



Assessing future expectations and the two-dimensional model of affect in an Italian population



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ABSTRACT

Future-directed thinking has been described as part of two underlying systems that integrate dimensions of affect, motivational systems, orientation to the future, and future expectations, which are initiated at the cognitive, affective, biological, behavioral, and motivational levels. The main aim of the present study is to test the two underlying frameworks model and explore future expectations in a general Italian-speaking population (N=345). Therefore, the second aim of the present paper is to confirm the factorial structure of the Subjective Probability Task (SPT; MacLeod et al., 1996), a questionnaire designed to assess specific positive and negative orientations towards the future. Results showed that the SPT has good psychometric properties and it is a reliable instrument to assess future-directed thinking. Moreover, our findings confirmed the role of future expectancies as cognitive correlates of depression and anxiety. Differently from previous studies (Clark and Watson, 1991; MacLeod et al., 1996), our results did not confirm that depression was characterized by low positive affect. We believe this paper contributes to the understanding of future expectancies and their relation with anxiety and depression, and will help to expand the availability of an instrument to assess future directed thinking.

1. Introduction

Thinking about the future is a central component of human cognition. It involves the ability to project the self forward in time in order to pre-experience an event (Atance and O'Neill, 2001). Many studies have demonstrated the relationship between future-related thinking and well-being. For instance, previous research has shown that patterns of positive future-directed thinking, such as hope and optimism, are linked to reported higher quality of life and life satisfaction (Scheier et al., 1989), less distress (e.g. Brissette et al., 2002), more adaptive behaviors, and overall higher well-being (Carver et al., 2010). By contrast, patterns of negative future-directed thinking, as in the case of hopelessness and pessimism, are associated with maladaptive behaviors, such as alcohol (O'hannessian et al., 1994) and substance abuse (Park et al., 1997), less persistence facing life's challenges, more avoidance coping, and poor health (Carver et al., 2010; Snyder et al., 1991). Moreover, reduced anticipation of future positive events is a defining characteristic of depression, whereas anxiety is characterized by an increase in the number of perceived negative future events (Balsamo et al., 2013; Bjärehed et al., 2010; Rief

et al., 2015). Besides, expectancies have been considered a core feature of mental disorders and for that reason a focal objective of treatment (Rief et al., 2015).

In their study, MacLeod et al. (1996) tested a new model of affect. They explored if the positive and negative future expectancies could be included in the tripartite model of Clark and Watson (1991). The tripartite model of anxiety and depression proposed by Clark and Watson (1991) theorizes three main factors: negative affect (NA), positive affect (PA), and arousal. According to this model, both anxiety and depression are characterized by a higher NA component; however, only depression consisting of low PA and anxiety is uniquely characterized by hyperarousal (Clark and Watson, 1991; Miloyan et al., 2014). With an exploratory factor analysis (EFA), MacLeod et al. (1996) tested a model composed by two factors: the first one characterized by anxiety, depression, NA, and expectancies for future negative events; the second factor dominated by depression (negative loading), PA (positive loading), and expectancies for future positive events. Therefore, MacLeod et al. (1996) described future-directed thinking as part of two underlying systems that integrate dimensions of affect, motivational systems, orientation to the future, and future

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expectations, which are initiated at the cognitive, affective, biological, behavioral, and motivational levels.

Regarding affect, PA and NA have been described as two orthogonal dimensions (Clark and Watson, 1991; MacLeod et al., 1996). PA refers to pleasurable engagement and reflects the extent to which one feels enthusiastic, active and alert. NA instead refers to unpleasant engagement and reflects the extent to which one feels angry, disgusted or afraid. Both PA and NA have also been used to conceptualize anxiety and depression. Anxiety and depression are characterized by a higher NA component, whether only depression is distinguished of low PA, and anxiety is singularly characterized by hyperarousal (Clark and Watson, 1991; Miloyan et al., 2014). Referring to the motivational level, previous studies (e.g. Fowles, 1988) have shown the distinction between a punishment-driven, aversive motivational system and a reward-driven, appetitive motivational system. Specifically, McNaughton (1982) referred to the former as the behavioral inhibition system, which is linked to aversive outcomes (i.e. punishment or frustrated non-reward) and inhibits ongoing behavior when an aversive outcome is perceived as likely. By contrast, the appetitive motivational system has been called the behavioral activation system or behavioral approach system. The behavioral approach system mediates responses to signs of desirable outcomes (i.e. relieving non-punishment or reward) and initiates approach behavior when such outcomes are perceived as probable (e.g. Fowles, 1988; Gray, 1987). Regarding future-oriented cognitive processes, they have been associated with emotional disturbances (Beck et al., 1987). Anxiety and depression are similarly associated with an increased tendency to anticipate the occurrence of negative events, and an increased tendency to believe that future events will yield negative outcomes (MacLeod et al., 1996; Miranda and Mennin, 2007). For instance, hopelessness has been described as the typical orientation to the future found in depression (Beck et al., 1988; MacLeod et al., 1996), whereas worry and negative bias for future personal (i.e., related to the self), but not for impersonal (i.e., other-oriented), events has been described as a characteristic of anxiety (Barlow, 2000; Butler and Mathews, 1987; MacLeod et al., 1996; Molina and Borkovec, 1994). Moreover, mood-disturbed individuals have been found to overestimate the probability of negative events (e.g. Andersen et al., 1992) and sometimes underestimate the probability of positive events (e.g. Pyszczynski et al., 1987).

To assess future-directed thinking, MacLeod et al. (1996) developed the Subjective Probability Task (SPT), a questionnaire designed to measure the tendency toward specific positive and negative future expectancies (e.g. Meevissen et al., 2011; Peters et al., 2010). Different variations and adaptations of the SPT have been used in research (e.g. Boselie et al., 2014; Hanssen et al., 2013; Stöber, 2000). The original authors developed a revised version by increasing the number of positive items (from 10 to 14) and reducing the number of negative items (from 20 to 16). Nevertheless, this change did not produce significant improvements. The original version of the SPT has been validated in English-speaking samples mostly composed by students (MacLeod et al., 1996; Meevissen et al., 2011; Peters et al., 2010).

The main aim of this study is to test the model with two underlying cognitive-affective frameworks (e.g. Clark et al., 1994; Fowles, 1988; Gray, 1987; MacLeod et al., 1996; McNaughton, 1982), in an Italian-speaking general population. To achieve this objective, we translate and assess the factorial structure and psychometric properties of the Italian SPT, a measure of future expectations, and we test the correlations between this measure and the other components of the two underlying systems (i.e. depression, anxiety, and positive and negative affect). We hypothesize that the Italian version of the SPT will present a two-factor structure and good internal consistency, like the previous version (MacLeod et al., 1996). The second objective is to test with a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) the structure of the two-framework model, which includes future-related thinking, affect, anxiety, and depression. Based on previous outcomes (MacLeod et al., 1996), we hypothesize that analyses will reveal a two-factor structure with one

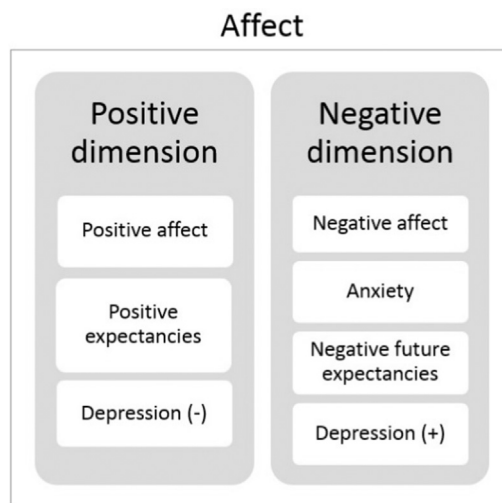


Fig. 1. Two underlying systems that integrate dimensions of affect, motivational systems, orientation to the future, and future expectations (MacLeod et al., 1996).

factor dominated by anxiety, depression, NA, and expectancies for future negative events, and the second factor dominated by depression (negative loading), and a positive loading of PA, and expectancies for future positive events (Fig. 1).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample was composed of 345 participants who voluntarily took part in the present study. The sample was composed of 34.8% (n=120) men and 65.2% (n=225) women. The participant average age was 33.5 years (SD=12.20.; range: 18–80 years old). Specifically, 63.9% of subjects were between 18 and 30 years old, 11.4% between 31 and 40, 13.2% between 41 and 50, 10.5% between 51 and 60, and 1% more than 60 years old. All participants were native Italian speakers. Regarding education, 2.6% (n=9) had completed middle school, 20.3% (n=70) had finished high school, and 77.1% (n=266) reported a university level of education. Of 250 participants who filled-out the BDI-II, 21 (8.4%) reported a moderate level of depression, and 9 (3.6%) moderate–severe depression. Mean score on the BDI was 9.61 ± 7.70 (range: 1–39). Of 256 subjects who completed the STAI-Y trait, 102 (39.84%) scored more than 40. Mean score on the STAI-Y trait was 43.65 ± 9.26 (range: 26–72).

2.2. Italian translation of the SPT

Permission to translate and validate the SPT was granted by the authors of the instrument (MacLeod et al., 1996). First, a native Italian speaker who was aware of the purpose of the SPT translated the items from English to Italian. Second, an Italian-English bilingual speaker who was not familiar with the SPT performed a back-translation from Italian to English. The two English versions were compared and any discrepancies were detected. Therefore, the Italian version of the SPT was judged to be an accurate translation of the English version.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Positive and Negative affect

Affect was assessed with a widely used scale, the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988), which consists of two subscales, one measuring PA and the other measuring NA. Each subscale contains 10 items, scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (extremely). The Italian validated

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