



Does the salience of possible selves mediate the impact of approach and avoidance temperaments on women's weight-loss dieting?



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ABSTRACT

The salience of both a hoped-for thin self and a feared fat self was predicted to mediate the impact of respective approach and avoidance temperaments on weight-loss dieting (WLD). Further, that the mediation pathway from avoidance temperament and through a feared fat self would be stronger than that from approach temperament and through a hoped-for thin self. A convenience sample of 249 college women reported age, height and weight and completed measures of the salience of possible selves, concern for dieting and approach and avoidance temperaments. Bootstrap mediation revealed that only avoidance temperament exerted an impact on WLD through the salience of both possible selves. However, the mediation pathway through the feared fat self was stronger than that through the hoped-for thin self. The consequences for the research and prevention of unhealthy dieting and eating pathology in women are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Research suggests that approach and avoidance processes play a critical role in the development and maintenance of eating pathology (Harrison, Treasure, & Smillie, 2011). Central to such processes is the influence of approach and avoidance temperaments: individual differences in the neurobiological sensitivity and reactivity to positive or reward stimuli (approach temperament) and negative or punishment stimuli (avoidance temperament) (Elliot & Thrash, 2010; Harrison et al., 2011). However, relatively little attention has been directed toward elucidating the social cognitive structures through which these temperaments exert their effects (Strauman & Wilson, 2014). Given that these structures may serve as important targets to treat and prevent pathology (Strauman, McCrudden, & Jones, 2010), this paper examines whether possible selves in the body image domain mediate approach and avoidance temperaments on a risk factor for eating pathology in young women: weight-loss dieting (WLD) (Haines & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006; Keel, Baxter, Heatherton, & Joiner, 2007).

Approach and avoidance temperaments can be conceptualized as initial bases for personality and the self-concept because they contribute to the shaping of an individual's affective, cognitive and behavioral adaptations to the social and physical environment (Rothbart, Ahadi, & Evans, 2000). One way in which this process is expressed is in how approach and avoidance temperaments orientate an individual to establish and maintain respective approach and avoidance goals in the self-concept (Caspi & Shiner, 2008; Elliot & Thrash, 2010). For example, a

predominant approach temperament, because it is experienced as being more sensitive and more reactive to potential rewards, is developmentally related to positive anticipation, as well as seeking out, engaging with, and persisting in challenging tasks (Rothbart et al., 2000; Rothbart & Huang, 2005). In contrast, a predominant avoidance temperament, because it is experienced as being sensitive and reactive to potential punishments, is developmentally related to the tendency to avoid exciting or potentially punishing situations (Rothbart & Huang, 2005).

Thus, over time, temperament helps shape what people like and dislike, what is valuable and important, and thus what they choose to do in the form of approach and avoidance goals (Elliot & Thrash, 2010; Rothbart et al., 2000). In contemporary western society women appear to possess influential approach and avoidance goals in the body image and WLD domains (Dalley & Buunk, 2011; Dalley, Toffanin, & Pollet, 2012). Specifically, these goals are in the form of possible selves, a hoped-for thin self and a feared fat self, and are the products of sociocultural forces that promote and reward thinness as well as punish and stigmatize fatness (Dalley et al., 2012; Markus & Nurius, 1986). However, since temperament is involved in the establishment of important and influential goals within the self-concept (Caspi & Shiner, 2008; Elliot & Thrash, 2010), it is reasonable to suggest that temperament serves such a function with regard to the hoped-for thin self and the feared fat self. Thus, given the rewards of thinness, approach temperament should facilitate the establishment and maintenance of a hoped-for thin self. Similarly, given the penalties associated with fatness, avoidance temperament should facilitate the establishment and maintenance of a feared fat self.

Goals may exert their influence on decision making and behavior to the degree that they are easily brought to mind or salient in the

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cognitive field (Kruglanski & Kopetz, 2009). Significantly, goals that are the most valued and important tend to be the most cognitively salient (Bargh, 1990). As a result it is predicted that approach and avoidance temperaments should exert their impact on WLD through the salience of the hoped-for thin self and the feared fat self, respectively. Specifically, with increasing approach temperament, the easier it should be to imagine a hoped-for thin self and the greater should be the WLD motivation. Moreover, with increasing avoidant temperament, the easier it should be to imagine a feared fat self (King & Raspin, 2004), the greater should be the motivation to engage in WLD in order to avoid a feared fat self.

Taken together then, it is expected that in young women the salience of a hoped-for thin self and the salience of a feared fat self, should respectively mediate the impact of approach and avoidance temperaments on WLD. However, it is also expected that the mediation pathway from avoidance temperament will be stronger than that from approach temperament. This is because, firstly, a significant body of research suggests that negative entities, and in particular negative selves, are more motivationally potent than positive entities and positive selves (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Secondly, and following on from this, there is evidence within the body image literature pointing to a relatively greater influence of a feared fat self over a hoped-for thin self on women's body image concerns and dieting behaviors (Dalley et al., 2012).

Finally, it is also expected that the predicted mediating pathways will occur over and above body size (body mass index: BMI). This is because previous research has found that possible selves, in the form of a fat or overweight self and thin self, exert their effects on body image concerns over and above actual body size and shape (Dalley et al., 2012).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Two hundred and forty nine college women volunteered as part of a convenience sample to participate in this cross-sectional study. The participants were recruited from the University central library. Six participants were excluded because their questionnaires were incomplete. The mean age of the remaining participants ($N = 243$) included in the statistical analysis was 21.73 years ($SD = 2.15$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Approach and avoidance temperaments

The 12 item Approach–Avoidance Temperament Questionnaire (ATQ) (Elliot & Thrash, 2010) was used to operationalize Approach–Avoidance temperament. Six items assess approach temperament (e.g. “When I see an opportunity for something I like, I immediately get excited”, “Thinking about the things I want really energizes me.”) and 6 items assess avoidance temperament (e.g. “I react very strongly to bad experiences”, “When it looks like something bad could happen, I have a strong urge to escape). Both sub-scales use a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Previous research has demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency for both the approach temperament subscale ($\alpha = .80$) and the avoidance temperament subscale ($\alpha = .80$). In this study Cronbach's alpha for the approach temperament subscale was .78 and .80 for the avoidance temperament subscale.

2.2.2. Salience of a possible self

Following King and Raspin (2004) salience was operationalized in terms of the ease and clarity with which goal representations are brought to mind. Participants read the following instructions: “From time to time we all think about the sort of body we could have in the future. Sometimes, what comes to mind is a hoped-for (feared) body that is thin or slim (fat or overweight). Please think about this hoped-for

(feared) body for a moment.” Participants were then asked to rate the two items on a Likert scale: “How clear is this hoped-for (feared) body in your mind?” 1 (*not at all clear*) to 9 (*very clear*) and “How frequently do you think about this hoped-for (feared) body?” 1 (*not at all frequently*) to 9 (*very frequently*). The correlation for the 2 items of the hoped-for thin self was $r = .59, p < .01$ and for the feared fat self items the correlation was $r = .63, p < .01$.

2.2.3. Weight-loss dieting

The Concern for Dieting subscale of the Revised Restraint Scale (Herman & Polivy, 1980) was used to operationalize weight-loss dieting. The scale assesses participants' motivation to restrain their eating using 6 items such as “How often are you eating?” and “How conscious are you of what you are eating?”. The total score is the sum of ratings with a possible range 0–19. The scale has previously been demonstrated to be a valid measure of dieting motivation, have satisfactory internal consistency, and be associated with eating disorder symptomatology (Van Strien, Herman, Engels, Larsen, & van Leeuwe, 2007). In this study Cronbach's alpha of the concern for dieting subscale was .76.

2.2.4. Body size

The body mass index (BMI) was used operationalize body size and was calculated by using the self-reported height and weight data.

2.3. Procedure

The study was granted permission by the department of social psychology ethical committee. After providing informed consent, participants completed measures of approach–avoidance temperament, accessibility of each possible self, and weight-loss dieting motivation and then provided age, height and weight. To prevent order effects the presentation of each possible self was counterbalanced. No monetary compensation was offered to participants.

2.4. Statistical analysis

Mediation was tested using Preacher and Hayes' macro PROCESS for SPSS (version 18). PROCESS is described by Hayes (2013) as a method for comparing multiple mediators. This procedure yields unstandardized path coefficients for a multiple mediator model and estimates 95% confidence intervals (CIs) of the indirect effects using a bootstrapping sample procedure. Assessing an indirect effect through a bootstrapping sample procedure is more reliable than testing significance of the mediation effects (Hayes, 2013). The model tested included approach and avoidance temperaments as predictors, salience of a feared fat self and salience of a hoped-for thin self as mediators, and WLD as the criterion variable. Self-reported BMI was included as a control variable.

3. Results

In contrast to expectations approach temperament was not significantly related to either the hoped-for thin self or WLD. An analysis of the proposed mediational impact of approach temperament through the hoped-for thin self on WLD was, therefore, no longer meaningful. The results presented thus reflect a reduced model as represented in Fig. 2.

The means and standard deviations of the variables and the correlations between them are presented in Table 1. A paired t-test revealed that the hoped-for thin self was significantly more salient than the feared fat self, $t(242) = 8.32, p < .001$.

3.1. Mediational analysis

Figs. 1 and 2 present the direct and indirect paths, respectively, of the mediation model tested in this analysis. The R^2 in the total effects model

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