

# 'Counterfactual' thinkers are more motivated and analytical, study suggests

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(PhysOrg.com) -- "If only I had..." Almost everyone has said those four words at some time. Rather than intensifying regret, "what if" reflection about pivotal moments in the past helps people to weave a coherent life story, and fosters their organizational commitment, scholars say.

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According to a new study, counterfactual thinking -- considering a "turning point" moment in the past and alternate universes had it not occurred -- heightens one's perception of the moment as significant, and even fated. Armed with a sense that life may not be arbitrary, counterfactual thinkers are more motivated and analytical in organizational settings, the study suggests.

"What we found is that people indicate stronger commitment to an organization when they think counterfactually and it helps to define who they are on a professional level," says Haas School Associate Professor Laura Kray.

The study was conducted by six scholars, including Kray and her colleague, Professor Philip Tetlock. "From What Might Have Been to What Must Have Been: Counterfactual Thinking Creates Meaning" was published in the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#) in January 2010. "For the first time, we demonstrate that counterfactual thoughts about one's life have predictable consequences for how critical events

and cherished relationships are understood," the authors write.

“Although you might think that counterfactually thinking is just going to lead me down a path of regret, it is actually very functional in terms of helping people establish relationships and make sense of cause and effect,” says Kray, “Counterfactual reflection about pivotal moments in the past helps people to weave a coherent life story.”

Kray notes the “what might have been” scenario is a popular narrative device, as developed in the 1998 film, *Sliding Doors* starring Gwyneth Paltrow. The film reveals two story lines: what happens when Paltrow's character makes it through the “sliding doors” onto the train, and what happens when she doesn't and misses the train.

“The irony is that thinking counterfactually increases the perception that life's path was meant to be,” says Kray, “which ultimately imbues one's life with significance.” While one might argue that believers of destiny would be less inclined to be analytical, the research also found that people who think counterfactually and find meaning in their lives are more apt to believe life is not a product of chance and that they can make valuable choices.

Kray and Tetlock were first intrigued by counterfactual thinking's relationship with fate following the 2000 presidential election. Kray recalls conservative commentators talking about how it was evident George W. Bush was destined to be president, and there appeared to be no perception that the race could have just as easily gone the other way. The questions arose, “What is fate?”, “How do people think about it?”, and “Is fate incongruent with personal choice?”

The team conducted experiments with student volunteers to discover how counterfactual thinking heightens the meaningfulness of key life experiences. The researchers asked one group of students a question in

which the language prompted counterfactual thinking; the other group was asked to respond only factually.

For example, when asked to write an essay on how they met a close friend, the counterfactual group was asked to explain all of the ways they might have not met this friend. The factual group was only asked to recount the factual details of the first encounter. When reflecting on the alternative -- never having become friends -- the participants who were prompted to think counterfactually viewed their friendships as more meaningful. The factual group did not experience that feeling of significance.

The researchers produced similar results when asking students to identify a turning point - or quintessential "fork in the road" moment -- in their lives in which a counterfactual world should seem most plausible and easy to imagine.

“Getting people to think counterfactually helps people see relations better and construct meaning in their lives,” says Kray. In the context of business, Kray says subsequent research found having a sense of meaning fosters organizational commitment. In combination with Kray’s earlier work showing that people who think counterfactually are more analytical, counterfactual reflection is proving to be a very powerful tool in organizational settings.

“How we react to counterfactuals is a great test of how open- or closed-minded we are on a topic,” adds Tetlock, who has studied how people think about what-if scenarios at the organizational and even country level. "In my book *Expert Political Judgment* (2005), I find that the more imaginatively experts think about possible pasts, the better calibrated they are in attaching realistic probabilities to possible futures.”

**More information:** Read the full paper:

[www.haas.berkeley.edu/groups/operations/kray\\_paper2010.pdf](http://www.haas.berkeley.edu/groups/operations/kray_paper2010.pdf)

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