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INTRODUCTION



On the temporal navigation of selfhood: The role of self-continuity

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A good deal of research has conceptualized and assessed the self at a single time point. This special issue advocates a complementary perspective, conceptualizing the self across time. A unifying theme across the seven special issue articles is self-continuity.

Broadly defined, self-continuity refers to the subjective perception of interconnections among one's past, present, and future. The neuroimaging literature adds granularity to relevant findings by pointing to the medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC) as underlying integration of these three temporal components of selfhood. Self-continuity is bolstered by fulfillment of the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Di Domenico et al. (2018) link the MPFC with individual differences in need fulfillment. Participants varying on level of need fulfillment viewed trait adjectives and responded (yes/no) to whether each adjective described their past self ("Five years ago, I was ..."), their present self ("At present, I am ..."), and their future self ("In five years, I will be ..."), while MPFC activity was monitored. Participants low on need fulfillment manifested reduced activity in the right-MPFC when responding to trait adjectives that referred to their past and future self as opposed to their present self, indicating that the MPFC processes temporally separated identities in a different manner. However, participants high on need fulfillment manifested uniformly increased activity when responding to trait adjectives across the three temporal components of selfhood, indicating that the MPFC processes temporally separated selves in a similar manner. The findings showcase the relevance of social neuroscience for the study of self-continuity. They also have implications for the role of individual differences in motivational states, such as need fulfillment, as far as the chronological integration of the self is concerned.

Moving from the micro-level to the macro-level, Becker et al. (2018) address, in a cross-sectional study, personality and cultural underpinnings of self-continuity. They begin by identifying three sources of self-continuity: a sense of stability of the self across time, the availability or creation of narratives that account for temporal change of the self, and associative links to one's past self (e.g., strength of attachment to valued objects). Becker et al. proceed to show that the effectiveness of self-continuity sources is contingent on two variables pertaining to personhood beliefs. One set of beliefs – at the individual level – refers

to whether the person is mutable (i.e., malleable, capable of change) or immutable (i.e., fixed, incapable of change). Indeed, individuals with mutable personhood beliefs ground self-continuity more on narratives, whereas individuals with immutable personhood beliefs ground self-continuity more on a sense of stability. The other set of beliefs – at the cultural level – refers to whether the person is contextualized (i.e., one's family, social rank, or place of origin are crucial for understanding them) or decontextualized (i.e., one can be understood in their own terms irrespectively of their relation to others). Interestingly, contextualized beliefs are positively linked to collectivism, and decontextualized beliefs to individualism. Becker et al. find that members of collectivistic cultures ground self-continuity more on a sense of stability and associative links to one's past, whereas members of individualistic cultures ground self-continuity more on narratives.

Landau, Arndt, Swanson, and Bultmann (2018) take the question of "how self-continuity is produced" to the laboratory. Older (compared to younger) adults experience higher self-continuity within a designated time period; put otherwise, they report that time passes at a faster rate. Landau and colleagues propose that the sense of sped up time derives from chunking. Older adults are more likely to group experiential moments or events under broader categories (e.g., family, work, entertainment, chores), whereas younger adults are more likely to store experiential moments or events as unique categories (e.g., the family Thanksgiving where uncle Bob embarrassed himself, today's day at work, viewing a funny movie, starting to rain while mowing the lawn). When older adults look back in time, there is only a small set of categories to integrate, thus giving the subjective impression of quick time passage (and stronger self-continuity). However, when younger adults look back in time, there is an entire set of moments or events to integrate, thus giving the subjective impression of slow time passage (and weaker self-continuity). In three experiments, Landau et al. manipulate chunking versus control. For example, participants in the chunking conditions ponder how last year's activities or events were similar to those of years past, whereas those in the control conditions ponder how activities or events from last year could have been different. In support of their theorizing, Landau et al. find that chunking creates a sense of accelerated time.

Di Domenico et al. (2018), Becker et al. (2018), and Landau et al. (2018) were predominantly concerned with sources of self-continuity. Another set of four articles addresses in more detail this exact topic: What does self-continuity do for us?

Seto and Schlegel (2018) argue that self-continuity feeds, in part, self-enhancement concerns. These authors operationalized self-continuity in terms of a stable (and upward) trajectory of one's sense of authenticity across time. In particular, the authors asked whether authenticity perceptions follow a predictably linear progression, in which people think they become more authentic over time (high self-continuity). Such a pattern would indicate self-enhancement (i.e., the future is rosy). Alternatively, authenticity perceptions may conform to a linear progression accompanied by a plateau, in which people think that they become more authentic from past to present, but this is where it all stops (low self-continuity). Such a pattern would signal an "end of the history illusion" (i.e., people changed as much as possible, with the future being identical to the present). In two longitudinal studies, Seto and Schlegel find that authenticity perceptions follow a linear progression: Participants believe that they become more authentic as a function of time. The results are consistent with the view that higher self-continuity (i.e., belief in a stable or predictable progression of authenticity) is, in part, in the service of self-enhancement.

Zou, Wildschut, Cable, and Sedikides (2018) contend that self-continuity contributes to psychological adjustment in a multi-cultural context. These researchers report a cross-sectional study, testing a sample of repatriates: international teachers, who, after a work placement in a host culture (United States), returned to their home countries. Repatriation can be a distressing experience, requiring cultural re-adjustment. Zou et al. find that feeling nostalgic for the host culture is positively linked to self-continuity, operationalized as a subjective connection between one's past and present selves. In turn, self-continuity transmits the benefits of host-culture nostalgia for psychological adjustment. That is, it was due to high self-continuity that teachers who felt more nostalgic about the United States reported higher levels of approach motivation, self-esteem, and job satisfaction.

Nurra and Oyserman (2018) maintain that self-continuity, operationalized as a perceived connection between one's present self and future selves, has motivational implications in a classroom context. In particular, self-continuity advances children's educational goals. Across five experiments, these authors demonstrate that a stronger (than weaker) connection between children's current self and future (adult) self leads to improved academic performance, indicated in terms of school grades. Stronger self-continuity reinforces the belief that the school represents an optimal path towards one's future self.

Finally, Slotter and Walsh (2017)¹ examine the implications of self-continuity for self-concept clarity. In four experiments, these authors operationalize self-continuity as reported self-change following role transition. Greater self-change would indicate lower self-continuity, and vice versa. The researchers focused on such roles as parent, spouse, and worker. Lower self-continuity (i.e., greater self-change) predicted weaker self-concept clarity in the presence of weakly positive emotions. However, lower self-continuity was unassociated with self-clarity in the presence of strongly positive emotions. In all, high levels of positive emotions offset the potentially pernicious influence of low self-continuity on self-concept clarity.

Collectively, the seven special issue articles grappled with many issues surrounding the self across time. What is self-continuity? What is its underlying neural structure? How is it moderated by individual or cultural differences? What are its functions and what are the boundaries of these functions? We hope that the pluralism of ideas and methods put forward will increase understanding, and advance research on, the diachronic self.

Note

1. The article has already been published in 16(05) issue.

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