



Personal change and the continuity of the self



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ABSTRACT

Five studies explore how anticipating different types of personal change affects people's perceptions of their own self-continuity. The studies find that improvements are seen as less disruptive to personal continuity than worsening or unspecified change, although this difference varies in magnitude based on the type of feature being considered. Also, people's expectations and desires matter. For example, a negative change is highly disruptive to perceived continuity when people expect improvement and less disruptive when people expect to worsen. The finding that some types of change are consistent with perceptions of self-continuity suggests that the self-concept may include beliefs about personal development.

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1. Introduction

Studies find that people distinguish between central, immutable features of a concept and features that are allowed to change without fundamentally altering its identity (Slovan & Ahn, 1999; Slovan, Love, & Ahn, 1998). Belief in immutable features is one element of psychological essentialism: the idea that an object possesses a deep underlying character or “essence” that cannot be changed without altering the definition of the object (Gelman & Hirschfeld, 1999; Haslam, 1998; Medin & Ortony, 1989; Medin & Rips, 2005). For example, the genetic makeup of a skunk is treated as an essential feature: most people believe that the organism would shift to a different natural kind if this feature were to change (Keil, 1989). In contrast, the skunk's stripe is characteristic but non-essential, as it could change without altering basic category membership (i.e., a stripe-less skunk could still be a skunk; Keil, 1989).

Other research examines how people track the continuity of individual objects across time and transformation, and how they differentiate between changes that disrupt versus maintain the identity of an individual object (Blok, Newman, & Rips, 2005; Gutheil, Bloom, Valderrama, & Freedman, 2004; Gutheil, Gelman, Klein, Michos, & Kelaita, 2008; Gutheil & Rosengren, 1996; Rips, Blok, & Newman, 2006). This research asks questions like “how might we determine whether a *particular* skunk is the same skunk we previously observed?” This judgment is based partially on whether any changes in the object are consistent with it still being a skunk. However, it is also based on beliefs about what types of changes are consistent with the continuity of an individual object of this class over time (see, e.g., Rips, 2011). For example, did the skunk get older (consistent with our beliefs about skunks) or younger (inconsistent with beliefs about skunks) since the last time we saw it?

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The current research explores ideas about change and continuity in the domain of the self-concept. We examine people's beliefs about which features of themselves may change, and in what ways they may change, while still preserving the continuity of the self.¹

1.1. Stability, change, and the self-concept

What is the essence of a person? People seem not to hold a pure physicalist view of personal continuity, but rather ascribe special importance to mental characteristics (Blok, Newman, Behr, & Rips, 2001; Nichols & Bruno, 2010; Tierney, Howard, Kumar, Kvaran, & Nichols, 2014). As such, people judge that significant changes in mental content undermine the relation between a current and future self (Bartels & Rips, 2010). Also, the type of mental change matters. Perceiving changes in another person's moral qualities leads to attributions of greater personal change (Heiphetz, Strohminger, & Young, 2016; Strohminger & Nichols, 2014, 2015) and greater disruption of established social relationships (Strohminger & Nichols, 2015) than perceiving changes in other mental features, like cognitive abilities or memories.

However, rather than thinking of others' moral values and mental characteristics as uniformly immutable, people consider positive changes in these qualities to be more allowable than negative changes (Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2014; Newman, De Freitas, & Knobe, 2015; Tobia, 2015). This pattern of judgments could arise from beliefs that the human essence is fundamentally positive. On this view, negative change deviates from this essence whereas positive change enables its expression (Newman et al., 2014; Tobia, 2015). This view presents the idea that some aspects of who a person really is seem best expressed via a trajectory of (positive) change.

Is this also how people think about themselves? There are many differences in how people think about themselves versus others (Molouki & Pronin, 2015), underscoring the importance of specifically examining first-person judgments of self-continuity over time. We think there are at least three possibilities for how people think about their own continuity: (i) People's thoughts about their self-continuity might be similar to their thoughts about others. Recent research suggests patterns consistent with this view in at least some situations (Bench, Schlegel, Davis, & Vess, 2015; Heiphetz et al., 2016). (ii) Differences in the accessibility of mental contents could cause differences in judgments of continuity for the self versus others. People can directly access and vividly experience their own (but not others') current mental contents (see Loewenstein, O'Donoghue, & Rabin, 2003; Pronin, 2008). So, nuanced changes in mental contents that are more easily observable for the self might seem more disruptive to one's own self-continuity than similar changes would be for the continuity of others. (iii) People might expect more improvement in themselves than in others, for any number of reasons. For example, if people have a stronger motivation to see themselves (versus others) in a positive light (e.g., Kunda, 1987), then they might view specifically positive changes as more continuity-preserving for the self than for others.

At present, it is unclear from existing research how people integrate ideas about the direction of change into their own self-concept. On the one hand, people expect to undergo many positive changes throughout their lives (Busseri, Choma, & Sadava, 2009; Haslam, Bastian, Fox, & Whelan, 2007; Newby-Clark & Ross, 2003; Wilson & Ross, 2001). They also report that positive change is more consistent with a process of "self-discovery" (Bench et al., 2015), which could mean that anticipating improvement might not undermine self-continuity. On the other hand, some studies find that imagining general (i.e., neither explicitly positive nor negative) personal change to one's core psychological characteristics reduces perceived continuity between the present and future self (Bartels & Urminsky, 2011; Ersner-Hershfield, Garton, Samanez-Larkin, & Knutson, 2009). This latter finding suggests that people may in fact treat any significant change in themselves as disruptive to self-continuity, regardless of valence.

The current studies aim to inform a handful of questions that remain unresolved in the literature to date: Do people think about their own continuity similarly to how they think about the continuity of others? Do people regard some aspects as strictly immutable in themselves, or might they view all improvements as continuity-sustaining? Previous research suggests that changes to moral characteristics (Strohminger & Nichols, 2014, 2015) and negative changes (Newman et al., 2014, 2015; Tobia, 2015) in others undermine *their* continuity, but it is less clear how such changes might affect *one's own* sense of self-continuity. Also, although people expect to change for the better over time (Busseri et al., 2009; Haslam et al., 2007; Newby-Clark & Ross, 2003), they nevertheless react to the general idea of personal change as if it disrupts self-continuity (Bartels & Urminsky, 2011; Ersner-Hershfield, Garton, et al., 2009), posing somewhat of a puzzle as to how people integrate change into the self-concept. To address these questions, we examine how people think about their own continuity across time and different types of personal change, and in doing so, we provide new insight and synthesis across these various streams of theorizing.

In this paper, we explore the relationship between personal change and perceived continuity of the self by systematically varying aspects of the changes considered. As we have noted, previous research about change in different domains (i.e., tracking the continuity of objects and other people) has suggested the importance of (i) the specific nature of the feature changing and (ii) the valence of change. Also, people tend to have specific goals and thoughts about how they themselves will change over time (Brunstein, 1993; Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2015). Therefore, we suggest that expectations and desires related to future change may also be particularly relevant in the domain of the self-concept. The following studies explore

¹ In this paper we measure people's degree of relatedness between the current and future self in a graded fashion, an approach taken by related past research (e.g., Bartels & Rips, 2010; Strohminger & Nichols, 2014). To avoid confusion between the concept of graded continuity and other identity-related concepts, we will use the terms "continuity" or "self-continuity" rather than "identity" to describe the construct measured in our research.

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