



Implicit theories moderate the relation of positive future fantasies to academic outcomes

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ABSTRACT

We hypothesized and observed that the degree to which students endorsed entity theories – the view that intelligence is fixed rather than malleable – attenuated the affective benefits and exacerbated the achievement drawbacks of positive fantasies in the academic domain. Positive fantasies only predicted low anger and anxiety for schoolchildren who did not strongly endorse entity theories (Study 1), and positive fantasies only predicted poor final school grades for vocational students who *did* strongly endorse entity theories (Study 2). An experiment indicated that for university students with stronger entity theories, positive fantasies demanded relatively little attention (Study 3), suggesting that positive fantasies obscure the opportunity for the preemptive self-regulation which promotes successful performance.

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1. Introduction

Students may use fantasies about upcoming academic experiences to help them anticipate and perhaps prepare for the future. For example, starting a new school program, students might imagine receiving and responding to their first feedback from teachers. A student who fantasizes about her first test being returned with a large A+ scrawled on the front might imagine her elated feelings, the fun of telling friends and family, and the excitement of going out for a celebratory dinner. Such idealized visions of the future have benefits for immediate affect (Eller, 1999; Jallo, Bourguignon, Taylor, & Utz, 2008), but drawbacks for actual achievement over time (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; Oettingen & Wadden, 1991). In the present research, we propose that these benefits and drawbacks depend on the way that people interpret and use their fantasies. Specifically, as a moderator of the relationship between positive fantasies and academic outcomes, we considered the way that students understand ability, as defined by their implicit theories of intelligence (Dweck, 1999).

Fantasies refer to the thoughts and mental images about the future that freely occur in the mind's eye. As described by Klinger (1990, 1996), who called them daydreams, fantasies pertain to currently important wishes in one's life, including desirable future outcomes as well as the processes of working toward these out-

comes. In fantasies that are experienced as very positive, people envision a masterful, perfect future performance without picturing potential setbacks or questioning the smooth attainment of the desired future (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002). On the other hand, people may also imagine the setbacks that could prevent a desired future, and may question whether a desired future can actually be achieved. By doing so, people generate fantasies that are experienced as relatively less positive (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002). It is important to note that fantasies, as used here, differ from what Lewin (1926) and Mahler (1933) called "Zauberdenken" (i.e., thoughts depicting actions and events that violate known natural laws); common usage of the word "fantasy" may connote such scenarios. However, as Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, and Armor (1998) pointed out, "Even an entertaining fantasy about acquiring great wealth typically begins with an unexpected inheritance or winning a lottery rather than with a large cloud opening up and dumping the money in the front yard or some other impossible event" (p. 430). Although people can generate fantasies about any topic, the present research concerns fantasies that depict performances. Fantasies that depict performances, which may be highly positive or less positive, portray (explicitly or implicitly) the individual's future capability. As outlined in more detail below, this capability can be interpreted as something that is fixed or as something that can be developed over time.

People use fantasies to anticipate affective consequences of future events (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007), and when the future is depicted as positive, this depiction can have immediate affective benefits. Imagining the successful pursuit and achievement of one's wishes has been shown to reduce feelings of anxiety and negative affect.

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For instance, images of successful performance were effective at decreasing the symptoms of competitive anxiety in rugby players (Mellalieu, Hanton, & Thomas, 2009), and simulations that depicted a smooth, logical, and confident process of arriving at a hospital on time to give birth were linked to reduced anxiety and stress about the delivery process (Brown, MacLeod, Tata, & Goddard, 2002). Indeed, specific cognitive strategies like guided imagery actively employ imagery of positive futures as a means of decreasing stress and anxiety (e.g., Eller, 1999; Jallo, Bourguignon, Taylor, & Utz, 2008). However, we expected the affective benefits of positive fantasies not to apply equally to all people.

Instead, we suggest that the relationship between positive fantasies and concurrent affect may depend on the meaning people ascribe to the images depicted in their fantasies. One variable known to affect the way in which people give meaning to their experiences is their implicit theories of ability (see Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999; Molden & Dweck, 2006). Specifically, the extent to which person attributes, like academic ability, are considered to be stable, uncontrollable traits (*entity theories*) rather than changeable, controllable qualities (*incremental theories*), influences people's aims and pursuits in the achievement setting. There is evidence that implicit theories shape the interpretation of past (e.g., attributions for failure, Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999) and present (e.g., current task; Stone, 1998) experiences, but research to date has not asked whether such theories color how individuals interpret images of the future, and whether a diverging interpretation of fantasies about the future might affect subsequent affective outcomes.

We hypothesized that the degree to which people endorse an entity theory, and thus believe in the fixedness of ability (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), should change the meaning of their fantasies about the future. The more individuals endorse strong entity theories, the more a fantasized capability is something that they either possess or lack, rather than something that can be worked toward. There are several reasons why for these individuals, positive fantasies about desired future performances might not have the typical affective benefits. First, for people with high entity beliefs, positive fantasies about a future performance should mean that one has demonstrated an existing capability, and thus it is not an actual achievement; it is simply an expression of what one already knows to have been achieved in the past. More importantly, fantasizing about an idealized performance might scare high entity theorists, as they fear they may, in fact, not possess the capability to perform in such an idealized way. An example would be students who, when faced with a challenging exam, use positive fantasies of receiving an A or of easily and competently preparing the materials in order to counteract their feelings of anxiety and anger (e.g., Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002). For students with strong entity beliefs, such fantasies depict the idealized expression of an existing capability that they hope to possess but may fear they do not. Thus, for them the affective benefits of imagining future success may be promptly undermined by the immediate fear that they actually do not. Accordingly, positive fantasies should have little power to neutralize feelings of anxiety and anger in school. Finally, findings suggest that for individuals with strong entity theories, feedback indicative of improvement over time may actually create rather than ameliorate anxiety, because such change violates their core belief in a stable self (Plaks & Stecher, 2007). Thus, positive fantasies about the future bearing the possibility of a change from the present may yield higher rather than lower anxiety for students with strong entity beliefs. For these three reasons, positive fantasies about desired future performances should not attenuate negative feelings like anxiety and anger in individuals who endorse strong entity theories.

On the other hand, students with weak entity theories can interpret positive fantasies about successful future performances as representing a capability that can be worked toward rather than

a capability that is fixed. Thus, when individuals endorse weak entity theories, the affective benefits of positive fantasies should not be undermined by the fear that one does not possess the idealized capability, as it can always be developed by future effort. For weak entity theorists, positive fantasies about future success should present an undisturbed affective boon that counteracts anxiety and anger, depicting the possibility of a future that is different from the present. In addition, positive fantasies about successfully performing in the future should not be linked to fears that the self may not be stable, as change over time does not violate the core belief in a changeable self. Accordingly, it should be people with weaker entity theories who show the typical pattern of positive fantasies yielding concurrently lower levels of negative feelings like anxiety and anger.

It is important to note that these hypotheses rest on differences in the *interpretation* of the fantasized future rather than on differences in the content of the fantasized future. For example, previous research has examined the content of fantasized futures in terms of whether it pertains to process or outcome (Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, & Armor, 1998). Anxiety is lower when students mentally simulate the process for doing well on an upcoming exam (sitting down, opening the book, starting to read) than when they mentally simulate the outcome of doing well on the exam (getting a good grade; Pham & Taylor, 1999). Because individuals with stronger entity beliefs do not conceptualize ability as something that can be worked toward and developed, one might suspect that these individuals would generate fantasies about outcomes rather than processes more readily than individuals with weaker entity beliefs. However, even if this is the case, it should not account for the moderating role of entity theories. Whether people fantasize about an idealized future outcome (e.g., a high test grade) or an idealized process of reaching that outcome (e.g., smooth and effective studying), these fantasies represent positive futures, which can still be interpreted in different ways. For example, students with relatively strong entity beliefs should interpret fantasies of receiving an A or of easily and competently preparing an assignment as representing a capability that they might or might not possess and hence might or might not demonstrate in the future. For these students, the positive fantasies should have little power to neutralize feelings of anxiety and anger in school. However, students with weaker entity beliefs could interpret the same fantasies as representing a capability that can be worked toward, and for these students, such positive fantasies should provide an affective boon that counteracts anxiety and anger.

Furthermore, we propose that entity beliefs should moderate the relationship between positive fantasies and feelings of anger and anxiety regardless of students' expectations of academic success. Even when people have high expectations of successfully attaining a fantasized positive future, if they strongly endorse an entity theory, then this attainment will be a demonstration of a fixed capability rather than the result of striving for improvement. Thus, regardless of the depiction of future outcomes versus processes and regardless of expectations of success, entity theories should attenuate the relationship between positive fantasies and low anger and anxiety, such that this relationship might only be present for students with weaker entity theories. These ideas are tested in Study 1 with a sample of middle-school students.

2. Study 1: Positive fantasies, implicit theories, and achievement emotions

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

Fifth and sixth grade students from two schools in a large city in Germany participated in this study about their thoughts and be-

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