Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 50 (2014) 202–209

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

Understanding the relationship between self-esteem and self-clarity: The role of desired self-esteem

Kenneth G. DeMarree [a,*], Kimberly Rios [b]

[a] Department of Psychology, University at Buffalo, State University of New York, USA
[b] Department of Psychology, Ohio University, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- People's desired self-esteem (SE) often differs from their actual SE.
- When actual SE and desired SE are incongruent, self-clarity is reduced.
- High SE is often desired, so low SE is associated with larger discrepancies.
- Discrepancies help explain relationship between SE and clarity.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 14 June 2013
Revised 8 October 2013
Available online 21 October 2013

Keywords:
Self-esteem
Self-clarity
Self-discrepancy
Attitude strength

ABSTRACT

In this research, we examined a novel predictor of clarity in one's self-conceptions: discrepancies between actual and desired levels of self-esteem. Because people tend to desire high self-esteem, such discrepancies are generally larger among individuals low in self-esteem. Among college students (Study 1) and in a more diverse sample (Study 2), we found that the relationship between actual self-esteem and self-clarity was stronger among participants who had high levels of desired self-esteem. Further supporting the causal role of actual-desired self-esteem discrepancies in predicting self-clarity, Study 3 found that a manipulation designed to make high self-esteem seem less desirable reduced the relationship between self-esteem and clarity. These results demonstrate the importance of considering not only people's actual levels of self-esteem, but also their desired levels. Implications for the possible origins and consequences of self-clarity are discussed.

Introduction

People's self-views are important determinants of how they think, feel, and behave (Swann, Chang-Schneider, & McClarty, 2007). However, there is more to a person's sense of self than the content of their self-concept and self-evaluation, including the organization (McConnell, 2011; Showers, 1992), stability (Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993), and clarity (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996) of self-conceptions. In the present investigation, we explore one of these dimensions – self-clarity, or the perception that one has a clear and coherent sense of self (Campbell et al., 1996) – and its relationship with self-esteem. We posit that the relationship between self-esteem and self-clarity can be influenced by the extent to which people *desire* a level of self-esteem that differs from their actual self-esteem. Because most people desire high self-esteem, we predict that people low in self-esteem will generally have greater incongruity, and consequently, less clarity.

Explanations for the self-esteem—clarity relationship

Self-esteem is strongly related to self-clarity, with people higher in self-esteem reporting more clear self-views (Campbell et al., 1996; Wu, Watkins, & Hattie, 2010). The most common measure of self-clarity, the self-concept clarity scale (Campbell et al., 1996), is in turn associated with a variety of important consequences, including reduced symptoms of depression and eating disorders (Bigler, Neimeyer, & Brown, 2001; Butzer & Kuiper, 2006; Vartanian, 2009); better educational consequences (Thomas & Gadbois, 2007); and a reduced likelihood of responding to an ego threat with anger and aggression (Stucke & Sporer, 2002). Because of these meaningful consequences, it is important to understand the antecedents of self-clarity.

Campbell (1990) (see also Campbell et al., 1996) discussed two possible reasons why people high in self-esteem generally have higher clarity than people low in self-esteem. First, because people are motivated to seek both positive information about themselves and information that is consistent with their preexisting self-concepts (Sedikides, 1993; Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987), people low in self-esteem will likely seek both positive (i.e., reflecting an enhancement bias) and negative (i.e., reflecting a bias to be consistent

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University at Buffalo, State University of New York, 214 Park Hall, Buffalo, NY 14260, USA.
E-mail address: kgdemarree@gmail.com (K.G. DeMarree).

0022-1031/$ – see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2013.10.003

with their low self-esteem) self-relevant information. This results in an unclear, evaluatively incongruent self-concept. Second, the opposite causal path might hold – low clarity could render people more open to potential negative self-relevant information, decreasing their overall level of self-esteem. Although support for both causal paths has been obtained, we focus on self-esteem as a predictor of self-clarity (see also Wu et al., 2010).

Attitude strength and self-clarity

Our explanation for the relationship between self-esteem and self-clarity is grounded in research on attitude strength (i.e., the extent to which an attitude is durable and impactful; Petty & Krosnick, 1995). A number of variables predict the strength of an attitude, including the degree to which it is held with certainty (Tormala & Rucker, 2007) or ambivalence (Conner & Armitage, 2008). Research on attitudes is relevant to the self because self-esteem is generally defined as an attitude toward the self (Rosenberg, 1965).

Research examining variables such as certainty, accessibility, and ambivalence, which are known to predict attitude strength outcomes, has found that these variables similarly predict the strength of self-views and self-esteem (e.g., DeMarree, Morrison, Wheeler, & Petty, 2011; Swann & Ely, 1984, for a review, see DeMarree, Petty, & Briñol, 2007). Self-clarity overlaps heavily with these variables (DeMarree & Morrison, 2012). Indeed, many of the items on the self-concept clarity scale (SCC; Campbell et al., 1996) seem to assess *subjective ambivalence*, or the experience of conflict regarding an attitude object (e.g., "My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another").

Based on attitude research, we examine a yet-untested predictor of self-clarity — discrepancies between actual and desired attitudes toward the self (i.e., actual–desired self-esteem discrepancies). In so doing, we can gain more insight not only into the origins of self-concept clarity, but also into why self-esteem level is associated with self-clarity.

Actual–desired (self-) attitude discrepancies

Much like people have behavioral or outcome goals (e.g., to exercise more or to get into medical school; Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986), they also have attitudinal goals (DeMarree, Wheeler, Briñol, & Petty, 2013; Maio & Thomas, 2007). That is, people often *want* to have an attitude that differs from the one they currently possess (e.g., they want to like chocolate cake less or their political party's nominee more than they currently do), and they will engage in a number of strategies directed toward obtaining the desired attitude (Maio & Thomas, 2007). Critical to the present investigation, as with possessing other forms of conflicting beliefs, people who hold discrepant actual and desired attitudes can experience conflict in their evaluative responses. In many ways, this mechanism is similar to others noted in previous research. With an objectively ambivalent attitude (i.e., possessing both positive and negative associations), for example, one's positive and negative evaluations have opposing implications for action. According to recent perspectives on ambivalence (e.g., van Harreveld, van der Pligt, & de Liver, 2009), which note that people experience the greatest conflict in their evaluations when their attitudes are objectively ambivalent and action is required, these opposing behavioral implications of positive and negative evaluations are what lead to the experience of conflict. For example, although positive feelings about an attitude object (e.g., cheesecake) might increase one's likelihood of approaching the object (e.g., eating the cheesecake), negative feelings about the attitude object might increase one's likelihood of avoiding the object (e.g., rejecting the cheesecake), leading to confusion, conflict, and indecision. Just as separate positive and negative evaluations present in ambivalent attitudes lead to different implications for behavior and thought (van Harreveld et al., 2009), so too might different actual and desired evaluations. These opposing pulls lead to greater feelings of conflict. Consequently, when people's actual and desired attitudes differ in valence, they tend to experience greater conflict than when the valences are similar. Stated differently, as the magnitude of actual–desired attitude discrepancies increases, so too do feelings of conflict about the attitude (i.e., subjective ambivalence; DeMarree et al., 2013).

However, unlike topics on which some people might want to be more positive and some people might want to be more negative (e.g., gun control), with self-esteem there appears to be a strong preference for a positive self-evaluation, at least in Western cultures (e.g., Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). Thus, the lower one's level of self-esteem, the larger the discrepancy between one's actual and desired self-esteem is likely to be, and the lower one's self-clarity will be.

The present research

One way to test whether actual–desired self-esteem discrepancies predict self-clarity is by examining the interaction between actual and desired self-attitudes (i.e., self-esteem). In Study 1 and Study 2, we examined actual and desired self-esteem as interacting predictors of self-clarity in a large student sample (Study 1) and a large international sample (Study 2). In Study 3 we experimentally manipulated whether high or low self-esteem was desired, in order to examine the causal impact of actual–desired self-esteem discrepancies on self-clarity. Our prediction was that the positive relationship between actual self-esteem and self-clarity would be strongest among those who desired high self-esteem.

Study 1

Method

Participants

Six hundred and eight university students (249 men, 359 women; $M_{age} = 19.72$, $SD = 2.85$) completed an online mass testing session. Not all participants completed all measures, so the degrees of freedom reported below reflect this. Because these measures were included in a mass testing session with limited space, brief versions of the measures were used.

Procedure and materials

Self-esteem. Participants first completed a single-item measure of self-esteem: "Using the scale below, please indicate the extent to which you like yourself" (1 = *dislike strongly*, 7 = *like strongly*). Scales like this have been used in previous research to measure self-esteem (DeMarree, Petty, & Strunk, 2010; Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001).[1]

Actual & desired self-esteem. Prior to the actual and desired self-esteem measures, participants received the following prompt:

> Sometimes the opinions people ACTUALLY have are different from the opinions people would LIKE TO have and sometimes these are the same. On the following scales, we'd like you to indicate the extent to which you ACTUALLY like yourself, the extent to which you IDEALLY would like yourself, and the extent to which you feel you SHOULD or OUGHT TO like yourself.

Participants then reported, on three separate scales, their actual, ideal, and ought self-esteem using the same scale as was used for the aforementioned self-esteem measure. We averaged ideal and ought self-esteem to form an index of desired self-esteem ($r = .53$) for the

[1] Validating the use of this measure, in a separate sample of 157 university students, we found this measure to be correlated with the RSE at $r = .69$, and with the Robins et al. (2001) measure at $r = .59$, $ps < .001$. Using this measure in place of the actual self-esteem measure produced the same results.