Contextualized self-views and sense of identity

Aleksandra Pilarska

Department of Personality Psychology, Institute of Psychology, Adam Mickiewicz University, Szamarzewskiego 89AB, 60-568 Poznań, Poland

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Research has yielded conflicting views of the adaptiveness of features of self-structure. Particularly interesting are the implications of contextually-based self-concept variability for the capacity to organize one's self-experience into a stable and coherent identity. In the past, this issue has been addressed from two contrasting perspectives: the fragmentation and the flexibility (specialization) hypothesis. This paper adds to the literature by examining the mediating and moderating effects of cognitive-motivational dispositions on the relationship between trait overlap among self-aspects and sense of personal identity. The analyses suggest this relationship is more complex than previously believed. There was no direct effect of overlap on sense of identity. However, support was found for moderated mediation: higher overlap was associated with higher integrative self-knowledge, which was in turn related to enhanced sense of identity, and the strength of this relation increased with the level of need for cognition (second-stage moderator). Yet, this was true only for individuals low and moderate in reflective self-focus (first-stage moderator).

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The matter of cross-context consistency (variability) in trait manifestation and its relation to self-experience and well-being has been a recurrent theme in personality psychology. The traditional view regards self-consistency as a fundamental human motive and important mental health indicator (James, 1890; Lecky, 1945). As Block (1961) argued, excessive self-variability results in "role diffusion, where an individual is an interpersonal chameleon, with no inner core of identity" (p. 392). From a postmodern framework, by contrast, such variability is thought to reflect individuals' ability to adjust to life's complexities (Gergen, 1971; Goffman, 1959). This idea is echoed in Linville's (1985, 1987) self-complexity model, where a self comprised of distinct self-aspects acts to buffer swings in self-appraisal and thereby to preserve global self-evaluations. Does holding contextualized self-views impede or facilitate maintaining a sense of self and identity? This paper revisits the fragmentation versus specialization hypothesis to argue that the relationship is more complex than previously suggested.

Donahue, Robins, Roberts, and John (1993) proposed the term self-concept differentiation to denote the tendency to view oneself as possessing different personality characteristics across roles or contexts. It is assessed by participants rating themselves on a set of attributes for five predefined roles, and can be expressed as the unshared variance, the mean inter-correlation, or the absolute differences among role-identities (Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003; Donahue et al., 1993; Styła, Jankowski, & Suszek, 2010). Prior research showed that

self-concept differentiation was negatively related to various adjustment outcomes, including a mature sense of identity, thereby confirming that contextual variation in self-views is indicative of a fragmented self-concept (Campbell et al., 2003; Diehl, Hastings, & Stanton, 2001; Donahue et al., 1993; Pilarska & Suchańska, 2013; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthrone, & Ilardi, 1997; Styła et al., 2010). However, this fragmentation hypothesis was questioned by findings that the self-concept differentiation index, while theoretically a self-structure measure, was influenced by the content (Baird, Le, & Lucas, 2006; Locke, 2006; Pilarska & Suchańska, 2013, 2014a). Specifically, the standard-deviation-based index conflates trait mean-level and intra-individual trait variability, whereas the correlation-based indices conflate inter-contextual and intra-contextual variability, hence raising the possibility of statistical artifacts. Indeed, Baird et al. (2006) and Pilarska and Suchańska (2014a) illustrated that once theoretically irrelevant variance sources were controlled, the effects of self-concept differentiation either did not occur or were less pronounced.

Self-concept differentiation is conceptually tied to self-aspects overlap, the second – apart from self-aspects quantity – underlying component of self-complexity (Linville, 1985). Overlap refers to the degree of relatedness (distinctiveness) of self-aspects and is operationalized as the proportion of shared traits in each pair of self-aspects, averaged across all pairs of self-aspects formed in the trait-sorting task (Rafaeli-Mor, Gotlib, & Revelle, 1999). The overlap index demonstrated reasonable internal consistency and content-independence (Rafaeli-Mor et al., 1999). Nevertheless, research examining its effects has not produced consistent results. Some research found overlap unrelated to measures of self-integration (e.g., self-concept clarity) or psychological adjustment (Constantino, Wilson, Horowitz, & Pinel, 2006; Luo & Watkins, 2009;

E-mail address: alpila@amu.edu.pl.

Stopa, Brown, Luke, & Hirsch, 2010). Two recent studies, though, reported that lower overlap was related to adolescent depression (Cohen, Spiegler, Young, Hankin, & Abela, 2014; Pepa, 2013). Attempts to establish the stress-buffering role of overlap yielded rather complicated results. Specifically, Cohen et al. (2014) found support for a stress-exacerbating role of low overlap, whereas Constantino et al. (2006) for its stress-protective role, although only among those low in depression or perceived stress. And Brown and Rafaeli (2007) found high overlap to buffer accumulated mundane stress, but to exacerbate severe stress. The limited evidence on the association between overlap and self-concept differentiation also remains inconclusive, with studies concluding either a slightly negative association (Diehl et al., 2001; Pilarska & Suchańska, 2014a) or none (Constantino et al., 2006). As for the matter in question, studies evaluating overlap's effect on identity are scarce and offer mixed results at best. Some failed to find a relationship between the two (Pilarska & Suchańska, 2013, 2014b), whereas other research revealed that higher overlap was associated with stronger sense of identity (Pilarska, under review-a).

This study further explored the association between cross-contextual variability in self-concept and psychological integration, and sought to test the ability of overlap to predict sense of identity — a subjective awareness and experience of inner content, coherence, continuity, uniqueness, self-boundaries, and self-worth (Blasi & Glodis, 1995; Pilarska, 2012). To address previous inconsistencies, this study examined possible mediators and moderators of the overlap–identity relationship, focusing on cognitive–motivational dispositions. This interest stems from the notion that a sense of identity emerges from cognitive processing of self-relevant information (Berzonsky & Sullivan, 1992; Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Whitbourne, Sneed, & Skultety, 2002), and the fact that self-structural variables themselves reflect the ways people cognitively organize self-knowledge (Linville, 1985; Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002). The reasoning behind this study is that self-aspects overlap by itself may not determine the strength of sense of identity, as it is co-determined by individuals' dispositions that drive meaning-making and integration of personal experiences. Integrative self-knowledge, the tendency to integrate self-experience across time (Ghorbani, Watson, & Hargis, 2008), is one of these dispositions, and has been reported as positively associated with overlap and identity (Pilarska, under review-b; Pilarska & Suchańska, 2014a). Another factor likely to influence the overlap–identity relationship is need for cognition, an intrinsic motivation to engage in and enjoy effortful, elaborative thought (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Such elaborative thought would characterize a person in any perceptual domain, including the self.[1] Importantly, need for cognition has been repeatedly linked to identity variables (Berzonsky & Sullivan, 1992; Njus & Johnson, 2008). Also worth examination is reflection — self-focus motivated by self-curiosity and search for self-knowledge (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). Reflection has been previously shown to be relevant to identity formation (Luyckx et al., 2007; Luyckx et al., 2008), and related to higher mental integration and less goal conflict (Thomsen, Tønnesvang, Schnieber, & Olesen, 2011).

Given limited previous research linking overlap to sense of identity and cognitive–motivational dispositions, the study was exploratory and interested in examining two questions: Does overlap have an effect (positive or negative) on sense of identity? If so, is this effect direct and unconditional?

2. Method

2.1. Overview

As part of a larger research project data were collected from adults with upper secondary education or above. Participants completed measures of self-complexity, identity, and cognitive–motivational dispositions along with other questionnaires not relevant to this study.

2.2. Participants

Participants were 544 Polish students (59.4% female) of different faculties and education institutions (universities and higher professional schools), whose age ranged from 18 to 32 years ($M = 21.29$, $SD = 1.46$). The focus on this population is important because the transition to adulthood, prolonged by formal education, involves many role changes that may affect self-concept structure and content. This is also the developmental stage when identity formation becomes central (Arnett, 2000; Diehl et al., 2001).

2.3. Measures

The more psychometrically sound overlap (OL) measure was used to operationalize distinctiveness of self-aspects. This was obtained using the *Self-Complexity Questionnaire* (Barczak, Besta, & Bazińska, 2007), based on Linville's trait-sorting task, with minor adaptations. Participants were provided with an adjective list (30 positively and 30 negatively valenced) and a recording sheet with blank columns. They were prompted to read the list and then think of the different roles they play in life. Afterward, participants were asked to form trait-groups that described aspects (roles) of themselves. The descriptive groups were recorded and labeled by participants. No limit was placed on the number of groups or adjectives within each group. Participants were informed that each adjective may be used in more than one group or not at all. Each participant's trait sort was used to calculate the overlap value as defined by Rafaeli-Mor et al. (1999). The number of self-aspects (NASPECTS) formed was also recorded and used as a control variable.

To measure sense of identity, understood as a recurring mode of experiencing oneself-as-subject, the *Multidimensional Questionnaire of Identity — Extended Form* (MQI; Pilarska, 2012) was employed. This 45-item questionnaire assesses the strength of six identity-related senses (of having inner contents, uniqueness, one's own boundaries, coherence, continuity, and self-worth). All items (e.g., I feel that I was once a very different person than I am now; It happens that I perceive my close one as an important part of my self) were evaluated on a 4-point scale from 0 "strongly disagree/never" to 3 "strongly agree/always". In this study, only the global score was used (GSI) and was computed by averaging scores across six subscales[2] (overall $\alpha = .80$, with α-values for individual subscales ranging from .60 to .81).

Need for cognition was assessed via the *Need for Cognition Questionnaire* (NCQ; Matusz, Traczyk, & Gąsiorowska, 2011). The questionnaire includes 36 items focusing on engagement and enjoyment of intellectual activities (e.g., I try to avoid situations that require intensive thinking from me; I enjoy broadening my knowledge about things); each evaluated on a 5-point scale from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree" ($\alpha = .88$).

Reflection, an openness-related self-focus, was measured with the 8-item Reflection subscale of the *Rumination-Reflection Questionnaire — Shortform* (RRQ Shortforms; Trapnell, 1997). Each item (e.g., I love exploring my "inner" self) was scored on a 5-point scale from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree" ($\alpha = .80$).

The 12-item *Integrative Self-Knowledge Scale* (ISK; Ghorbani et al., 2008) measured a temporally integrated understanding of self-related processes (e.g., If I need to, I can reflect about myself and clearly understand the feelings and attitudes behind my past behaviors). Ratings were completed using a 5-point scale from 0 "largely untrue" to 4 "largely true" ($\alpha = .80$).

---

[1] Self-complexity can be placed within the broader context of cognitive complexity (Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002), which Tanaka, Panter, and Winborne (1988) identified as the component of the Need for Cognition Scale.

[2] For all multi-item measures, person-mean substitution was used to replace missing values for participants missing up to 20% items in each subscale.