
Attentional Effects on Mood Are Moderated by Chronic Self-Conception Valence

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Positive and negative self-conception subjects rated their mood under either self-focused attention or other-focused attention conditions. Self-focused attention was partially induced by instructing subjects to write a story about themselves, whereas other focused attention was partially elicited by instructing subjects to write a story about an acquaintance. Attentional effects on mood were moderated by the valence of subjects' chronic self-conceptions. Under self-focused attention conditions, positive self-conception subjects reported feeling happier than negative self-conception subjects. However under other focused attention conditions, positive and negative self-conception subjects did not differ in their reported mood. Supplementary analyses ruled out the possibility that the relation obtained between self-conception valence and mood was mediated by the valence of the stories that subjects wrote.

Self-focused attention, "an enhanced awareness of one's salient self-aspects" (Carver, 1979, p.1251), is a concomitant of several clinical disorders, including depression (Ingram, 1990). Why is self-focused attention higher among depressives than among normals? In an attempt to address this question, investigators have begun studying the relation between self-focused attention and sad mood, a primary correlate of depression.

Recent findings have corroborated the notion that self-focused attention is associated with sad mood, defined as "a general and pervasive feeling state that is not directed toward a specific target" (Word, Salteberg, & Goldsamt, 1990, p. 900). In a field study, Csikszentmihalyi and Figurski (1982) demonstrated that increased self-focused attention accompanies negative affect when voluntary activities are performed. Similarly, Wood, Saltzberg, Neale, Stone, and Rachmiel (1990) content-analyzed 30 daily subject reports and found self-focused attention to be associated with global negative mood. In a laboratory study, Sedikides (1991) also found a connection between self-focused attention, as measured by the Private Self-

Consciousness Subscale of the Self-Consciousness scale (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975), and mood, as measured by a single-item mood rating scale, $r(98) = -.35, P < .0001$. High dispositional self-focused attention covaried with sad mood.

However, the evidence linking self-focused attention to mood has so far been correlational. Hence, it is conceivable that negative affective states induce self-focused attention or that self-focused attention induces negative moods. The present research was designed to test the latter possibility.

Duval and Wicklund (1972) and Wicklund (1975) postulated that individuals in a state of high self-focused attention look inward as they engage in self-evaluation. In the process, individuals become aware of their standards of performance or behavior. Given that few, if any, self-aspects are congruent with the ideal self, individuals are likely to realize eventually that they have been unsuccessful in meeting a subset of their standards, and they will experience sad affect. The aversiveness of sad affect will either lead to avoidance behavior or will motivate people toward reducing the discrepancy between real and ideal standards of performance or behavior.

According to Carver and his colleagues (1979; Carver & Scheier, 1981), Buss (1980), and Hull and Levy (1979), self-focused attention is not necessarily aversive. If people believe that meeting their standards is beyond their capabilities, self-focused attention will be aversive and

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might lead to behavioral withdrawal. However, if people believe that they are capable of matching their standards, self-focused attention is likely to induce behavioral persistence toward goal attainment.

The theorizing described above was initially intended to be mostly applicable to achievement contexts and was principally concerned with behavioral alteration. Subsequent research extended this theorizing to situations where no reduction of real-ideal self-discrepancies is apparently involved. This research showed that the facet of the self that happens to be most momentarily or chronically accessible in memory captivates the attention of the highly self-focused individual and becomes the object of scrutiny in the self-evaluation process. [The facet of the self may be cognitive (Baldwin & Holmes, 1987; Scheier, 1976), affective (Scheier & Carver, 1977; Scheier, Carver, & Gibbons, 1981), physical (Gibbons, Carver, Scheier, & Hormuth, 1979; Gibbons & Gaeddert, 1984), or behavioral (Davies, 1982; Gibbons et al., 1985).

These recent advances have implications for the issues addressed in the present research. Self-relevant conceptions (i.e., thoughts about and evaluations of the self) are chronically accessible (Rogers, 1977; Rogers, Kuiper, & Kicker, 1977) and thus easily activated. A state of self-focused attention will direct subjects' attention to, and subsequently will likely activate, chronically accessible aspects of the self. If so, self-focused attention should induce sadness in negative self-conception individuals and happiness in positive self-conception individuals. Accordingly, self-conception valence should moderate attentional effects on mood.

METHOD

Subjects and Experimental Design

The Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQQ Pelham & Swann, 1989) was completed by 120 University of Wisconsin undergraduates as part of an unrelated experiment. The SAQ is an assessment of self-conception valence. Subjects rated themselves relative to other college students their own age on the following 10 attributes: intellectual/academic ability, social skills/social competence, artistic and/or musical ability, athletic ability, physical attractiveness, leadership ability common sense, emotional stability, sense of humor, and discipline. Each of the 10 scales ranged from 1 (bottom 5%) to 10 (top 5%).

Two groups of 30 subjects each were selected for use in this experiment: the negative self-conception subjects, who had scored in the lower 25% of the distribution (range = 34-60, $M = 51.37$, $SD = 6.99$), and the positive self-conception subjects, who had scored in the upper 25% of the distribution (range = 81-91, $M = 85.70$, $SD =$

2.67). The majority of the subjects (52) were women. An experimenter telephoned these 60 subjects and politely invited them to the laboratory for participation in a survey allegedly conducted by the psychology department. Subjects were offered extra introductory psychology course credit and a chance to win \$25 at a lottery. All subjects accepted the offer. Subjects were run individually. The experimental design was a 2 (Focus: self-focus, other-focus) \times 2 (Self-Conception Valence: positive, negative) between-subjects factorial. Positive and negative self-conception subjects were randomly assigned to the focus conditions of the experiment.

Procedure

Subjects in the self-focus condition found a mirror facing them when seated. Subjects were given a three-page booklet. The first page contained a list of 20 words, 5 of which were self-referent (I, *myself* me, my, mine). Subjects were asked to write a story about themselves (in 10 min) on the same page, using as many of these words as possible (see Fenigstein & Levine, 1984). Subjects in the other-focus condition found the back side of a mirror - facing them when seated, so that they could not see their own image. The first page of their booklet contained a list of 20 words, 5 of which were other-referent (*he*, him, himself his, *he's*). Subjects were instructed to write a story about an acquaintance of theirs, someone they had met only once or twice.

The second page of the booklet was blank. On the third page, subjects rated their mood on three 9-point (i.e., 1-9) scales, anchored *sad-happy*, *depressed-elated*, and *negative-positive*. Given the high internal consistency of the scales (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$), the mean of the three scales was used in the reported analyses. Separate analyses for each scale yielded identical results.

RESULTS

Self-Conception Valence as a Moderator of Attentional Effects on Mood

Overall, self-focus subjects ($M = 5.27$) reported being sadder than other-focus subjects ($M = 5.93$), $F(1, 56) = 11.87$, $p < .001$, and positive self-conception subjects ($M = 6.10$) reported feeling happier than negative self-conception subjects ($M = 5.13$), $F(1, 56) = 22.64$, $p < .0001$.

The moderational role of self-conception valence with regard to attentional effects on mood was examined by way of the Self-Conception Valence \times Focus interaction. The interaction was significant, $F(1, 56) = 19.63$, $p < .0001$ (Figure 1). Under conditions of self-focus, positive self-conception subjects reported feeling happier than negative self-conception subjects, $F(1, 28) = 5.80$, $p < .0001$.

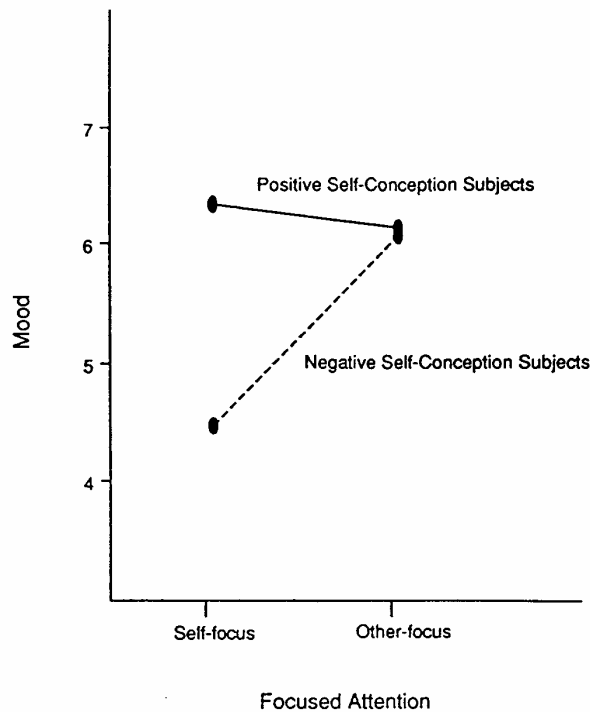


Figure 1 Mood as a function of self-conception valence and focus.

However, under conditions of other-focus, positive and negative self-conception subjects did not differ in their reported mood, $t(28) = 0.27$, $p < .79$. Viewed somewhat differently, self-focus elicited sadder mood than other-focus in negative self-conception subjects, $t(28) = -5.43$, $p < .0001$, but self-focus and other-focus did not differentially affect the mood of positive self-conception subjects, $t(28) = 0.72$, $p < .48$. These results demonstrate that self-conception valence moderates the effects of attention on mood and suggest that self-focused attention affects the mood of negative self-conception subjects only.

Story Valence as a Mediator of the Relation Between Self-Conception Valence and Mood

Subjects in the self-focus condition wrote a story about themselves, whereas subjects in the other-focus condition wrote a story about an acquaintance of theirs. Stories referring to the self are likely to express subjects' chronically accessible self-conceptions. If so, self-focus should lead positive self-conception subjects to write more pleasant stories than negative self-conception subjects, whereas other-focus should not affect story valence.

Two coders, who were blind to the hypotheses and design of this experiment, independently rated the va-

lence of the stories that subjects wrote on a single-item scale anchored with 1 (very negative, *sad*, or unpleasant) and 9 (very positive, *happy*, or pleasant). The 60 stories were presented to the coders in different random orders. The coders' ratings were significantly correlated, $r(58) = .71$, $p < .0001$. The mean coder rating was used in the analyses reported below. Separate analyses on each coder's ratings produced identical results.

Positive self-conception subjects ($M = 6.54$) tended to write more pleasant stories than negative self-conception subjects ($M = 5.94$, $F(1, 56) = 9.40$, $p < .003$). This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction, $F(1, 56) = 1535$, $p < .0001$. In the self-focus condition, positive self-conception subjects wrote more pleasant stories about themselves ($M = 6.77$) than negative self-conception subjects ($M = 5.40$), $t(28) = 4.48$, $p < .0001$. However, in the other-focus condition, positive self-conception subjects ($M = 6.30$) and negative self-conception subjects ($M = 6.47$) wrote equally pleasant stories about an acquaintance, $t(28) = -.68$, $p < .50$. Alternatively, negative self-conception subjects tended to write much more negative stories under self-focus than under other-focus, $t(28) = -3.71$, $p < .001$, but positive self-conception subjects tended to write only slightly more pleasant stories under self-focus than under other-focus, $t(28) = 1.76$, $p < .09$.

These results raise the possibility that the valence of the stories subjects wrote about themselves mediated the effect of self-conception valence on mood. Specifically, it is likely that, in the self-focus (but not other-focus) condition, self-conception valence did not directly affect mood. Instead, self-conception valence directly affected story valence, which, in turn, affected mood.

To assess this possibility, two path analytic models were developed, one for each focus condition. Each model included three variables: self-conception valence, story ratings, and mood. I computed maximum likelihood estimates of the model's parameters. After computing standardized path coefficients for the self-focus and other-focus conditions, I used one-sample t tests to compare each coefficient against zero.

In the case of self-focus (Figure 2), the valence of subjects' stories, as reflected in the story ratings, had a direct effect on mood, $t(29) = 4.53$, $p < .0001$. Self-conception valence also directly affected Story Ratings, $t(29) = 4.58$, $p < .0001$. However, story ratings did not significantly affect mood, $t(29) = 0.73$, n.s. Hence, it is concluded that the valence of the stories that subjects wrote about themselves did not mediate the relation between self-conception valence and mood.

As expected, in the case of other-focus (Figure 3), no path coefficient was significant. Self-conception valence did not significantly affect story ratings, $t(29) = 0.34$, or mood, $t(29) = 0.84$; and story ratings did not significantly affect mood either, $t(29) = -0.38$.

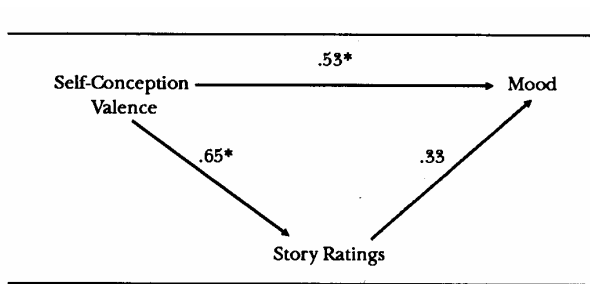


Figure 2 Path analysis in the self-focus condition.
* $p < .0001$.

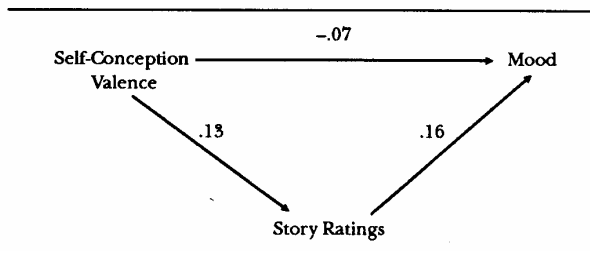


Figure 3 Path analysis in the other-focus condition.

DISCUSSION

The present findings demonstrate that focus of attention interacts with self-conception valence in affecting mood. First, the valence of subjects' self-conception did not determine their self-reports of mood under other-focus conditions, suggesting that self-conceptions per se may not have much impact on individuals' affective state. Rather, differences in mood as a function of self-conception valence were obtained only under self-focused attention conditions. Specifically, self-focused attention induced a sad mood in negative self-conception subjects. However, it did not significantly affect the mood of positive self-conception subjects, indicating that the previously observed negative impact of self-focused attention is limited to negative self-conception subjects. Hence, conceptualizations that predict main effects of self-focused attention or main effects of self-conception valence cannot account for the present set of findings.

Surprisingly, however, the impact of self-focused attention on subjects' mood was not mediated by the valence of their self-related stories, as is reflected in the weak relation between story ratings and mood (see Figure 2). This suggests that self-focused attention increased the accessibility of self-related material but that this material was not necessarily used in the stories that subjects wrote. At the very least, this finding would suggest that only part of the accessible self-conceptions were used in the stories that subjects wrote about themselves.

An implication of the writings of Duval and Wicklund (1972) and Wicklund (1975) is that self-focused atten-

tion will lead to sadder mood than other-focused attention. In contrast, the present findings indicate that the assumed negative impact of self-focused attention is limited to individuals with negative self-conceptions. Note, however, that the main effect of attentional focus obtained in the present study would have supported Duval and Wicklund's assumption had self-conception valence not been assessed. Given that self-focused attention apparently depresses the mood of negative self-conception subjects without elevating the mood of positive self-conception subjects, one is bound to obtain a main effect in the sample as a whole. As the present data indicate, however, this main effect is likely to be misleading. Rather, the present findings indicate that the impact of self-focused attention is moderated by self-conception valence, consistent with the position espoused by Carver (1979; Carver & Scheier, 1981), Buss (1980), and Hull and Levy (1979). All in all, the results reinforced the veridicality of past findings, suggesting that negative affect is not necessarily a direct by-product of self-focused attention (Brockner, Hjelle, & Plant, 1985; Gibbons et al., 1985).

Self-focused attention, compared with other-focused attention, produced null effects in positive self-conception subjects. The reasons are unclear. It is likely that happy mood in positive self-conception subjects is at a constant ceiling level, which can hardly be enhanced by increased self-focused attention. The present finding is, nonetheless, consistent with the existing literature. Experiments assessing the impact of self-focused attention on happy mood have yielded either nonsignificant or marginal effects. Summarizing this literature, Gibbons (1990) concluded that "for persons of moderate or high self-esteem, self-focus does not have much immediate impact on mood, unless (1) mood-altering manipulations are used, (2) the perceived goal or standard for some reason is thought to be unattainable (i.e., if appropriate behavior is not possible), or (3) the person is engaging in standard=discrepant behavior of some kind" (p. 276). None of those conditions were satisfied in the present experiment.

Past research has contributed considerably toward understanding of the relation between self-focused attention and self-esteem. That research showed that low self-esteem individuals are more likely to experience self-focused attention as aversive (Brockner & Wallnau, 1981; Nadler, 1983) and to be more reactive to self-focused attention states (Brockner, 1979; Hull & Young, 1983) than high self-esteem individuals. However, this past research was not directly concerned with mood states. Moreover, past research did not examine the moderational role of self-conception valence in the production of sad mood. The present research extends the construct of self-focused attention to an area that it has rarely been extended to before—namely, chronic acces-

sibility of self-conceptions. The findings call for future research into ways in which self-focused attention alters the mental representation of the self, the dynamics of representation activation, and the cognitive and behavioral consequences of the activation.

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