



It works both ways. Enhancing explicit self-esteem using the self-reference task



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ABSTRACT

The self-reference task (SRT) is an evaluative learning paradigm that uses the positive valence of the self to change the attitude towards new and neutral stimuli. In this contribution, we present evidence regarding the possibility of changing the attitudes towards the self, following a modified SRT. In three independent research studies, we provided participants in experimental groups with an SRT that paired the self with highly positive pictures. After the completion of the modified SRT, participants in the experimental group reported significantly higher explicit self-esteem (in all studies) and more positive self-views (Study 1 and Study 2), as compared with a control group. In the second study, students completed the modified SRT each day for two weeks. The participants in the experimental group reported more positive explicit self-esteem and higher psychological well-being (e.g., higher academic engagement and lower academic burnout), as compared to the control group. However, Study 3 did not provide evidence regarding the effect of the modified SRT on self-reported mental health. Our results suggest that asking individuals to relate the self with another stimulus can be used in both directions to transfer valence from the self to external targets, and from external targets to the self.

1. Introduction

Individuals generally have a positive evaluation of themselves (Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000). Moreover, the positivity of the self-evaluations can be transferred to any owned object through the mere ownership effect (Nuttin, 1985). Although the mere ownership effect was initially used for measuring implicit self-esteem (Koole, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2001), more recent developments in the field of evaluative learning investigated whether it can be used for changing attitudes through the self-referencing task (SRT - Perkins, Forehand, & Greenwald, 2005).

The SRT (Perkins et al., 2005) is an evaluative learning paradigm that recently gained the interest of researchers. Unlike other well-established learning paradigms, the particularity of the SRT is that it uses the self as a valenced stimulus to modify the valence of previously neutral stimuli. Although it was first considered a particular form of evaluative conditioning, recent theoretical developments suggested that the SRT might be a new type of evaluative learning effect, based on intersecting regularities (Hughes, De Houwer, & Perugini, 2016). In a recent meta-analysis of 53 studies, Mattavelli, Richetin, Gallucci, and Perugini (2017) reported that the SRT is effective at forming or

changing the attitudes towards the new stimuli, at implicit and explicit levels.

All previous studies paired the self with neutral stimuli and aimed to demonstrate that the positive valence of the self can be transferred to these stimuli. Given that the SRT effect proved to be reliable and robust (Mattavelli et al., 2017), in the present research we are interested in investigating whether the request to classify the self and other stimuli in the same category can transfer the valence from the stimuli to the self. More specifically, we are interested to see whether the valence of the self can be enhanced, after an SRT in which the paired stimuli are also positively valenced. If the new stimuli generate intense positive emotional reactions, we expect to find a reversed transfer of valence (i.e., from the stimuli to the self).

1.1. Conditioning the positivity of the self

Theoretical developments in the research field of attitudes (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995) suggested that a positive self-view is an attitude towards the self. Following this paradigm shift, psychologists took into consideration both explicit self-views (or discursive self-esteem, resulted from conscious self-appraisal processes) and implicit self-

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views (or implicit self-esteem, resulted from automated associations with the self) (Bosson et al., 2000).

Given the fact that positive self-views can be conceptualized as attitudes towards the self, researchers used psychological theories of attitude formation and attitude change to explain the formation and the temporal dynamics of self-esteem. In this vein, Dijksterhuis (2004) investigated whether implicit (or automated) self-esteem can be changed using a subliminal evaluative conditioning task. In a series of five experimental research studies, Dijksterhuis (2004) exposed participants to repeated associations between a self-related stimulus and positive stimuli and did not use any discursive instructions. Following this procedure, higher levels of implicit self-esteem were found in the case of the experimental groups, as compared with neutral control groups. Covin (2008, Experiment 2) and Grumm, Nestler, and Von Collani (2009, Experiment 1 and Experiment 3) used an evaluative conditioning procedure similar to the one used by Dijksterhuis (2004) and reported similar results regarding implicit self-esteem. In another study, Baccus, Baldwin, and Packer (2004) used an evaluative conditioning procedure that paired self-relevant information with smiling faces within a computer game, and reported higher implicit self-esteem in the experimental group, as compared with the control group. Moreover, Baccus et al. (2004) reported null effects of the evaluative conditioning on explicit self-esteem, which suggested that stimulus pairing tasks are effective for changing implicit, and not explicit self-appraisals.

Using the reflective-impulsive model (Strack & Deutsch, 2004) and the associative-propositional model (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006), Grumm et al. (2009) argued that different experimental manipulations should have different effects on implicit and explicit self-esteem, depending on the characteristics of these experimental manipulations. An experimental manipulation that changes the affective reaction towards the self will affect only implicit self-esteem and will also have to address self-related propositions to successfully change explicit self-esteem (Grumm et al., 2009). In two studies, Grumm et al. (2009) used propositional manipulations to change explicit self-esteem (Experiment 2), and a combination of affective and propositional manipulations to show that a change in implicit self-esteem can lead to a change in explicit self-esteem (Experiment 3).

Starting from similar assumptions, Ebert, Steffens, von Stülpnagel, and Jelenec (2009) investigated whether learning processes are present within an implicit association test (IAT - Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). Ebert et al. (2009) used a modified version of the IAT for self-esteem (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000), and presented the participants only the blocks that paired the “self” category with positive attributes, and the “others” category with negative attributes. In the other experimental condition, the “self” category was paired with negative attributes, and the “others” category was paired with positive attributes. Ebert et al. (2009) reported enhanced implicit self-views in the “self + positive” condition, as compared with the “self + negative” condition.

In conclusion, previous research studies reported that implicit and explicit self-views could be changed using evaluative learning paradigms (i.e., evaluative conditioning), or using classification tasks similar with the SRT (i.e., the unbalanced IAT task used by Ebert et al., 2009). Taken together, these findings suggest that it is possible to find a reversed SRT effect.

1.2. The self-referencing task

In their initial study on the SRT, Perkins et al. (2005) used four types of stimuli: self-concept stimuli (e.g., I, mine), other-related stimuli (e.g., they, their), pictures of digital clocks, and pictures of analogic clocks. Participants were asked to press the same key (the ‘d’ key) when the stimulus displayed on a computer screen represented the “self” or an analog clock, and to press the ‘k’ key when the stimulus represented the “other” or a digital clock. Following this simple classification task, the participants reported preferences towards the analog clocks, if this

type of clocks shared the same key with the “self” stimuli.

Initially, Perkins and Forehand (2012) used the balance congruity principle (Greenwald et al., 2002) to explain the transfer of valence behind the SRT. From this perspective, the positive valence and the self-concept share a first order link prior to the SRT, and this link is assessed by implicit or explicit self-esteem measures. As they complete the SRT, individuals create a first-order link between the self-concept and the new set of stimuli, and this generates a second-order link between the positive valence of the self and the new stimuli. Therefore, the establishment of the second-order link is the reason we find positively valenced stimuli after the completion of an SRT.

More recently, Hughes et al. (2016) suggested that the SRT effect is the result of intersecting regularities. In the SRT, the “self” category and one set of stimuli (e.g., analog clocks) share a common response key throughout the task, and another common response key is shared by the “others” category and another set of stimuli (e.g., digital clocks). Hughes et al. (2016) argue that in the SRT there are four operant contingencies (i.e. if I, then press key A; if others, then press key L; if digital clock, then press key A; if analog clock, then press key L), and these operant contingencies intersect in terms of a common response (i.e., key A or key L). The intersecting regularities is an evaluative learning procedure which is different from the simple stimulus pairing involved in evaluative conditioning paradigms and can explain how individuals create associations between the self and the other categories presented in an SRT (Hughes et al., 2016; Mattavelli et al., 2017).

2. The present study

Previous research studies provided converging results that implicit valence of the self can be enhanced through subliminal conditioning (Covin, 2008; Dijksterhuis, 2004) or by conducting a categorization task similar with the SRT (Ebert et al., 2009). Because the underlying learning effects are presumed to be implicit, these research studies did not use any explicit measures for assessing the manipulation effects and relied exclusively on implicit measures. However, Baccus et al. (2004) reported significant effects of a conditioning paradigm on implicit self-esteem, not on explicit self-esteem. Taken together, these findings support the idea that evaluative learning paradigms can be used successfully to change the valence of the self-concept.

In the present paper, we develop the ideas suggested by Ebert et al. (2009), and we use the SRT as a reliable paradigm for evaluative learning. We anticipate that the introduction of highly positive stimuli in the SRT will result in an enhancement of the self-concept valence. Using the balance congruity principle (Greenwald et al., 2002), we expect to enhance the positivity of the self-concept by creating a second-order link between the self-concept and the positive valence of the stimuli, in addition to the existing first-order link between the self-concept and positive characteristics. Therefore, the general hypothesis of the present research study is:

H1. The participants that pair the self-concept with positive stimuli will report more positive self-views, as compared with participants in the control group.

3. Study 1

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

127 undergraduate students (72.44% female, mean age = 23.3 years, SD age = 5.89 years) participated in this study, in exchange for partial course credit. Following the analysis of the SRT tasks, 22 participants were excluded from the statistical analyses because they had < 80% correct classifications. An apriori, two-tailed, power analysis indicated that a sample size of 64 participants in each of the two groups should provide 80% power to detect a moderate effect size ($d = 0.50$).

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