



Global self-esteem and the processing of positive information about the self



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ABSTRACT

We examined undergraduate participants' ($N = 98$) self-related cognitive response to positive information about the self and how this response is related to global self-esteem and trait anxiety. Positive information about the self was defined as information that attributes positive qualities to the self or positive experiences for the self. The responses were measured by an open-ended questionnaire containing 12 scenarios. Self-esteem correlated positively with positive self-verification and self-focused positive construal of the event, and negatively with negative self-verification and self-focused negative construal of the event. All the four forms of self-focused cognitive responses made unique contributions to the prediction of self-esteem.

Mediational analysis suggested that self-focused negative construal of positive information about the self might partially account for the link between self-esteem and trait anxiety. The findings in this study underscore the importance of studying cognitive responses to positive events for understanding individual differences in self-esteem and trait anxiety.

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Global self-esteem refers to how an individual values the self (e.g., Leary & Baumeister, 2000); it is often treated as a trait that reflects an individual's stable level of self-evaluation (e.g. Brown, Dutton, & Cook, 2001; Tesser, 2004). High global self-esteem is positively related to psychological wellbeing (e.g., Schimmack & Diener, 2003) and negatively related to anxiety (e.g. Baumeister, 1998; Coopersmith, 1967) as well as depression (Watson, Suls, & Haig, 2002).

To develop and maintain high global self-esteem, it is important to cope adaptively with negative information about the self (Baumeister, 1993). Moreover, because positive achievements may bolster self-esteem (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003), it is important to cope adaptively with positive information about the self as well, in order to assimilate this information into one's self-concept. Not surprisingly, prior research has revealed profound differences in the way people with high self-esteem and people with low self-esteem react to negative as well as positive feedback (e.g., Baumeister & Tice, 1985; Brown & Dutton, 1995; Jussim, Yen, & Aiello, 1995; McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981; Shrauger, 1975; Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987; see also e.g., Leitner, Hehman, Deegan, & Jones, 2014). These differences include emotional, motivational and cognitive aspects. The focus of the present study is on reactions to positive information about the self and the role they play in developing and maintaining individual differences in self-esteem.

1. Self-esteem-related differences in emotional reactions to success

Both people with high self-esteem and people with low self-esteem prefer success feedback to failure feedback and feel better after success feedback than after failure feedback (e.g., Swann et al., 1987). However, Wood and colleagues found that people with low self-esteem were more likely than people with high self-esteem to dampen the positive affect they had felt at the time of an event (Wood, Heimpel, & Michela, 2003; see also Goodall, 2015) and to show more anxiety after written success manipulation (Wood, Heimpel, Newby-Clark, & Ross, 2005), suggesting that experiencing success may, to some extent, provoke unease/apprehension in people with low self-esteem.

2. Self-esteem-related differences in motivation

People with high self-esteem seem to be motivated to maximize their self-esteem (self-enhancement; e.g., Baumeister, 1999), or to maintain their already positive self-esteem (self-verification; e.g., La Ronde & Swann, 1993). These strivings are likely to contribute to their good ability to benefit from success. In contrast, people with low self-esteem seem to be motivated to avoid losing self-esteem (Baumeister, 1993), or possibly by a striving for self-verification, which in their case implies efforts to maintain a negative self-evaluation. Neither of these motivations would seem to put people with low self-esteem in a good position to benefit from success. Accordingly, research findings indicate that, compared to people with high self-esteem, people with low self-esteem are less motivated to repeat a task after successful performance (Baumeister & Tice, 1985) and less likely to actually do well on a

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repeated task after receiving positive feedback (Danielsson, 2008a; Silverman, 1964). Indeed, people with low self-esteem seem to find it less important to perform well on a repeated task after positive feedback than after negative feedback (Danielsson, 2008b). Thus, instead of seeing and grabbing opportunities in life, they are inclined to choose safety and focus on preventing or repairing mistakes.

3. Self-esteem-related differences in cognition

Compared to people with low self-esteem, people with high self-esteem are more likely to expect, accept, and believe in success (see e.g., Blaine & Crocker, 1993). This may be due to the fact that success is congruent with their positive self-concept (e.g., Shrauger, 1975).

People with low self-esteem seem to be less sure about who they are, what describes them and what does not describe them than are people with high self-esteem (Baumgardner, 1990; Campbell, 1990). Therefore, people with low self-esteem tend to have either a negative or a more neutral self-concept than do people with high self-esteem (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). These factors may make people with low self-esteem relatively less prone to believe and accept positive information about themselves, as well as more sensitive to and more prone to accept negative feedback (Blaine & Crocker, 1993).

4. The present study

The aim of the present study was to further examine self-esteem-related differences in reactions to positive information about the self by studying self-related thoughts provoked by this type of information. Such thoughts are likely to mediate the effects of positive information on self-esteem, but have received surprisingly little attention in prior research. Self-related thoughts in response to success may confirm or reinforce high self-esteem through positive self-verification (e.g., “I’m really good.”) or by portraying the self in a positive context (e.g., “I’ll go home and celebrate this.”). Likewise, thoughts about the self after success may contribute to low self-esteem through negative self-verification (e.g., “I don’t deserve this success.”) or by picturing the self in a negative context (e.g., “If I can’t repeat this success, I’ll feel miserable.”).

A study by Wood and colleagues (Wood et al., 2005) provides preliminary evidence of self-esteem differences in self-related thoughts after receiving positive information about the self. The study examined how individuals with high versus low self-esteem differed on open-ended measures of cognitive response to current, experimentally manipulated experiences of success as well as to imagined future situations of success. The findings indicated fewer positive self-related thoughts, more negative self-related thoughts, and more negative thoughts about other aspects of the events in people with low self-esteem than in people with high self-esteem. However, the findings were inconsistent and self-esteem differences in cognitions were often small, despite the fact that the contrasted samples of participants differed greatly in average level of self-esteem. The fact that each participant responded to only one experimentally induced or imagined experience of success may have contributed to these weaknesses in the results.

The present study examined self-esteem-related differences in open-ended cognitive responses to 12 imagined scenarios in a sample that was roughly normally distributed on self-esteem. Positive information about the self was defined as information that attributes positive qualities to the self or signifies likely positive experiences for the self. We expected that positive self-verification and positive construal of the depicted event would be associated with high self-esteem, and that negative self-verification and negative construal of the event would be negatively related to self-esteem. In addition, based on the assumption that all four categories of thoughts may feedback upon self-esteem, we further predicted that each one of them would account for unique variance in self-esteem. Finally, because success tends to generate anxiety in individuals with low self-esteem (Wood et al., 2005), we explored the extent to which self-related thoughts generated by

positive information about the self are associated with trait anxiety. We expected that negative thoughts about the self would be associated with high levels of trait anxiety and that those thoughts might partially account for the link between self-esteem and trait anxiety.

5. Method

5.1. Participants

The participants were 98 (71% women; mean age = 26.62, $SD = 7.43$) introductory university students. They participated in the study as volunteers. The participants were asked to fill in the questionnaires in connection with their lessons.

5.2. Self-report questionnaires

5.2.1. Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965)

The scale consists of 10 items, e.g., “I feel I have a number of good qualities,” rated on a 5-point scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Higher scores represent higher self-reported levels of self-esteem. The scale’s test-retest reliability has been found to be 0.78 (Mohammadi, 2004), and its internal consistency in the present study was high ($\alpha = 0.91$).

5.2.2. State-trait anxiety inventory (STAI; Spielberger, 1983)

The inventory consists of one scale for state anxiety and another for trait anxiety. We used the trait anxiety scale, which consists of 20 statements of the type “I feel nervous and restless,” “I’m a steady person” (reversed coding). The scale has good test-retest reliability (Spielberger, 1983). In the present study, the internal consistency was high ($\alpha = 0.91$).

5.3. Assessment of cognitive responses

Thoughts about positive self-related information were assessed using a questionnaire that depicts 12 hypothetical scenarios (see Table 1) in which the respondent experiences a positive event. Participants responded by writing down their spontaneous cognitive reaction to each scenario.

Response protocols were coded blind to participants’ level of self-esteem and trait anxiety using definitions of response categories that were based on the work by Wood et al. (2005). The coded response types are defined below, illustrated by responses to scenario 5.

Table 1

Hypothetical scenarios involving positive self-relevant feedback.

1. Two people you don’t know suddenly approach you, looking at you with admiration. One of them says: “Who are you? You must be someone special.”
2. When you look into the mirror one morning you look unusually alert and fresh.
3. You’re in a good mood because your friend praised you and thinks you’re great.
4. You’re on your way to meet one of your best friends, whom you haven’t seen for a long time.
5. You’re looking at a list of test results and see that most people who took the test did poorly. You, on the other hand, got an A.
6. After a period of training you’ve gotten into shape and are asked if you could help with fitness training at the gym.
7. You did well at a job interview and they will let you know the outcome in a week.
8. There’s been a break in the course and now you’re going to see your fellow classmates again.
9. While talking about a homework assignment, your teacher thinks your solution is so good that she asks you to go through it with the class.
10. A person you’ve been interested in for a long time asks you if the two of you should get together.
11. It’s your birthday and more people have come to congratulate you than you thought would come.
12. You’ve been wondering about your health, but your doctor says you’re completely healthy.

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