CURRENT RESEARCH IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

http://www.uiowa.edu/~grpproc/crisp/crisp.html

Volume 12, Number 9
Submitted: April 26, 2007
First Revision: April 27, 2007
Second Revision: May 1, 2007
Third Revision: May 14, 2007
Accepted: May 17, 2007
Published: March 17, 2007

SEGREGATING POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE THOUGHTS ABOUT PARTNERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEXT-DEPENDENCE AND STABILITY OF PARTNER VIEWS

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ABSTRACT

Earlier research has demonstrated that individuals high in self-esteem tend to integrate positive and negative information about close others whereas those low in self-esteem tend to segregate such information. The present study of roommates replicates this link and extends it by providing evidence that: (a) high self-esteem and integration of roommate views predict less context-dependent satisfaction with roommates, (b) the latter effect mediates the former, and, (c) integration of partner views predicts more stability in those views. Whereas we did not find an association between self-esteem and stability of partner views, we offer an explanation consistent with our original theory.

INTRODUCTION

Close relationships with other people are centrally important in everyday life. Aside from their ubiquity, these relationships have important implications for both physical and mental health (see Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000, for a summary). Recent evidence suggests that these relationships are important determinants of self-esteem as well (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Given the importance of close relationships, it is crucial for relationship researchers to understand how people maintain them.

The presence and awareness of partners' negative characteristics can provide a challenge to the maintenance of close relationships. On one hand, partners' negative characteristics can reflect badly upon the self (Tesser & Collins, 1988). For example, a roommate's lack of attention to appearance could be embarrassing to an appearance-conscious person who is associated with that roommate. Partner negatives can also indicate that the partner might reject one in the future. For example, a romantic partner's failure to remember one's birthday could suggest that the partner does not care about one's needs and may leave the relationship. Recent evidence suggests that there are individual differences in terms of how sensitive people are to these sorts of concerns. More specifically, individuals with low self-esteem tend to be especially threatened by partners' negative characteristics (Graham & Clark, 2006, study 4).

Assuming that all relationship partners (current or potential) have flaws and that individuals with low self-esteem are threatened by such flaws, why don't people with low self-esteem simply avoid relationships? They, like all humans, are characterized by a "need to belong" and actively desire and seek relationships with other people (Baumeister & Leary, 2000) at the same time they wish to avoid rejection. Graham and Clark (2006) suggested that individuals with low self-esteem regulate their conflicting approach and avoidance motivations by functionally segregating partner positives and negatives in memory, such that they focus primarily on one or the other at any given point in time. That is, they view partners as primarily positive or primarily negative at different times. Doing so allows people to focus exclusively or primarily on partner positives when threat to the relationship is low and the person with low self-esteem wants to avoid the threat of facing partner negatives. It also allows the same person to defensively focus exclusively or primarily on partner negatives to minimize hurt feelings related to a real or imagined rejection by the partner. Furthermore, it allows the low self-esteem person to psychologically distance him or herself from a partner who may be reflecting negatively on the self (Graham & Clark, 2006).

Graham and Clark (2006) found support for these ideas in four studies. In a first set of studies, participants indicated whether or not each of a series of positive and negative words appearing on a computer screen applied to another person or to an inanimate object. Participants were randomly assigned to view these words in an alternating positive and negative order or in a non-alternating order, in which all positive or negative words were presented first, followed by all words of the other valence. The prediction was that, if individuals who are low in self-esteem functionally segregate partner positives and negatives in memory, they should be slowed by having to make alternating positive and negative judgments relative to making all positive then all negative judgments (or vice versa). That is, they would have to switch between positive and negative stores of memory about the partner to complete the task, and this switching would slow them down. Results were consistent with this prediction; individuals with low self-esteem were

slower when making alternating positive and negative judgments about another person, but not when making similar judgments about an inanimate object (Graham & Clark, 2006, studies 1 and 2). In contrast, individuals with high self-esteem showed no such pattern. In subsequent studies, Graham and Clark (2006, studies 3 and 4) developed a self-report measure of the tendency to integrate versus segregate partner positives and negatives in memory (the Inegration of Thoughts About Partners Scale or I-TAPS) and administered it to four samples of participants along with other measures. Across all four samples, one of which was nationally representative, higher self-esteem was associated with higher I-TAPS scores, controlling for a host of potentially confounding variables.

Consequences of Segregating Partner Positives and Negatives

As suggested in the preceding analysis, one might expect that segregating partner positives and negatives serves a protective function for individuals with low self-esteem. Doing so allows these individuals to ignore partner negatives when things are going well in a relationship. It may also soften the blow of an actual or implied rejection by allowing the individual to focus exclusively on partner negatives, thereby allowing one to devalue and psychologically distance oneself from the partner in the face of social threat (cf. Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998; Murray et al., 2002).

Despite the protective merits of the tendency to segregate partner positives and negatives, we expect that there are negative consequences as well. First, individuals who segregate positive and negative information about partners are likely to have views of partners that are unstable across time. In other words, if these individuals focus primarily on either partner positives or partner negatives at a given point in time, they ought to vary tremendously across times in their views of partners. Second, individuals who segregate partner positives and negatives should have highly context-dependent levels of relationship satisfaction. That is, their current level of satisfaction with a partner should be more dependent upon the immediate relationship context than should the satisfaction of individuals who integrate partner positives and negatives. They should also show larger differences in satisfaction across positive and negative contexts within a given relationship.

We conducted the present study to test both of these possibilities. We recruited undergraduate research participants who had roommates and asked them to evaluate their roommates every three days for three weeks. At the end of this time period, participants came in for a lab session and completed measures of self-esteem, integration of thoughts about partners, and relationship satisfaction. During this session, they also recalled both a positive time and a negative time in their roommate relationship and made retrospective satisfaction ratings for each of these times. We predicted that: (a) higher self-esteem, controlling for relationship satisfaction, would be associated with higher scores on the integration measure (consistent with Graham & Clark, 2006, studies 3 and 4), (b) those high in self-esteem would be less variable across time in their evaluations of roommates with integration at least partially mediating this association, and, (c) individuals with high self-esteem would report more similar satisfaction scores across the two retrospective ratings with integration at least partially mediating this association.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 71 (26 men, 38 women, and 7 who did not indicate sex) undergraduate introductory psychology students who received partial course credit. They ranged in age from 18 to 21 with a median age of 19. Each participant had a roommate for the entire period of the study.

Measures and Procedure

We recruited potential participants during class sessions early in an academic semester. Interested parties learned that they would receive emails from the researcher directing them to a website on which they would evaluate their roommate. They learned that this would happen every three days until they had completed seven evaluations. Compliance was good: 64 of the 71 participants completed at least six of the seven online evaluations of their roommates. We excluded data from those seven participants who completed fewer than six evaluations (excluding data from participants who failed to complete all seven evaluations would have resulted in far fewer observations for analysis). There was no evidence that participants who failed to complete at least six evaluations chose more or less positive adjectives to describe their roommates (75.00%) than those who did (66.86%), $t(62) = -.64$, $p = .52$.

When participants launched the relevant website, they were instructed to select from a list the six adjectives that most applied to their roommate at the current time. There were 20 positive and 20 negative adjectives to choose from (see Appendix A for a complete list). We computed the proportion of positive traits to total traits selected for each evaluation of the roommate. Then, to assess variability, we computed the standard deviation across each participant's first six evaluations. After all of the online evaluations were completed, participants scheduled a time to visit the lab to complete some final measures and to receive credit. Whereas it would have been preferable to have participants complete the lab session before the longitudinal component of the study, this would have necessitated an additional lab visit for debriefing. We did not expect that we could recruit participants to complete two lab visits and seven online evaluations for one experimental credit.

At the lab session, participants completed a short battery of measures including the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (alpha = .89), a ten-item measure of global, trait self-esteem including items such as “I feel that I have a number of good qualities” and “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.” They also completed the Integration of Thoughts About Partners Scale (alpha = .85) (I-TAPS; Graham & Clark, 2006) as applied to their roommate, a measure of the tendency to see partner positives and negatives in an integrated manner. This measure includes items such as, “When I’m mad at my roommate, I can’t think of anything good about him/her” (reversed) and “Even when my roommate does something to hurt me, it is easy to remind myself of his or her positive attributes.” Participants also completed a six-item measure of relationship satisfaction (alpha = .93) (adapted from Graham & Clark, 2006, study 3c). The wording of the latter measure was changed to reflect roommate rather than romantic relationships. Moreover, because one item involved love and was therefore not appropriate to describe roommate

relationships, we substituted that item with, "If you were able to switch roommates today, to what extent would you like to do that?" Other items included "How satisfied are you right now with your roommate?" and "To what extent do you dislike your roommate right now?" (reversed). Participants also recalled a positive and a negative time in their relationship with their roommate. They made retrospective ratings of how satisfied they were with their roommate at each of these two times (using the same six-item measure of satisfaction described above, altered only to reflect the retrospective nature of the ratings). All measures completed at the lab session were rated on a seven-point Likert scale; we aggregated each of these measures by computing the mean for all items on each.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations for self-esteem, integration, current relationship satisfaction, difference in satisfaction scores across the two retrospective ratings, and variability in the online roommate evaluations (as indexed by computing the standard deviation of the first six evaluations made by each participant. Participants were above the scale midpoint of four on both self-esteem (Mean = 5.45) and satisfaction with roommates (Mean = 5.02). These findings are consistent with the notion that mentally healthy persons have "positive illusions" or inflated views of the self (Taylor & Brown, 1988) and close relationship partners (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Table 2 displays the complete correlation matrix showing the associations between each of these variables.

Is higher self-esteem associated with a greater degree of integration of thoughts about partners?

As predicted, higher self-esteem was associated with higher scores on the I-TAPS, $r(64) = .34$, $p < .01$. To rule out relationship satisfaction as a confounding variable, we computed a regression analysis predicting I-TAPS score simultaneously from self-esteem and satisfaction scores. This analysis revealed that self-esteem accounted for unique variance in I-TAPS scores, above and beyond that accounted for by relationship satisfaction, standardized beta = .29, $p = .01$.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for all Study Variables

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Self-esteem	5.45	.96
Integration	4.62	1.07
Current satisfaction	5.02	1.54
Difference in satisfaction	2.26	1.16
Variability in roommate evaluations	.11	.11
Mean percent of positive adjectives selected	.67	.33

Table 2: Correlations among all Study Variables

		1	2	3	4	5
1	Self-esteem	--				
2	Integration	.34 **	--			
3	Current satisfaction	.09	.57 **	--		
4	Difference in satisfaction	-.27 *	-.40 **	-.29 *	--	
5	Variability in roommate evaluations	-.01	-.27 *	-.32 *	.21	--
6	Mean percent of positive adjectives selected	.20	.59 **	.57 **	-.24	-.47 **

Were people with higher self-esteem and people who are more integrated less variable in their evaluations of roommates across time?

We did not find the predicted association between higher self-esteem and decreased variability of roommate evaluations across time, $r(62) = -.01$, $p = .96$. However, as predicted, higher I-TAPS scores predicted less variability across the evaluations $r(62) = -.27$, $p < .05$. Because higher self-esteem was not associated with decreased variability, we did not test the mediational hypothesis that differences in I-TAPS scores would at least partially account for that association.

Were people with higher self-esteem and people who are more integrated less context-dependent regarding their relationship satisfaction?

As predicted, higher self-esteem was associated with smaller difference scores between retrospective satisfaction ratings at a positive and a negative time in the relationship with one's roommate, $r(63) = -.27$, $p < .05$. Also as predicted, higher I-TAPS scores were associated with smaller difference scores between these same ratings, $r(63) = -.40$, $p = .001$. To test the hypothesis that integration would mediate the association between higher self-esteem and smaller difference scores, we used a four-step procedure (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). First, as already reported, we examined the association between the independent variable (self-esteem) and the dependent variable (difference scores) and found it to be significant. Second, as already reported, we examined the association between the independent variable (self-esteem) and the mediator (integration) and found it to be significant. Third, we simultaneously regressed difference scores on self-esteem and integration. Whereas higher integration remained a significant predictor of smaller difference scores (standardized beta = -.34, $p < .01$), the association between self-esteem and difference scores became non-significant (standardized beta = -.15, $p = .25$). Finally, a modified version of Sobel's (1982) test confirmed that integration scores accounted for a significant portion of the association between self-esteem and difference scores ($z = -1.94$, $p = .05$).

DISCUSSION

The present study was designed to explore two theoretical implications of earlier evidence suggesting that people low in self-esteem have more functionally segregated memory stores of positive and negative information about relationship partners (Graham & Clark, 2006). Those implications were that low self-esteem and a tendency to segregate positive and negative partner information ought to relate to: (a) more variability in views of partners across time, and (b) more of an impact of immediate relationship context on current relationship satisfaction. Of the two predictors, we considered self-esteem to be the more distal predictor for which the associations would be mediated by the tendency to segregate partner information.

We found evidence that segregation of thoughts about partners is associated with more variability in the positivity/negativity of partner judgments across time. We also found evidence of bigger differences in relationship satisfaction in the context of positive and negative relationship events among those who segregate partner positives and negatives. We believe these tendencies are likely to carry with them important relationship liabilities and vulnerabilities. In particular, people who have fluctuating views of their partners are likely to behave in unpredictable ways toward their partners. For example, when focusing primarily on partner positives, we would expect them to behave in ways that indicate trust in and caring for the partner. When focusing on negatives, however, we would expect them to behave in ways indicating little trust and caring. Given that both humans and non-human animals prefer predictable to unpredictable stimuli (Badia, Harsh, & Abbott, 1979; Steinhauer, 1984; Weir, 1965), we expect that unpredictability could lead to drops in relationship satisfaction. Consistent with this analysis, Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985) have argued that predictability is an important component of interpersonal trust. In addition to drops in trust and relationship satisfaction, this unpredictability could also lead a person to lash back at a partner who has a segregated view of him or her. By eliciting the very behavior they are trying to avoid, persons who segregate views of partners may find it hard to adopt healthier, more integrated views of partners.

Self-esteem, our theoretically more distal predictor of instability of views of partners and of context-dependence of relationship satisfaction, significantly predicted the latter but not the former. One possibility for this null finding is that the three-week time period was not sufficient to reveal an association between self-esteem and variability. This seems unlikely, however, given the observed association between the I-TAPS and variability. A more intriguing possibility is that at least some people low in self-esteem may become locked into viewing their roommate as all good or all bad for the 21-day period of the study. If they have been sufficiently hurt or rejected by another person, they could react to this by believing that the person is all bad and ignore their positive attributes. In such a case, we would expect them to have a stable, negative view of the other person. In contrast, it is also possible that a person low in self-esteem might view a roommate in a stable, positive manner. Either possibility would result in extremely stable views of the other person. If a sufficient number of participants with low self-esteem were characterized by either pattern, this could have prevented the emergence of the predicted association. Importantly, if this possibility is correct, it suggests that the association between low self-esteem and the tendency to segregate positive and negative partner aspects is even stronger than previously thought. Future research should address this possibility.

Given the correlational nature of the present data, we cannot make firm statements about causality. Whereas our theoretical viewpoint suggests that having low self-esteem leads people to segregate partner positives and negatives, it is possible that the reverse is true. Furthermore, it is possible that there are third-variables such as attachment insecurity or rejection sensitivity that might explain the relationship between low self-esteem and the tendency to segregate partner positives and negatives. The present data are consistent with hypotheses, however, and future research should directly address issues of causality.

In conclusion, we have presented evidence that low self-esteem is associated with greater context-dependence of relationship satisfaction. Moreover, we have presented evidence that the tendency to segregate partner positives and negatives is associated with greater context-dependence of relationship satisfaction and greater instability in views of partners. Theoretically, this has implications for the generally poor relational outcomes associated with self-esteem. Practically, this has implications for research on relationship satisfaction. That is, researchers should pay attention to the immediate relational context in which they ask participants to report about their relationships and their partners.

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APPENDIX A : Complete List of Positive and Negative Adjectives Used

Positive: forgiving, caring, pleasant, admirable, understanding, trustworthy, appreciative, likeable, dependable, friendly, cheerful, kind-hearted, ethical, loyal, smart, good, sincere, open-minded, sympathetic, good-natured.

Negative: greedy, jealous, gossipy, gloomy, shallow, nosey, cruel, egotistical, phony, obnoxious, self-centered, rejecting, touchy, petty, annoying, boring, spiteful, thoughtless, cold, dishonest.

AUTHOR NOTE

We acknowledge the financial support of the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation. Any opinions, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this paper are ours, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NIH or the NSF. We thank Carl Skipper for preparing the web site used to conduct this research. We thank Eli Finkel, Jesse Harrington, Melanie Malefyt, and Sherri Pataki for providing comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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