



Holding a silver lining theory: When negative attributes heighten performance[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Silver lining lay theories are prevalent and spontaneously generated.
- For people induced with impulsivity, a silver lining theory heightens creativity.
- Holding a silver lining theory increases effort invested in performance.

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ABSTRACT

Holding a lay theory that a negative personal attribute is associated with a positive attribute (i.e., a silver lining theory), may increase effortful performance in the domain of the positive attribute. In Study 1, individuals readily generated personal silver lining theories when prompted to consider a negative attribute, and the majority of individuals endorsed them for themselves. In Studies 2 and 3, we investigated how believing in a silver lining theory affected performance using the specific silver lining theory that impulsivity was associated with creativity. In both a college (Study 2) and an online sample (Study 3), individuals induced to believe that they were impulsive and then given the specific silver lining theory that impulsivity was related to creativity showed greater effort-based creativity than those for whom the silver lining theory was refuted. In Study 4, individuals made to believe that they were impulsive and given the silver lining theory performed more creatively than those who received no information about a silver lining theory, indicating that the silver lining theory increased performance relative to baseline. Silver lining lay theories may allow people to compensate for a negative attribute by promoting effortful behavior in the domain of a positive attribute believed to be linked to that negative attribute.

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I am not strictly speaking mad, for my mind is absolutely normal in the intervals, and even more so than before. But during the attacks it is terrible—and then I lose consciousness of everything. But that spurs me on to work and to seriousness...

[Vincent van Gogh, Letter to Theo van Gogh, ca. 1889]

With only his right ear intact, Vincent van Gogh wrote his brother from an asylum to describe his attacks of “acute mania with generalized delirium” (Urpar, 1889). This account of his state of mind, however, was not entirely negative: van Gogh associated these attacks with his hard, creative work. Van Gogh arrived at a common-sense understanding

(i.e., lay theory) about the organization of his self, such that a negative attribute he possessed (i.e., suffering from attacks) was associated with a positive attribute he possessed (i.e., being a serious artist). While speculative, it seems possible that this silver lining theory helped van Gogh increase his creative output. In the present research, we test whether holding such a silver lining theory affects performance in the domain of the positive attribute.

Lay theories

Our conceptualization of silver lining theories follows a long tradition of research on lay theories, which are common-sense based theories that people use to make sense of their self and surroundings (Dweck, 1999; Heider, 1958; Wegener & Petty, 1998). People hold theories about seemingly everything, including genetics (Plaks, Malahy, Sedlins, & Shoda, 2012), global warming (Dunlap, 1998), and obesity (McFerran & Mukhopadhyay, 2013). Some of these theories apply to people's own selves, including lay theories about willpower (Job,

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Walton, Bernecker, & Dweck, 2013; Miller et al., 2012), personality traits (Beer, 2002), and moods (Igou, 2004). Much research on lay theories about the self has focused on one specific type of lay theory, namely whether a personal attribute is malleable or fixed (implicit theories; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Dweck, 2008). Silver lining theories are orthogonal to this work, and concern lay theories of the organization of personal attributes.

Personal attributes

The self-concept (Baumeister, 1998; Forgas & Williams, 2002; Swann & Bosson, 2010) is comprised of a variety of self-aspects, which are each in turn comprised of attributes such as personality traits, group memberships, and behaviors (McConnell, 2011; McConnell, Shoda, & Skulborstad, 2012). Personal attributes vary both in content and valence (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; North & Swann, 2008). Typically, individuals judge an attribute as negative or positive, i.e., perceive it as detrimental or conducive to their performance and well-being.

Various theories address the question of how personal attributes are organized. For example, Showers (1992) described how people organize attributes by valence, and McConnell (2011) focused on hierarchy. We depart from these lines of inquiry by considering how people believe personal attributes are organized.

Silver lining theories

A silver lining theory is a form of lay theory in which a negative personal attribute is associated with a positive personal attribute. Impulsive individuals, for example, may hold a silver lining theory that their negative attribute of impulsivity is associated with their positive attribute of being creative. We hypothesize that individuals will readily endorse silver lining theories when prompted to think about a negative attribute they possess.

We also hypothesize that a silver lining theory increases effortful performance in the domain of the positive attribute implied by the silver lining theory—given that individuals believe that they possess the negative attribute. Belief in a silver lining theory may heighten both the value of performance and expectancies of success in the domain of the positive attribute. This should increase motivation, thereby increasing effort (Atkinson, 1957; Heckhausen, 1991). This increase in effortful performance provides compensation for possessing the negative attribute. For example, an impulsive individual who believes the silver lining theory that impulsivity is associated with creativity should exert more effort into behaving creatively than an impulsive individual who does not hold the silver lining theory.

In the present research, we explored the endorsement of silver lining theories generally by investigating whether lay individuals believe that for their own selves, a selected negative personal attribute is associated with a positive personal attribute (Study 1). We then examined whether inducing vs. refuting a silver lining theory in individuals who believed that they possessed the relevant negative attribute affected effort-based performance in the domain of the positive attribute (Studies 2 and 3). Finally, we analyzed to what extent inducing a silver lining theory increased effortful performance by adding a neutral control condition where participants received no information about a silver lining theory (Study 4).

Study 1: Prevalence of silver lining theories

We conducted a survey to examine if silver lining theories are pervasive and readily endorsed. We asked participants to describe one negative attribute they possessed, and asked if this attribute was or was not associated with a positive attribute. We expected that silver lining theories would be frequently endorsed.

Method

Participants and design

A total of 110 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (see Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) completed a brief survey for \$.10. Seven participants (6%) failed an attention check (i.e., responded to a question they were instructed to skip) and were excluded (see Mason & Suri, 2012). Exclusions based on failure to attend to stimuli in our online samples (Studies 1, 3, and 4) are comparable to rates found previously (e.g., Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2012). The final sample of 103 participants (67 females) was $M = 35.06$ ($SD = 13.51$) years old.

Procedure and materials

Measures were completed in the following order. Participants first brainstormed a negative personal attribute and wrote it down. They rated possession of the attribute (“To what extent do you have this trait,” and “How much is this trait a part of you”) on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). They rated the negativity of the attribute, first generally (“How negative do people in general consider this trait?”) and then personally (“How much does this trait interfere with your long-term and short-term goals?”). Belief in a silver lining theory was assessed by the item, “In you, to what extent do you think that this negative trait is connected to a positive trait” on a scale from 1 (not at all connected) to 7 (very connected). If participants indicated not at all connected, the survey ended. Otherwise, participants wrote down the positive attribute. They rated the extent to which they possessed this attribute, and the positivity of the attribute, again rating it generally (“How positive do people in general consider this trait?”) and personally (“How much does this trait help you with your long-term and short-term goals?”). Finally, they rated how weak or strong the association between their negative and positive attributes was on a scale from 1 (very weak) to 7 (very strong).

Results and discussion

For both the negative and positive attributes, the two items assessing the extent to which participants possessed each attribute were highly correlated, so we averaged them for both the negative ($\alpha = .74$) and positive ($\alpha = .93$) attributes. Participants selected a negative attribute that was very much a part of them ($M = 5.63$, $SD = .99$), and negative both in general ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.35$) and for them personally ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 1.57$). Only ten participants (9.7%) indicated that their negative attribute was *not* associated with a positive attribute. Among the majority who held a silver lining theory, the positive attribute was very much a part of them ($M = 5.89$, $SD = 1.07$), and positive in general ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 1.04$) and for them personally ($M = 5.63$, $SD = 1.27$). Moreover, the association between the negative and the positive attribute was strong ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 1.24$).

The majority of individuals endorsed a silver lining theory: when prompted with a negative attribute, most participants readily generated a positive associated attribute. Participant-generated silver linings are presented in Table 1.¹ The present survey suggests that when given the opportunity, people endorse silver lining theories.

¹ Participants were not provided with examples of silver lining theories; they were allowed to interpret what a “trait” meant, and what “negative” and “positive” meant in regard to their own attributes. Perhaps because of this, some participant-generated silver lining theories appear to make little sense at face value. Whether this is due to participants misunderstanding the task, liberally interpreting instructions, or inadequately describing their silver lining theory in a way that makes sense to others, is hard to tell.

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