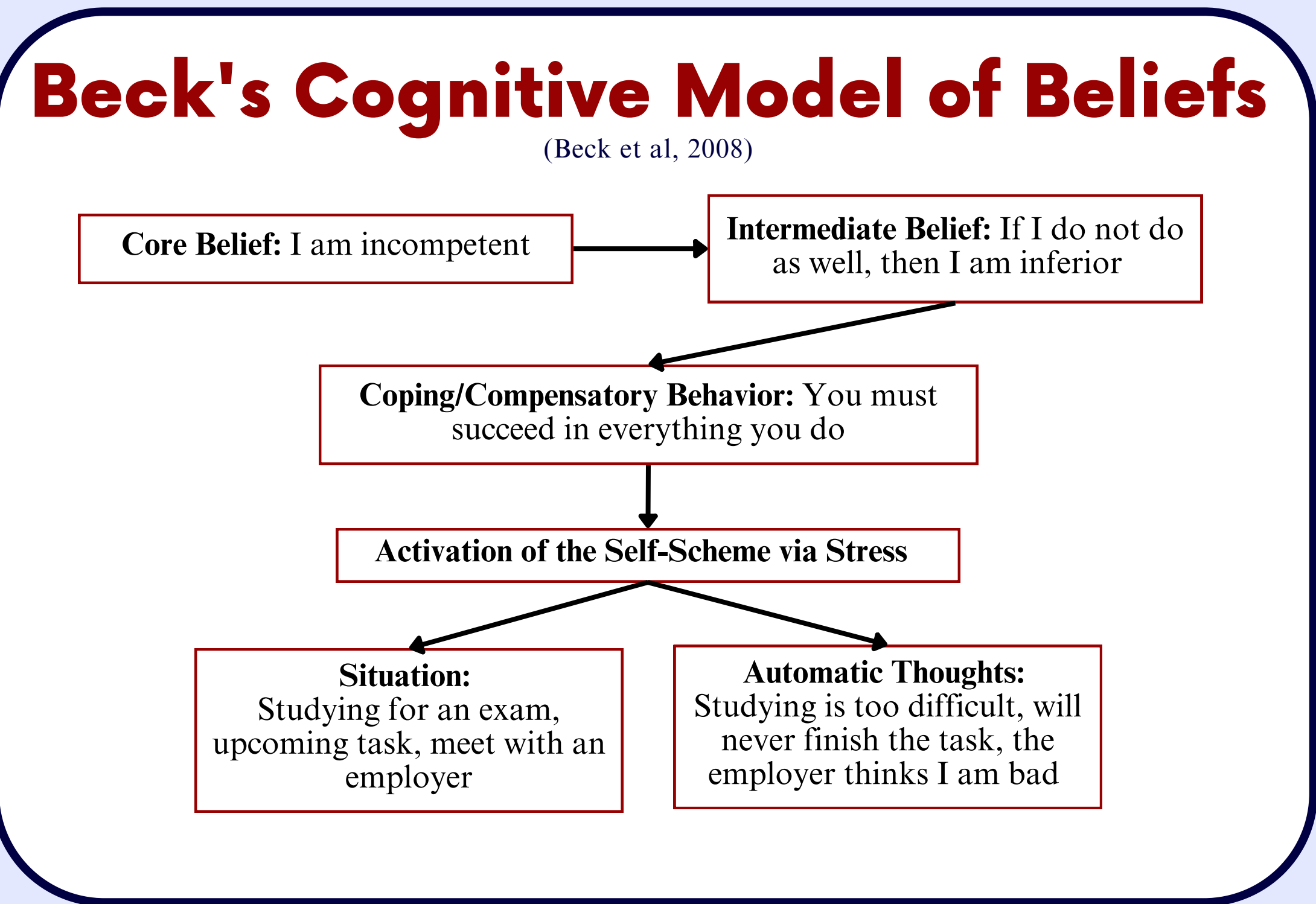
Beliefs guide our behaviors, foundation of our actions, and impact the ways we view the world and ourselves.

A belief is typically defined as an internal mental state (ie. a mental model) that is often associated with a particular response that could be in the form of a statement or an action (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975).

Beliefs are driven by cognitive development, vulnerabilities, and psychological appraisals (Beck, 2008) → tend to develop in childhood and this stage is integral in how we form our beliefs

Over this summer, I conducted preliminary literature reviews of four belief domains or psychological constructs: human agency, personal narratives, beliefs about the body, and beliefs about the future.

- Women's Agency:** Data Aggregation & Interrater Reliability Book Corpus, Lexicon, & Data Corpus Review
- Personal Narratives:** Academic Reading & Synthesizing/Summarizing Literature Review
- Beliefs About the Future:** Academic Reading Literature Review
- Beliefs About the Body:** Academic Reading & Identifying Possible Candidate Beliefs
 - Literature Reviews broken down into 6 domains: Anthropology, alternative/modern medicine, comparative religion, sports, philosophy, and disabilities
 - Twitter Labeling to gain insight about what beliefs may exist about one's own body in natural settings



Body

Anthropology



Comprehension is heavily influenced by the culture they grow up in (Panagiotaki & Nobes, 2014)



Children start understanding the body's existence at four years-old and solidifies around seven years-old

Alternative/Modern Medicine



Impairments from mental disorders can affect the sense of body ownership and agency - generally negative or no affect experienced about the body (Rossetti et al., 2022)



Visuomotor synchrony is needed to understand the body's existence and can claim ownership of entities outside of its own existence (Samad et al., 2015)

Comparative Religion



Sanctification helps predict body appreciation and awareness (Jacobson, 2016)



Dualism is a key component to connectedness between the mind and body - the body is seen as the product carrying out the will of the mind (Frecska et al., 2023)

Sports



Upon injury, sense of accomplishment is needed to combat the negative views upon the body that will arise (Bragaru, 2012)

Disability

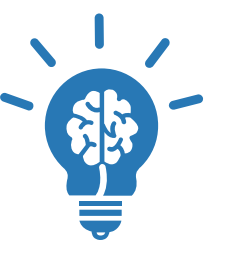


The body is active; the body is productive - the body is capable and can be pushed in light of downgrading situations (Qu, 2019)

Philosophy



The body exists for the sake of the soul and is considered the house (Sorabji, 2009)



The body is a space of learning and deriving purpose (Witteman, 2020)

Key Finding: Beliefs about the body vary across time given the surrounding societal standards and culture and level of mental awareness.

Conclusion

Beliefs are vital to understanding because they guide behaviors and create the outlook we have on the world, ourselves, and any other existing entity. Beliefs can be easily influenced by the perceptions we hold in the exact moment, the society we developed and exist in, and a myriad of others

Women's Agency - Beliefs about our own agency varies over the years and is correlated to the time period

Personal Narrative - Narrating and storytelling is an important feature of human communication driven by the past with immense thought about the future

Future - Worry about the future does not assist the current affect in the present. Most future thoughts tend to be driven by the events of the past

Body - The beliefs we hold about our body generally come from the culture, religion, and society we grow up in. The body is seen as something that is connected to and the product of the mind at work