



Evaluative processes in self-critical individuals: The role of success and failure inductions☆



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 April 2015

Received in revised form 18 February 2016

Accepted 29 March 2016

Available online 7 April 2016

Keywords:

Self-criticism

Personality pathology

Task switching

Success

Failure

Agency

Evaluative processes

ABSTRACT

Relying on the two-factor model of personality development (e.g., Blatt & Blass, 1992) and evolutionary psychology perspective on self-criticism (SC; e.g., P Gilbert & Irons, 2005), we examined the role of evaluative processes in SC by investigating SC individuals' reactions to achievement success and achievement failure. We hypothesized that inducing achievement success or failure would activate the SC schema, and that such activation would result in enhanced automatic operation of the individual's evaluative system. In two experiments, an experience of achievement success or failure was induced by means of a fabricated intelligence test (Exp. 1A), or by an event recall (Exp. 1B & Exp. 2). Automatic evaluative processes were evaluated by a tailored task switching paradigm. While, SC was associated with enhanced automatic negative evaluation following a failure induction, it was associated with enhanced automatic positive evaluation following recalled achievement success. To the best of our knowledge, the results are the first documentation of bias towards positive information in SC. We discuss these results in terms of a potential resilience facet within SC.

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1. Introduction

Self-criticism (SC) is a personality trait pertaining to a punitive stance towards the self, once the individual's standards are not met (Shahar & Priel, 2003). It is mostly studied in relation to depression within the framework of the two-factor model of personality development (e.g., Blatt & Blass, 1992; Blatt, 2004). According to this model, personality is developed through a dialectical process between two primary axes: gaining individual differentiation (agency; the introjective trajectory), and gaining belongingness to a large group (communion; the anaclitic trajectory; Luyten & Blatt, 2011). In cases where there is imbalance between communal goals and agentic goals, a pathological personality structure may be developed. SC is considered to represent a personality pathology that is characterized by an imbalanced emphasis on the agency axis (Blatt, 2004; Luyten & Blatt, 2011).

SC is often measured via the Depressive Experiences Questionnaire (DEQ; Blatt, D'Afflitti, & Quinlan, 1976), a self-report questionnaire that is aimed at assessing depressive personality styles. The DEQ was utilized in order to test the role of SC in depression (e.g., Blatt, 2004; Blatt et al., 1976), as well as other psychopathologies, such as eating disorders (Dunkley, Masheb, & Grilo, 2010), social anxiety (Shahar &

Gilboa-Shechtman, 2007) and post-traumatic stress disorder (Yehuda, Kahana, Southwick, & Giller Jr, 1994; for a review, see Shahar, 2015).

Much of the research on SC was based on the “congruency hypothesis”, according to which SC tendencies are expected to be activated by agency/achievement-related stressful situations (e.g., achievement failure), rather than by communion-like stressful situation (e.g., interpersonal rejection; Hammen, Marks, Mayol, & DeMayo, 1985). Overall, the results of this line of research agree that SC individuals react to failure inductions, but are inconsistent regarding their reaction to interpersonal rejection (Besser & Priel, 2011; Longe et al., 2010; Priel & Shahar, 2000; Zuroff & Mongrain, 1987). Specifically, these studies suggest that, following achievement failure, SC individuals exhibited high levels of introjective depression (Zuroff & Mongrain, 1987), decreased levels of self-efficacy (Mendelson & Gruen, 2005), and increased levels of negative emotion (Besser & Priel, 2011). Additionally, Besser and Priel (2011) showed that the effect of SC on the level of negative emotion following failure was mediated by a perception of the event as a threat to self-definition.

Interestingly, to the best of our knowledge, none of these studies evaluated the reaction of SC individuals to success. Although previous studies have shown inverse associations between SC and positive life events, such that elevated levels of the former predict reduced levels of the latter (Shahar, Henrich, Blatt, Ryan, & Little, 2003; Shahar, Kalnitski, Shulman, & Blatt, 2006), these previous studies did not evaluate the **reaction** of SC individuals to positive life events. This issue is important because research suggests that, in contrast to negative life events, positive life events (i.e., successes) serve as a protective shield

Abbreviation: SC, self-criticism; TRCE, Task Rule Congruency Effect.

☆ This article is a Special issue article – “Young researcher award 2015”.

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against stressors (e.g., Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Shahar & Priel, 2002). Therefore, the reactions of SC individuals to their successes might influence their ability (or inability) to make the most of this potential resilience factor.

So far, we have argued that achievement success and achievement failure situations trigger SC schemas. However, we did not address the question of what exactly is being triggered by success or failure? A potential answer can be found in Gilbert's social mentalities theory (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Gilbert, 2000, 2005, 2009). Gilbert uses the term "social mentality" to describe neurophysiological patterns that are involved in the creation of specific social roles, and that consist of a combined operation of motivations, emotions, cognitive processing mechanisms, and behaviors. In relation to SC, Gilbert focuses on two main social mentalities: the social rank mentality and the caregiving mentality.

The social rank mentality is based on a motivation to seek status in order to become attractive to others. In terms of cognitive mechanisms and behaviors, it directs attentional efforts towards the evaluation of the competitors' status, evaluating if it would be beneficial to compete with them. While positive affect might be associated with successes or the competitors' failure, aggressive behavior may appear when this mentality is activated, as well as the tendency to put down or inflict shame upon other persons. In contrast, the care-giving mentality consists of a motivation to decrease the other's distress, akin to a parent's inclination to invest his/her resources in an infant in order to increase the infant's chances of survival. When activated, cognitive efforts and actions are directed at understanding and solving the source of distress, while aggressive behavior and hostility are inhibited. In this case, if the other (e.g., infant) continues to be distressed, bad feelings arise.

Interestingly, Gilbert argues that the above-mentioned notions are not limited to self-other relationships, but also appear in our inner world, which is hypothesized to have a social nature that involves self-to-self relationships (Gilbert & Irons, 2005; Gilbert, 2000). He then suggests that SC individuals are characterized by over-development of dominant-subordinate self-to-self relationships, and under-development of caring self-to-self relationships.

Relying both on Gilbert's (Gilbert & Irons, 2005) conceptualization and the two-factor model perspective (Blatt, 2004), we hypothesize that situations that involve achievement success or failure (agentic goal) would activate the SC schema (agentic personality style). We also hypothesize that the system that would be triggered would be the dominant-subordinate system, which is characterized by evaluative and judgmental processes that belong to a group that we term "evaluative personality processes" (see below; Rahamim, Bar-Anan, Shahar, & Meiran, 2013). In order to test our hypothesis, we conducted two experiments in which we induced an experience of either achievement failure or achievement success. Following the induction, we measured the activation of evaluative processes by a tailored task switching (TS) paradigm (Kiesel et al., 2010; Meiran, 2010), as explained below.

1.1. The task switching paradigm and evaluative processes

The TS paradigm was originally developed to study mindsets (Gibson, 1941; Jersild, 1927), a concept describing the temporary configuration of the mental system that makes it ready to carry out a particular mental activity. Early TS studies focused on the ability to flexibly change mindset, a core executive function (e.g., Miyake et al., 2000). Much of the research on TS emphasized its cognitive and neurological underpinnings (Kiesel et al., 2010; Koch, Gade, Schuch, & Philipp, 2010; Meiran, 2010; Shallice, Stuss, Picton, Alexander, & Gillingham, 2008; Vandierendonck, Liefooghe, & Verbruggen, 2010), as well as inflexibility in various forms of psychopathology (Cepeda, Cepeda, & Kramer, 2000; Meiran, Levine, Meiran, & Henik, 2000).

Recently, we reviewed a series of studies that utilized TS-based methodologies in the assessment of attitudes, self-concept, and personality processes, especially in relation to evaluation behavior (Rahamim

et al., 2013). In this review, we defined *evaluation* as any behavior that indicates liking or disliking of an object (De Houwer, 2009). Accordingly, we defined *evaluative processes* as psychological processes that lead to such behaviors. When these processes were related to the activation of personality traits, we labeled them 'evaluative personality processes.' In the following experiments, we use TS-based methodologies in order to measure evaluative personality processes in SC.

In the current study, the TS paradigm involved switching between an evaluative task and a non-evaluative task. In detail, it involved the categorization of adjectives, according to two classification rules: a Content rule (e.g., "Does the adjective "stupid" relate to physical appearance or character?"), and a Valence rule (Is a given adjective (e.g., "beautiful") negative or positive?). In each trial, only one of these task rules was relevant. When the situation involved switching between two tasks (and task rules), participants needed to maintain readiness to perform either of the two tasks, despite the fact that only one task was relevant in any given trial. This readiness to perform the currently-irrelevant task is seen in the Task Rule Congruency Effect (TRCE). TRCE refers to a comparison between responses in congruent trials, wherein both task rules require the same response (i.e., same key press), and in incongruent trials, in which the two task rules indicate conflicting responses. In the current study, an example of an incongruent trial is a trial in which, according to the instructed Content rule, the correct response is the key on the right. However, pursuant to the Valence rule, which is currently irrelevant but may become relevant in the next trial, the correct response is the left key.

The response time and accuracy advantage of congruent trials over incongruent trials is the TRCE (Meiran & Kessler, 2008). TRCE, then, reflects the automatic processing of the currently irrelevant dimension, according to Bargh's (1989) and Tzelgov's (1997; see also Tzelgov & Ganor-Stern, 2005) definition of automaticity as processing that takes place when not being a part of the task's requirement. In the example above, TRCE showed that the Valence rule influences performance, despite being irrelevant in the particular trial.

We (Rahamim, Meiran, Ostro, & Shahar, 2012) have previously applied this conceptualization of TRCE in studying features of histrionic personality disorder (HPD), a disorder that is characterized by an imbalanced emphasis on the communion axis (e.g., Cogswell & Alloy, 2006; Morse, Robins, & Gittes-Fox, 2002; Ouimette, Klein, Anderson, Riso, & Lizardi, 1994). Specifically, we asked participants to switch between a non-evaluative task (i.e., a decision on the gender of a target stimulus) and an evaluative task (i.e., a decision on the valence of a target stimulus). The results showed that, following an intimacy induction (communal-related situation), individuals with HPD features exhibited an enhanced TRCE, and that this effect was restricted to negative stimuli and was present only in the non-evaluative task. This enhanced TRCE indicates that when these individuals saw a negative target stimulus, they could not refrain from classifying it as negative, although the current task demand was to classify it by its Gender. According to our definition, this represents a tendency for automatic, negative evaluation. The fact that this effect was found following an intimacy induction, but was not found following a control induction, is consistent with the congruency hypothesis mentioned previously: communal-related HPD tendencies are expected to be activated by a communal-related situation. It should be noted that intimacy-related situations are generally considered as pleasant, rather than stressful, situations. Thus, it can be argued that the *theme* of the situation (communal) was the active ingredient in our induction. In the current study, we utilized this conceptualization in testing the hypothesis that SC evaluative schema would be activated following achievement failure and achievement success.

2. Experiment 1A

In Experiment 1A, we induced achievement success, as well as achievement failure, using a fabricated intelligence test and compared these two conditions to a third condition, in which the participants

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