

State Self-Esteem as a Moderator of Negative Mood Effects on Person Impression

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Participants in a negative or a neutral mood performed an impression formation task in Experiment 1, a word fragment completion task in Experiment 2, and both tasks in Experiment 3. A self-referent versus other-referent sentence completion task was used to induce a negative mood. As a result, participants exhibited fewer mood-congruent effects on impression rating in the self-referent than in the other-referent mood induction condition, even though relevant traits had been equally activated across the two conditions. It was also shown that the self-referent induction procedure was accompanied by degrading of self-esteem, whereas the other-referent one was not. Taken together, the results suggest that the state self-esteem might be relevant to moderating of the negative mood effects on person impression. © 2001 Elsevier Science

In recent years, a large number of social cognitive studies have addressed the question of how and why one's social perceptions, judgments, and memories are influenced by one's current mood states. The most influential and concise explanatory framework for the mood effects on cognition has been the associative network theory of affect, namely the mood-priming model (Bower, 1981, 1991; Bower & Cohen, 1982). According to this model, material in memory that is congruent with current mood states in the affective tone is activated, is made more accessible, and becomes more likely to be used in various kinds of cognitive processing, leading to a marked mood-congruent effect on memory, interpretations, and judgments.

Moderation of Negative Mood Effects on Person Judgment

Although there is much empirical evidence to show that the mood priming effect occurs in various cognitive tasks, some studies suggest that the degree and quality of mood priming is not invariable as implied by the network model (for a review, see Forgas, 1999b). For example, it is well known that the impact of negative mood on other judgments is often modified because of internalized social rules such as

politeness. Several empirical studies have shown that participants in whom a negative mood had been momentarily induced did not become so critical of others (Forgas & Bower, 1987, 1988; Forgas, Bower, & Krantz, 1984; Forgas, Bower, & Moylan, 1990). Berkowitz and Troccoli (1990) argued that negative mood does not directly lead to openly expressed negative opinions about others. More recently, Forgas (1999a,c) demonstrated that negative mood produced greater politeness in the language used for requesting.

These findings seem to suggest that people in a negative mood generally become self-reflective and motivated to accommodate their responses appropriately according to the social rules. Or, at least they tend to refrain from derogating others. However, we still cannot rule out the possibility that those results stem from the nature of the mental processes by which the moods are induced. In those studies, participants' mood states were altered by reminding the participants about their autobiographical memories (Forgas, 1999c; Forgas et al., 1984) or by giving them bogus feedback about their performances (Forgas & Bower, 1987). One may suspect that either of those mood induction procedures would have an impact on the state self-esteem. We should note that several studies have shown that participants in a negative mood became less critical or more polite toward others even when the mood was induced by videos, which seem to be less likely to affect the state self-esteem (Forgas, 1999a, 1999c; Forgas et al., 1990). However, even

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in those studies, one cannot exclude the possibility that seeing the mood-invoking videos brings self-referent ideas to mind that would affect the state self-esteem. Actually, Heatherton and Polivy (1991) pointed out that many of the mood induction procedures might have altered the level of self-esteem as well as mood states. The results obtained in the above studies, therefore, could be due partly to the degraded self-esteem accompanying the induction procedures used.

State Self-Esteem and Person Impression

In addition, the literature on self-esteem provides a convincing rationale for our assumption. Several self-esteem researchers have suggested that people with low self-esteem are so cautious and self-protective that they do not want to make straightforward claims about themselves that cannot be supported by others (e.g., Brown, 1993; Schutz & Tice, 1997; Tice, 1993). One could argue that momentarily degraded self-esteem also leads people to be cautious about criticizing others, which seems socially undesirable. This notion is not inconsistent with the formulation of Sedikides (1992a,b) as well. According to his theorizing, momentary negative self-evaluation produced by negative mood (i.e., sad mood) results in heightened self-focused attention. Heightened self-focused attention, following the contention of self-awareness theory, produces a self-regulation in the interest of doing what the person regards as desirable (Carver & Sheier, 1981; Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Besides, the literature on depression suggests that self-focused attention is associated with increased likelihood of deprecating oneself (e.g., Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987), which presumably leads people to be self-protective all the more.

This argument seems to contradict the findings from prejudice research that people whose self-esteem has been threatened derogate others to restore it. However, this phenomenon has been demonstrated to occur particularly when participants are making in-group–out-group comparisons (Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987), when the target person is a member of a disliked group (Fein & Spencer, 1997), or when participants have been criticized by the target (Sinclair & Kunda, 2000). In other words, it does not occur if derogating the target would not be so effective a way of self-salvage. Therefore, it is predictable that degraded self-esteem inhibits derogating others in a person judgment task where participants are supposed to evaluate the target as detached observers with their group membership less salient. The present study attempts to investigate this.

Thus, in this study, it is hypothesized that degraded self-esteem accompanying mood induction procedure may play a certain role in moderation of the negative mood effects on person impression.

Mood and State Self-Esteem

To test our hypothesis, it is necessary to examine the differential effects of the two types of mood induction, with and without a change in self-esteem. We should note here that in practice mood might often be contaminated with self-esteem, but mood and state self-esteem are separable from each other conceptually and psychometrically. Heatherton and Polivy (1991) developed a useful scale for measuring the state self-esteem and demonstrated its validity for untangling the interrelations between mood and self-esteem. The theory of Sedikides (1992a, 1992b) may be worth a mention in passing. He theorized that mood itself produces momentary positive or negative self-evaluation, which in turn directs one's attention outward or inward, respectively. His argument is quite convincing, but at the same time it leads us to wonder whether all moods are accompanied by a change in self-evaluation. In our opinion, this chain of psychological processes is instigated particularly when a mood induction procedure has the potential to change the valence of self-conception or the level of self-esteem. In fact, some empirical studies suggest that the change in self-conception or the fluctuation of self-esteem accompanying a mood-altering experience might be one of the important factors determining the consequences of that mood (Berkowitz, 1987; Rholes, Riskind, & Lane, 1987; Rosenhan, Salovey, & Hargis, 1981; Thompson, Cowan, & Rosenhan, 1980). Few studies, however, have explicitly investigated how differently the mood induction procedure may influence person judgments when it is accompanied by a change in self-esteem compared to otherwise.

Beyond the Work by Ikegami (1993)

Ikegami (1993) is one of the few exceptions of a researcher who addressed this issue directly, using self-referent and other-referent sentence completion tasks to induce a negative mood. It was assumed that self-referent mood induction would have effects on the state self-esteem, whereas other-referent mood induction would have effects that were independent of the state self-esteem. As a result, the negative moods induced by self-referent versus other-referent tasks were equivalent in intensity, but the negative mood effects on person impression regarding hostility were less prevalent in the former than in the latter. This indicates that the negative mood effects on person impression are more likely to be moderated when the mood is induced by self-degrading ideas. To be more specific, the temporarily degraded self-esteem may lead participants to be more cautious and less critical of others, thus preventing them from applying mood-primed hostile traits to the behavioral events elicited by the target person.

This interpretation, however, is still unverified because there is no direct evidence that the self-referent mood induction task actually influences the level of self-esteem.

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