



Research paper

Temporal self appraisal and continuous identity: Associations with depression and hopelessness

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Major depression
 Hopelessness
 Continuous identity
 Self-appraisal
 Concepts of self
 Cognitive therapy

ABSTRACT

Background: While depression is associated with decreased self-worth, less is known about how depression relates to the degree of perceived unity of the self over time (CI; continuous identity) and appraisal of past and future selves (temporal self-appraisal). In Study 1, we examined the relationship between depression severity and temporal self-appraisal. In Study 2, we examined depression and hopelessness severity as it relates to temporal self-appraisal and continuous identity. It was hypothesized that individuals with significant levels of depressed mood would report lower self appraisals of current and future selves and that hopelessness about the future would be associated with disturbances in perception of self over time (CI; continuous identity) and temporal self-appraisal.

Methods: Study 1 examined depressed mood (n=75) and non-depressed mood (n=144) individuals to determine their self-rated personal attributes for their past, present and future selves using a validated task of temporal self-appraisal. Study 2 examined an independent sample of subjects. Based on cutoff scores for clinically significant depression and hopelessness, Depressed/Hopeless (n=63) and Non-Depressed /Non-Hopeless (n=168) subjects were asked complete the validated task of temporal self-appraisal and also complete a validated task to assess their continuous identity.

Results: In Study 1, a significant difference was found between the depressed mood group and the non-depressed mood group in how they see themselves changing over time. The non-depressed group perceived themselves increasing in positive personal attributes from past, to present, to future self. The depressed mood group perceived themselves as deteriorating from the past to the present in terms of positive attributes about their self-identity. However, contrary to expectations, the depressed group perceived their future self as improved from their present self. Subjects' past and future selves were at a similar level and both were significantly higher than perception of their present self-worth. Study 2 replicated these findings and also found severity of depression was significantly related to lower levels of CI. Additionally, it was found that the severity of hopelessness was minimally associated with continuous identity and temporal self-appraisal ratings.

Conclusion: These results suggests that even people with depressed mood have an instinctive grasp of the possibility to an improved future self-worth despite the negative cognitions associated with present self-worth and hopeless expectations about the future. While depressed and hopeless individuals may view the world negatively and feel hopeless about their general future, these results suggest that depressed individuals distinguish between hopelessness about future external success and future self-improvement. Despite perceiving their past and future selves to be more positive, depression severity was associated with less continuous identity. Since depressed individuals perceive a future self as a return to or a recovery of a past self, therapeutic strategies may focus on improving a sense of continuous identity with past and future selves and focusing on deriving meaning from current life difficulties to improve beyond a past self, growing to a superior future self.

Limitations and future research: Limitations include using self-report measures of depression and hopelessness. Future studies may wish to use individuals who were diagnosed with depression to explore further how depressed people see themselves changing from the present to the future. Additionally, future studies could determine if depressed individuals who do not perceive their future self to be improved are at higher risk for adverse outcomes.

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STUDY 1.

1. Introduction

Temporal self-appraisal examines how a person views themselves over time (past, present and future). Euthymic individuals typically maintain a positive view of their current self by denigrating their past selves (i.e., self-enhancement bias; Wilson and Ross, 2001; Ross and Wilson, 2003). That is, most euthymic individuals believe that their lives follow a continuously improving trajectory where evaluation of their past-self includes more self-criticism than their evaluation of their present-self and that their future-self is evaluated even more positively than their present-self (Kanten and Teigen, 2008; Grysman et al., 2015; Heller et al., 2011).

In contrast, individuals with low self-esteem, a correlate of depression, are less inclined to a self-enhancement bias about their past (Haddock, 2004) and may not see themselves on the same trajectory as typical individuals who rate themselves as improving from the past to the present, and from the present to the future. In addition, due to high levels of hopelessness about the future (Beck et al., 1974) depressed individuals may view themselves as having deteriorating self esteem from their present self to their future self. Negative beliefs about the self are a hallmark feature of depressed mood (Beck, 1979; Rogers, 1961; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In addition, depression is associated with guilty self-beliefs about the past (Beck, 1979; O'Connor et al., 2012; Orth et al., 2006) and pessimistic and hopeless attributions about future opportunities (Beck, 1979; Pyszczynski et al., 1987).

However, it may be the case that the negative beliefs a depressed individual holds about their current-self do not extend to perceptions about their past-self. Some studies have suggested that depressed mood increases rumination about an idealized version of a past-self (Wildschut et al., 2006). Since depression is associated with the expectation of the occurrence of future negative events (Pyszczynski et al., 1987) depressed individuals may have an idealized view of a past self, while simultaneously holding a negative view of their current self and perhaps, due to their hopelessness about an improved future, an even greater negative view of their future self. This possibility is consistent with the learned helplessness theory of depression (Seligman, 1972; Abramson et al., 1978) that posits negative internal, global, stable and hopeless attributions as mediators of depression. According to traditional views of depressive attributions, it would be expected that characteristic helpless and hopeless ways of thinking would result in negative appraisals of the future, where efforts to exert positive change would be regarded as futile.

No study to date, however, has compared how individuals with depressed mood characterize their appraisal of their past and future self identity with their perception of their present self identity. In the current investigation, we examined the temporal self-appraisal of the past, the present and the future in depressed mood and non-depressed mood individuals. We hypothesized that individuals with depressed mood would have a negative linear trend where they believe they deteriorated from the past to the present and would continue to decline from present to the future in self-worth. In contrast, we hypothesized that individuals from the non-depressed group would have a positive linear trend where they believe that they have improved from the past to the present and would continue to enhance their positive attributes from the present to the future (self-enhancement bias; Ross and Wilson, 2003).

In addition, we examined subjects' temporal self continuity. That is, the degree subjects rate their past and future selves as overlapping in similarity with their present selves. Temporal self-continuity is related to the construct of continuous identity (Sokol and Eisenheim, 2016). Diachronic disunity (or low levels of continuous identity) is characterized by a sense of alienation from one's future or past self (Parfit, 1971; van Gelder et al., 2013). Lack of a continuous identity may lead to

impulsive short-term decision making focusing on present-self gain at the expense of the future-self (Hershfield, 2011; van Gelder et al., 2013; Bartels and Urminsky, 2011). Recent studies have found diachronic disunity between present and future-self predicted depression severity, suicidality, impulsivity and delinquent behavior (Sokol and Eisenheim, 2016; Hershfield, et al., 2011; van Gelder, 2013). Similarly, the lack of past to present continuous identity is strongly predictive of depressed mood severity and suicidal risk (Sokol and Eisenheim, 2016; Chandler et al., 2003; Ball et al., 1989). Sokol and Eisenheim (2016), for example, found that increasing disparity between the present and future selves was predictive of subjects' negative mood and suicide risk severity. However, no study to date has examined both temporal self-appraisal and temporal continuity to predict depressed mood. We hypothesized an interaction, where individuals who view themselves as improving from their past to their future-self and have higher levels of temporal self-continuity would have the lowest levels of depressed mood.

2. Materials and method

2.1. Participants

254 adult subjects were recruited from the Amazon Mechanical Turk subject pool. Of these subjects, 250 completed the full survey. An additional four subjects were ruled out for selecting an option stating that there was a reason that their survey should not be used for academic research. A total of 246 subjects were included in the analyses. Regarding demographics, subjects ranged in age from 18 to 68 years with a mean age of 38.2 (SD=13.1), 63% were female, and their primary language was English (99%). The subjects' mean years of education was 15.76 (SD=3.4); 38% were single, 50% were married or in a domestic partnership, 1% were widowed, and 11% were divorced (single) or separated; 78% were white, 7% were Hispanic or Latino, 8% were black or African-American, 1% were Native American, and 2% identified as other. Also, 65% of the participants were employed, 11% were out of work, 5% were retired, 7% were homemakers, 8% were students, and 3% identified as other. Subjects were compensated \$0.25 for completion of survey items.

Using the Depression subscale of the DASS-21 and its recommended cut-off scores for clinically significant depression (Nieuwenhuijsen et al., 2003) we created two groups, those who scored in the Normal range (0–9) were entered into a Nondepressed group (N=144) and those who scored above the clinical cut-off score and were in the moderate to extremely severe depression range (above 13) were entered into the Depressed group (N=75). Subjects who fit into the mild, non-clinically significant, depressed range (10–13) were not included in either group (N=28).

Amazon Mechanical Turk has been shown to be a highly reliable and valid method of collecting data for psychological experiments (Buhrmester et al., 2011; Paolacci et al., 2011). There has been a recent increase in using Amazon Mechanical Turk subject pool for research, in a large variety of areas of clinical psychology including well-being, obsessive-compulsive behavior and general psychopathology (e.g. Garcia et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2014). Additionally, Shapiro and colleagues (2013) have demonstrated that the Amazon Mechanical Turk subject pool has similar prevalence of clinical variables, such as depression and anxiety, as subject pools obtained through more traditional methods. Furthermore, due to the diverse range of participants available in the pool studies using the Amazon Mechanical Turk subject pool allows for a more representative selection of socioeconomic levels, ages, gender and race than would sampling from a college campus, increasing external validity of findings (Shapiro et al., 2013). Also, the online format allows for greater confidentiality and anonymity; such as in the present study, where even the researchers do not have access to any information beyond the demographic information explicitly given by the subject (Shapiro et al., 2013). See Chandler

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