Are "Actual-Self Versus Ideal-Self" Discrepancies Associated With Depression Emotions? A Study With Discrepancy Direction Manipulation

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Abstract

Self-discrepancies represent a gap between people's different selves and evoke negative emotions (Higgins, 1987). In this research project, in agreement with Higgins' theory, we hypothesized that participants' actual-self vs. ideal-self discrepancies are primarily related to dejection emotions. We conducted an experimental study where we used explicit measures. After identifying an ideal-self discrepant quality by administering self-report questionnaires in which participants rated themselves on their actual personality attributes and on their ideal qualities, two weeks later we assigned each participant a schematic self-discrepant quality and ask to describe situations in which s/he wished s/he met his/her ideal standard but s/he didn't (positive discrepancy condition or achieving direction), or to describe a situation in which s/he met right the contrary of his/her ideal standard (negative discrepancy condition or avoidance direction). Via a priming task, we aimed at activating such ideal self-schemata, before asking participants in experimental conditions to rate current emotional states along POMS items (Spielberger, 2012). We expected to observe higher mean scores on POMS Depression scale when participants were exposed to the actual/ideal priming conditions, in comparison to the control-group participants, who only rated their current emotional states on POMS. Preliminary findings cautiously suggest that discrepancies require to be assessed in a more clear and accurate way in order to relate to specific emotions, by taking into account the role of positive discrepancy condition (achieving direction) and negative discrepancy condition (avoidance direction) as well.

Keywords: Self discrepancy; actual self; ideal self; dejection emotions; priming effect; discrepancy direction.

Introduction

Research has shown that different types of discrepancies between self-state representations are related to different kinds of emotional vulnerabilities. For example, discrepancies between the actual/own self-state and the individual's representation of hopes, wishes and aspirations (ideal self) are associated with dejection-related emotions (sadness, disappointment, dissatisfaction, frustration and dejection), whereas discrepancies between the actual/own self state and the individual ought-self evoke agitation emotions. These discrepancies imply absence of positive outcomes or presence of negative results, respectively.

The greater the magnitude and accessibility of a discrepancy, the more the individual will experience the kind of discomfort associated with it, and such an effect has been experimentally demonstrated: Priming manipulation temporarily increases the kind of discomfort associated with the discrepancy whose accessibility was activated (Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986).

Results from more recent studies, however, in which different discrepancy assessment methods were used, do not fully support the Higgin's theory (McDaniel & Grice, 2008; Ozgul, Heubeck, Ward, & Wilkinson, 2003) rather suggesting that these discrepancies elicit a general negative emotional condition. None of the studies focused on the direction of ideal discrepancies by differentiating between those discrepancies expressing a status a person wishes to achieve (referred from here on as achieving discrepancies, i.e., a person wishes s/he were in a way s/he is not) and those discrepancies expressing a status a person wishes to escape (referred from here on as avoiding discrepancies, i.e., a person wishes s/he were not in a way s/he is).

Method

Participants

Participants were students who received course credit in return for their participation: 13 students took part into the experimental condition and 31 students completed the control task.

Experimental design and procedure

In the experimental condition, we administered participants a list of adjectives twice, with different instructions: They were asked to rate how they actually are and how they wish they were (rating tasks were counterbalanced across participants). By subtracting actual from ideal self-rating scores on matching adjectives, we computed discrepancy scores for each participant. Discrepancy scores could be negative or positive: when the score was positive, the discrepancy direction was towards an ideal quality the participant wished not to possess (avoidance direction); when the score was negative, the discrepancy direction was towards an ideal quality the participant wished to possess (achieving direction). We assumed that the highest discrepancy scores revealed schematic discrepancies in self-perceptions.

Ten to twenty days later, each participant was assigned his/her schematic ideal discrepancy, that is, the personality adjective with the highest discrepancy score, and asked to complete an ideal priming task: When his/her schematic ideal discrepancy was positive, participants had the following instructions: "describe a situation in which you were (assigned adjective) but you wished you were not like that"; when the value was negative, participants were asked to: "describe a situation in which you were not (assigned adjective) but you wished you were".

After this priming condition, participants rated their current emotional states on POMS. Control group participants completed POMS only.

Preliminary results

After discarding 3 univariate outliers, POMS raw scale scores were transformed into z-scores. Since POMS scales were highly inter-correlated, we then regressed each POMS scale onto the other POMS scales, in order to have a pure score for each scale.

We used ANOVA analyses to compare residual POMS mean scores across the 3 experimental conditions, i.e., control group (N = 29), experimental group with schematic discrepancies towards an achievement direction (N = 3) and experimental group with schematic discrepancies towards an avoidance direction (N = 9).

	Achieving direction group (N=3)	Avoiding direction group (N=9)	Control group (N=29)	F	η^2
Depression-Dejection	0,17	-0,18	0,04	0,23	0,01
Tension-Anxiety	0,44	-0,35	0,06	1,03	0,05
Anger-Hostility	0,07	0,16	-0,06	0,19	0,01
Confusion-Bewilderment	0,09	0,01	0,01	0,01	0
Fatigue-Inertia	-0,44	0,22	-0,02	0,58	0,03
Vigor-Activity	-0,29	-0,5	0,18	2,09	0,10

Table 1: ANOVA analyses that compare residual P.O.M.S. mean z-scores across the 3 experimental conditions.

No difference across the groups was statistically significant, because of the low statistical power of the analysis due to an inadequate number of participants in the two experimental conditions. Nevertheless, η^2 observed for POMS Tension-Anxiety and Vigor-Activity scales suggest that emotional states might vary in function of different experimental conditions. Higher anxiety levels were reported when an ideal self-discrepancy was activated towards an achieving direction (how we wish we were, but we are not) rather than an avoidance direction (how we wish we were not, but we are). When we compared scores by ANOVA with POMS scales as within factor (2 levels, i.e., two emotional states) and the two experimental conditions (achievement vs. avoidance direction) as between factor, results showed that participants who had been solicited to think of when they were not as they wished (achievement direction), for example, reported higher anxiety but lower fatigue levels in comparison to those participants with self-ideal discrepancies oriented towards an avoidance direction ($F = 2,58$, ns, $\eta^2 = .21$ for the within (POMS) by between (condition) factors interaction effect).

Discussion

Our preliminary findings suggest that actual vs. ideal self discrepancies may elicit higher levels of general negative emotions rather than of dejection only, in accordance with more recent studies, where different discrepancy assessment methods were used from those followed in Higgins' studies (McDaniel & Grice, 2008; Ozgul, et al., 2003). Our preliminary results also cautiously indicate that discrepancies require to be assessed in a more clear and accurate way also by taking into account direction of discrepancies, i.e., avoidance or achievement. We aim to collect further data in order to provide statistically robust results on the possible impact of achieving vs. avoiding direction of self actual vs. ideal discrepancies on current emotional states.

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