



Short Communication

Self-esteem and public self-consciousness moderate the emotional impact of expressive writing about experiences with bias

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ABSTRACT

Expressive autobiographical writing has generally been shown to have positive psychological effects, as well as health benefits. The current study examined whether dispositional factors moderate the emotional benefits of expressive writing about personal experiences with social bias. Participants (N = 154 undergraduate students) completed personality measures one week prior to writing about a personal experience being the target of bias. Results indicated that self-esteem, public self-consciousness, and need for cognition may play an important role in predicting individuals' reactions to communicating their own experience with social bias. Specifically, higher scores on the Public Self-Consciousness Scale were correlated with more negative emotions (measured with the PANAS), whereas higher scores on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale were correlated with more positive emotions. Higher scores on the Need for Cognition Scale were associated with heightened positive and negative reactions. Thus, personality variables appear to be an important moderator of the short-term outcomes of expressive writing.

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1. Introduction

Writing about one's own subjective experiences is a natural activity that is widely assumed to help individuals process their thoughts and feelings about life events, extract meaning from them, and position specific episodes into the broader context of their identity or life story (Gergen & Gergen, 1988; McAdams, 2001). Indeed, a vast body of research has revealed the positive, therapeutic effects of expressive autobiographical writing, particularly for those who have experienced stressful events, on overall psychological and physical well-being (Lepore, 1997; Pennebaker, 1993, 2004; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997). This work has shown that autobiographical narrative construction can allow individuals to re-experience and analyze challenging events in a way that renders them, and the negative emotions they trigger, less threatening and more manageable (Smyth, 1998). At the same time, there is some evidence that expressive autobiographical writing may not always have a salutary effect. For example, one study revealed that writing about emotionally charged experiences was effective for participants who scored higher on *alexithymia* (who typically are less adept at identifying and labeling their own emotions), but not for those who exhibited a *repressive coping*

style characterized by an avoidance of one's emotional responses (Baikie & McIlwain, 2008).

Uncovering the moderating factors that heighten or reduce its impact is crucial for achieving a full understanding of the contexts and populations with which expressive writing is particularly beneficial, ineffectual, or even potentially harmful.

1.1. Current study

The present research investigated another potential boundary condition for the emotional benefits of expressive writing: participants' personality traits. That is, the study tested the relationship between a number of dispositional factors and participants' affective responses to writing about a personally stressful or aversive event. In addition to exploring the role of key individual difference variables as yet unexplored in the expressive writing literature, the present work centered on an event type that has received surprisingly little attention in prior research—the experience of being the target of stereotypical or biased judgments. Building on the few studies focused on expressive writing for members of stigmatized groups (e.g., Lewis et al., 2005; Pachankis & Goldfried, 2010), this study examined whether personality variables might moderate the emotional benefits of expressive writing about personal experiences with social bias.

We selected two types of personality variables: those related to individuals' feelings about themselves, and those related to their processing

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of messages. Specifically, we expected that individuals with high self-esteem might have more positive outcomes from the writing exercise, perhaps because they may find it less threatening (whereas individuals with low self-esteem might focus more on the pain of the original discrimination experience, and thus have a more negative reaction; Brown, 2010). Similarly, we expected that a high level of public self-consciousness, which directs attention to others' views on the self, might render expressive writing about bias less likely to yield positive emotional responses. Private self-consciousness may have the same effects. Internal self-focus might cause rumination about the negative event and/or cause individuals to re-experience negative emotions that the event originally triggered (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995).

Need for cognition, an individual's tendency to enjoy and engage in effortful thought, affects how individuals process persuasive messages. Individuals high in need for cognition are more likely to elaborate on a message; they focus on the central points of a message and form stronger attitudes. A second individual difference variable, transportability, relates to engagement with narratives or stories. Individuals who are highly transportable are more likely to become transported into the narrative world (immersed in the story), including their own remembered stories about their past. Because both of these personality variables lead to stronger engagement with messages, we suggest that both of these variables may lead to more extreme emotional reactions (either positive or negative) to the expressive writing task.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 215 participants (121 male, 93 female, 1 other; M age = 20 years, $SD = 2.99$; see below for exclusions) from a large public university participated for partial course credit. (An additional 119 participants completed the personality measures, but not the writing phase.)

All materials were administered online. One week prior to the writing phase of the study, participants completed a series of personality scales. For the writing phase of the study, participants were randomly assigned to one of three narrative voice conditions (1st, 2nd, or 3rd person voice); however, because no significant main effects or interactions involving narrative voice emerged in analyses, this factor will not be discussed further. All participants received the following expressive writing prompt (adapted from the standard version created by Pennebaker, 1997):

For this exercise, please write about an experience when you feel like you were treated or judged differently by someone else based on something about you. That is, focus on a time when you believe you received differential treatment based on some internal or external characteristic you possess (or a characteristic that another person believed you possessed)...In your writing, really let go and explore the event and how it affected you.

Participants were instructed to take up to 48 h to think of the specific bias-related event they wished to write about and to write continuously for ten minutes. Immediately after completing this task, participants completed a series of measures assessing their emotions and reactions to the writing task.

2.2. Dependent measures

The measure of *self-reported physiological responses* while writing the narrative asked participants to select any of the responses that they experienced while writing: racing heart, upset stomach, headache, dizziness, shortness of breath, cold hands, sweaty hands, and pounding heart (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986).

2.2.1. Bias-related emotional responses

Participants then completed an emotion rating scale (created for this study) to assess affective responses that pertain specifically to potential responses to expressing experiences with bias (nervous, relieved, fatigued, liberated, angry, constrained, validated, diminished, empowered, unburdened). For both these responses and the emotions below, participants were instructed to report how they felt "right now." We combined the bias-related emotions to form a positive reaction composite (5 items; $\alpha = 0.83$) and a negative reaction composite (5 items; $\alpha = 0.78$).

2.2.2. Positive and negative emotions

Participants also completed a set of emotion items selected from the PANAS (interested, distressed, excited, upset, strong, guilty, scared, hostile, enthusiastic, proud, irritable, alert, ashamed, inspired, nervous, determined, attentive, jittery, active, afraid; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). We created a positive emotion composite (10 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$) and a negative emotion composite (10 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$). These two composites were negatively correlated, but only moderately so, $r(152) = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$.

2.2.3. Additional measures

Other measures (social anxiety; questions about the nature of the bias experience) are not discussed here due to space constraints. These variables did not affect the primary findings; details are available upon request.

2.3. Personality measures

Need for cognition, the preference for and inclination toward effortful thought, was measured using the Need for Cognition Scale (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Participants assessed the degree to which each scale item was characteristic of them on a scale ranging from 1 = "extremely uncharacteristic of me" to 5 = "extremely characteristic of me." The scale consists of 18 items including "I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours," (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$).

Private and Public Self-consciousness were assessed using the Private and Public Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975), which measures the extent to which individuals engage in introspection and self-reflection versus concern themselves with others' views of them. Participants rated items on a scale from 0 = "extremely uncharacteristic/not at all like me" to 4 = "extremely characteristic/very much like me." Sample items include "I reflect about myself a lot" (introspection; 10 items; $\alpha = 0.74$) and "I'm concerned about what others think of me" (concern for others' views; 7 items; $\alpha = 0.74$).

Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), the most widely used measure of global self-worth. Participants responded to 10 items such as, "I feel I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others," on a 4-point scale from 1 = "strongly agree" to 4 = "strongly disagree," ($\alpha = 0.89$).

Transportability, the extent to which individuals tend to become immersed in stories, was assessed with a four-item transportability scale, including items such as, "Stories affect me emotionally" (rated on a scale of 1 *not at all* to 7 *very much*; Mazzocco, Green, Sasota, & Jones, 2010; $\alpha = 0.85$).

3. Results

Participants who did not follow instructions (e.g., wrote their story in a different narrative voice than instructed) were excluded from analysis, leaving a sample of 84 men and 70 women. Because we were interested in possible gender differences, we also excluded one participant who listed "other" for gender. Of the final sample, 82 participants were white, 52 were Asian, 5 were African-American, 4 were Hispanic, and the remainder was multi-racial (1 declined to provide race).

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