



Positive affect, intuition and referential thinking

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ABSTRACT

This study tested the prediction that individual differences in intuition would interact with positive affect (PA) to predict referential thinking, in a nonclinical sample. Participants ($N = 146$) completed questionnaires measuring PA, intuition, referential thinking, personality traits, depression, anxiety, and meaning in life. Controlling for anxiety and depression and traits, the interaction of PA and intuition predicted referential thinking. Exploratory analyses demonstrated that at high levels of PA, referential thinking was positively associated with meaning in life. The role of meaning-making processes in referential thinking is discussed.

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1. Introduction

Referential thinking is generally included as a component of the positive schizotypy domain, along with magical ideation, odd beliefs, and unusual experiences (Kendler, Ochs, Gorman, Hewit, & Mirsky, 1991; Vollema & Hoijtink, 2000). Referential thinking involves finding self-relevant meaning in random events. *DSM-III-R* defined “idea of reference” as, “an idea...that events, objects, or other people in the person’s immediate environment have a particular and unusual meaning specifically for him or her” (American Psychiatric Association, 1987, p. 399; emphasis added). Items from commonly used schizotypal personality scales often include direct or indirect reference to meaning (e.g., “Do you sometimes feel that things on the TV or read in the newspaper have a special meaning for you?” from the Schizotypal Personality Questionnaire, SPQ, Raine, 1991). Clearly, referential thinking might be thought of as a type of meaning-making, involving the perception and interpretation of random life events as personally profound and informative. Thus, variables associated with more general ascriptions of meaning to experience might serve as potential predictors of referential thinking. The present study examined whether intuitive processing style, specifically when coupled with positive affect (PA), might predict referential thinking.

Intuitive information processing is rapid, holistic, and associationistic (e.g., Epstein, 1991, 2008). Essentially, intuitive processing involves relying on vague hunches or gut feelings. Intuition is related to the use of heuristics in problem solving, stereotypical thinking as well as superstitious beliefs (Pacini & Epstein, 1999).

Recent research has shown that PA facilitates the emergence of beliefs and behaviors guided by intuition. Specifically, PA interacts with individual differences in intuition to predict paranormal belief as well as susceptibility to sympathetic magic (King, Burton, Hicks, & Drigotas, 2007). For example, individuals high on intuition who were induced to experience PA were more likely to rate videos purporting to show UFOs and ghosts as believable and meaningful (King et al., 2007, Study 1). This research provides an indirect empirical inroad to positive schizotypy and referential thinking more specifically, as both of these have been shown to relate to paranormal belief (Genovese, 2005; Hergovich, Schott, & Arendasy, 2008).

Like referential thinking itself, paranormal beliefs involve ascribing a particular type of meaning to ambiguous stimuli. Two people might see the same object in the night sky. For one, it is easily discounted; for another it indicates a visitor from another planet. Similarly, two individuals might have the same fleeting idea of reference (e.g., that a movie plot bears an uncanny resemblance to one’s life) but one might dismiss this as meaningless coincidence (or good filmmaking) while another might ascribe unusual meaning.

Importantly, the interaction of individual differences in intuition and PA has implications for general attributions of meaning (not simply paranormal meaning) to experiences. Emerging evidence suggests that the convergence of PA and intuitive processing relates to enhanced ascriptions of meaningfulness to ambiguous stimuli (e.g., Zen koans, life experiences; Hicks, Cicero, Burton, & King, in preparation). Intuitive processing involves relying on one’s gut feelings and PA appears to bolster these feelings so that they are reflected in a sense that events are particularly, personally meaningful. Thus, the present study examined the prediction that

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intuition and PA would interact to predict referential thinking. Rather than predicting a straightforward correlation between intuitive processing and referential thinking, we predicted that referential thinking would, like ascriptions of meaning in past research, be predicted by a convergence of high PA and high intuition.

The relation of positive schizotypy to intuition has been addressed in only one study. Results showed intuitive processing to be unrelated to the cognitive/perceptual factor (that factor most similar to referential thinking) and the interpersonal factor, and negatively related to disorganized schizotypy (Genovese, 2005). Previous research has provided mixed evidence for relations among referential thinking and other personality characteristics. Kerns (2006) found positive schizotypy (including magical ideation, odd beliefs, and unusual experience; those variables conceptually closest to referential thinking) to be largely unrelated to the Five Factor Model (FFM) traits, cognitive control, and emotional clarity. Chmielewski and Watson (2008) found no significant associations between big five dimensions and unusual beliefs and experiences (again, that factor most relevant to referential thinking). In contrast, Kwapil, Barrantes-Vidal, and Silvia (2008) found positive schizotypy to relate positively to neuroticism and openness to experience and negatively to agreeableness and conscientiousness. Interestingly, intuition is related to a very different profile of traits, sharing positive associations with extraversion and agreeableness (Pacini & Epstein, 1999). Clearly, further exploration of analogues to referential thinking in normative personality characteristics remains a goal for research. Notably, few of the traits considered in past research have been particularly germane to the potential meaning-relevant function of referential thinking.

1.1. Overview

To test the main prediction that referential thinking would be predicted by the interaction of intuitive processing style and PA, participants completed measures of PA, intuition, and referential thinking. In addition, participants completed a measure of the FFM to explore the relations between these traits and referential thinking (and to provide control variables for analyses). Because referential thinking (Lenzenweger, Bennett, & Lilienfeld, 1997) and positive schizotypy more generally (Kwapil et al., 2008; Lewandoski et al., 2006) relate to anxiety and depression, measures of these variables were included as control variables as well.

By definition, referential thinking represents the ascription of personal meaning to various life events. As such, this type of thinking might relate to the experience of meaning in life, more generally. To explore this provocative notion, participants completed a measure of meaning in life. Analyses explored the potential relationship of referential thinking to the experience of meaning in life as a function of PA and intuition.¹

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

One hundred forty-six undergraduates (106 women, 40 men) from a personality psychology class completed a take-home questionnaire packet for extra credit. Participants were instructed to complete the measure in a quiet setting at their own pace and to

return the packet in two weeks. When packets were returned (100% were returned) all identifying information was removed. Ages ranged from 18 to 37 years old ($M = 20.52$, $SD = 2.21$). Represented ethnicities were 93% White/European American, 5% African American, 1% Asian, and 1% "other."

3. Materials

3.1. Intuition

Individual differences in intuitive processing style were measured using the 20-item Faith in Intuition subscale from the Rational Experiential Inventory (Pacini & Epstein, 1999). A sample item includes, "I believe in trusting my hunches." This measure is related to the use of heuristics in problem solving, stereotypical thinking, superstitious beliefs, extraversion, agreeableness and interpersonal trust (Pacini & Epstein, 1999).

3.2. Positive affect

Participants completed the Positive affect scale from the Positive and Negative affect schedule (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) with instructions to rate each descriptor for how much they generally feel that way.

3.3. Traits

The NEO-Five Factor Inventory (Costa, Jr., & McCrae, 1992) has five 12-item scales, measuring neuroticism, extraversion, and openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness.

3.4. Mental health

The anxiety and depression scales from the Personality Assessment Inventory (Morey, 1991) are each composed of three 8-item subscales, including cognitive, affective, and physiological aspects of depression and anxiety. Subscales are summed to create total scores.

3.5. Meaning in life

Participants completed 4 items drawn from the Purpose In Life test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), including, "In life, I have very clear goals and aims," "My personal existence is very purposeful and meaningful," "I have clear goals and a satisfying purpose in life," and "I regard my ability to find a meaning, purpose, or mission in life to be very great." Factor analytic work (McGregor & Little, 1998) suggests these items are particularly relevant to the experience of meaning in life and not simply PA. These items have been used in past research on meaning in life (e.g., Hicks & King, 2008).

3.6. Referential thinking

The Referential Thinking Scale (REF; Lenzenweger et al., 1997) was introduced to detect relatively unusual and severe referential thought, likely to be of clinical significance. Items tap non-psychotic ideas of reference, with no mention of paranormal beliefs or explicit reference to meaning. Lenzenweger et al. (1997) reported a test-retest correlation of .86 over four weeks. Although correlated with anxiety and depression, factor analytic work has demonstrated discriminant validity from these variables (along with self-monitoring and self-consciousness) and convergent validity with measures of perceptual aberration, magical ideation (Lenzenweger et al., 1997) and poor performance on a fine motor task (Lenzenweger & Maher, 2002).

¹ Only two studies have directly addressed the potential relationship between schizotypy and meaning in life. Goulding (2004, 2005) found that schizotypy was unrelated to Sense of Coherence (e.g., Antonovsky, 1993) in undergraduates but negatively related to SOC in a sample of paranormal believers and experiencers. However, SOC is very strongly related to PA ($r = .80$, King et al., 2006) rendering it a less than optimal measure of meaning in life.

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