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The associations between Self-Criticism and Dependency and incidental learning of interpersonal and achievement words

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Abstract

Personality trait-congruent implicit content processing was studied experimentally. In Experiment-1 ($N = 132$), individual differences in Self-Criticism were most strongly associated with incidental learning of negative achievement words, whereas individual differences in Dependency were most strongly associated with incidental learning of negative interpersonal words. In Experiment-2 ($N = 172$), individual differences interacted with processing tendencies in predicting negative affect. Highly dependent and highly self-critical individuals experienced higher negative affect if they were low in incidental learning of positive interpersonal words. Overall, these findings indicate that Self-Criticism and Dependency have significantly differential impacts on implicit cognitive processes.

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1. Introduction

Studies of personality in the context of information processing suggest two competing hypotheses. First, that processing tendencies are correlated with individual differences (e.g., Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Satpute, 2005). Second, that processing tendencies are independent of individual differences but interact with them to predict affective outcomes (e.g., Robinson, Ode, Wilkowski, & Amodio, 2007). The experiments presented in this paper were designed to test these hypotheses by examining associations between Dependency and Self-Criticism and the unintentional learning of positive and negative interpersonal and achievement stimuli words.

Blatt (1991) characterized personality development as the integration of a person's capabilities for self-definition (Self-Criticism) and for interpersonal relatedness (Dependency). The self-definition process relates to "the development of a realistic, essentially positive and increasingly integrated self-definition and self-identity" (Blatt, 1991, p. 453). The interpersonal relatedness process is defined as "the development of the capacity to establish increasingly mature, reciprocal and satisfying interpersonal relationships" (Blatt, 1991, p. 453). Excessive emphasis on either the relatedness or the self-definition dimension has been considered a vulnerability factor to depression (e.g., Beck, 1987; Besser, 2004; Besser & Priel, 2003, 2005). Individuals high in Dependency are hypothesized to be at risk for developing negative affectivity when they perceive disruptions in their relationships with others, interpersonal loss, or social rejection. Individuals high in Self-Criticism are hypothesized to be at risk for developing negative affectivity when they perceive that they are not meeting such standards.

In 1992, Blatt and Zuroff proposed that dependent and self-critical individuals have marked differences in the way they perceive and interpret the social world (for reviews, see Blatt, 2004; Corveleyn, Luyten, & Blatt, 2005). This selective processing would also explain, in part, why dependent individuals are more at risk for distress following negative interpersonal events, whereas self-critical individuals would be more at risk for distress following negative events of failure and loss of self-esteem (the so-called *congruency-hypothesis*). However, results from research on the congruency hypothesis are mixed (see e.g., Blatt, 2004; Corveleyn et al., 2005), probably because dependent and self-critical individuals may show marked differences in the way they interpret life experiences: a negative life event can be interpreted by one individual as threatening self-worth (a negative achievement event) and by another as a threat to interpersonal relationships (a negative interpersonal event). Existing experimental studies used situational stressors defined *a priori* as related to achievement or interpersonal issues, and therefore did not control for the subjectivity of participants' interpretations of failure versus rejection (e.g., Mazure, Bruce, Maciejewski, & Jacobs, 2000).

To further investigate the role of selective information processing related to Dependency and Self-Criticism we compared participants' self-reports with their unintentional cognitive processing of stimuli words expressing threats to achievement goals or to interpersonal relatedness. We used a Stroop-like color identification task followed by an unanticipated recognition test. This paradigm allowed us to examine the *recognition of relevant words without intentional learning* or encoding-intentional retrieval task (see Perlman & Tzelgov, 2006) that involved the presentation of a word list, without asking participants to read, memorize, or otherwise process the presented words. We investigated cognitive biases in the processing of four contents: two negative contents – negative interpersonal (rejection) and negative achievement (failure) words; and two positive contents – positive interpersonal (relatedness) and positive achievement (success) words (available upon request from first author). After the Stroop-like color identification task, participants were presented with

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