



The moderating effect of self-concept valence on the relationship between self-focused attention and mood: An experience sampling study

Nigel P. Field^{a,*}, Raeda Joudy^a, Daniel Hart^b

^a Ph.D. Program in Clinical Psychology, Palo Alto University, Palo Alto, CA, USA

^b Department of Psychology, Rutgers University, Camden, NJ, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 10 November 2009

Keywords:

Self-focused attention
Experience sampling
Self-esteem
Neuroticism
Mood

ABSTRACT

This study examined the moderating role of self-esteem and neuroticism on the relationship between self-focused attention and mood using experience sampling methodology. 107 undergraduate participants were paged seven times each day over the course of a week and completed a set of measures that included items assessing current mood, focus of attention, and self-evaluative thoughts during these times. A significant within-person relationship was found between focus of attention and mood such that self-focus samplings were associated with a shift toward negative mood compared with samplings involving non-self-focus. As hypothesized, those with higher self-esteem and lower neuroticism showed less of a shift toward negative mood during self-focused attention relative to those with lower self-esteem and higher neuroticism. Moreover, the valence of self-evaluative thoughts during states of self-focused attention was shown to mediate the impact of these personality traits on mood.

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1. Introduction

There is evidence that whether self-focused attention incites negative mood is contingent on the evaluative content of the self-concept (e.g., Phillips & Silvia, 2005; Sedikides, 1992). Under the assumption that the most salient and chronically accessible self-aspects are likely to become the focus of attention under self-aware conditions (Carver, 1979), the nature of their evaluative content should have direct bearing on whether self-focused attention induces negative mood (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Sedikides, 1992). Specifically, individuals who possess more negatively valenced self-aspects should show a greater increase in negative mood relative to individuals with more positively-valenced self-aspects under self-aware conditions. The present study examines this in the context of daily life through the use of experience sampling methodology. It thereby extends previous work on the affective consequences of experimentally manipulated self-focused attention in addressing its spontaneous occurrence and effect on mood as it occurs naturalistically.

1.1. Background

Studies examining the impact of self-focused attention on mood have typically relied on experimental manipulation of self-focused

attention, such as through the use of mirrors (e.g., Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Phillips & Silvia, 2005; Sedikides, 1992). These studies characteristically employ between-group designs in which one group is administered a self-focus manipulation while participants in a control condition are given instructions promoting attentional focus away from the self. Mood ratings comparing the two groups obtained after the manipulation provide the means for examining the effect of self-focus versus non-self-focus on mood.

Studies addressing the linkage between self-focused attention and mood have obtained mixed results; while some studies have shown that self-focused attention is related to more negative mood (e.g., Ingram, Lumry, Cruet, & Sieber, 1987; Pyszczynski, Holt, & Greenberg, 1987), in other studies self-focused attention is associated with more positive mood (e.g., Ickes, Wicklund, & Ferris, 1973; Salovey, 1992). These discrepant findings informed the present study hypothesis that the valence of the self-concept may play a role in whether self-focused attention is likely to induce negative or positive mood. Indeed, previous studies provide some support for this position. In a study examining the relationship between self-focused attention, the evaluative tone of the self-concept and mood, Sedikides (1992) found that, among participants who were given a self-focused attention manipulation involving writing about themselves while facing the reflective side of a mirror, those with more positive self-conceptions made higher happy mood ratings relative to those with more negative self-conceptions. On the other hand, among those in the other-focused control condition involving writing about an acquaintance while facing the backside of a mirror, no differences were found in mood ratings between

* Corresponding author. Address: Palo Alto University, 1791 Arastradero Rd., Palo Alto, CA 94304, USA.

E-mail address: nfield@pgsp.edu (N.P. Field).

positive and negative self-conception participants. These results thus suggest that the impact of self-focused attention on mood is moderated by the evaluative content of participants' self-conceptions.

In a similar vein, Phillips and Silvia (2005) examined self-discrepancy (i.e., negative self-conception) as a moderator of the linkage between self-focused attention and mood. Participants were assigned to either a high self-awareness condition involving facing the reflective side of a large mirror or a low self-awareness condition in which they faced the backside of the mirror. They were then asked to complete a measure assessing the extent to which their actual self was discrepant with their ideal self and measures of current mood state. As predicted, a significant interaction effect was found for self-awareness and self-discrepancy on mood. In effect, the self-focus manipulation served to increase participants' awareness of discrepancies between their self-conceptions and ideal self-standards, leading to more negative mood among participants with higher self-discrepancies relative to those with lower self-discrepancies, whereas no such differences were found in the low self-aware condition.

1.2. Present study

The present study extends previous work on self-focused attention and mood through the use of experience sampling methodology. This method offers a more ecologically valid means for investigating the moderating effect of the evaluative tone of the self-concept on the impact of self-focused attention on mood than studies relying on an experimentally induced self-awareness manipulation. Equally if not more important, intensive longitudinal data gathering made possible through the use of experience sampling methodology provides a means for examining within-person relationships between focus of attention and mood. Existing studies typically rely on between-person or -group analyses in which one group is administered a self-focus manipulation while participants in the control condition are given instructions promoting attentional focus away from the self. These study designs are limited in not being able to draw conclusions regarding within-person relationships. This is a serious problem in that the findings from between-person designs have been known to differ substantively from those obtained using within-person designs, such that the findings obtained using the former may not apply at the level of the individual (see Tennen, Affleck, Armeli, & Carney, 2000). To our knowledge, a study conducted by Csikszentmihalyi and Figurski (1982) is the only other study using experience sampling methodology to examine the effect of self-focused attention on mood. Their study did not address individual differences in self-concept valence on the relationship between self-focused attention and mood, however. Furthermore, in simply aggregating within-person focus of attention and mood scores in their analysis, instead of using multilevel statistical procedures that could provide a means for examining within-person relationships between these variables as well as between-person factors that might moderate these within-person relationships, it was not possible to answer within-person questions regarding the association between self-awareness and mood.

This study also has theoretical implications in addressing the trait–state interface in terms of the interaction between time-invariant dispositional influences, involving the evaluative tone of the self-concept, and time-varying situational influences, involving self-focused versus non-self-focused attention, on mood state. Through repeated measurements of attentional focus and mood state throughout the course of a week via experience sampling, it was possible to obtain a sufficient within-person sampling of these mental states to examine systematically such trait–state interaction effects in daily life.

In line with the results of Sedikides (1992) and Phillips and Silvia (2005), we hypothesized that the effect of the evaluative content of the self-concept on mood would be more pronounced under conditions of self-focused attention. Self-esteem and neuroticism measures were used to assess self-concept valence. Self-esteem provides a direct measure of the evaluative tone of the self-concept (Rosenberg, 1965). Because self-esteem and neuroticism are known to be strongly correlated (Robins, Tracy, & Trezniewski, 2001; Watson, Suls, & Haig, 2002), reflecting their shared focus on negative self experience and dissatisfaction, neuroticism provides an additional albeit indirect measure of the evaluative content of the self-concept. We predicted that both measures would be significant moderators of the impact of self-focused attention on mood, such that higher scores in neuroticism and lower scores in self-esteem would be linked to a greater shift toward negative mood under naturally occurring states of self-focused attention relative to naturally occurring states in which attention was directed away from the self.

Finally, stemming from the assumption that the impact of self-esteem and neuroticism on mood lies through their effect on the evaluative tone of the self-concept activated during states of self-focused attention, it follows that the latter should mediate the effects of these personality variables on mood. We therefore expected that on experience samplings involving self-focused attention, participants with lower self-esteem and higher neuroticism would have more negative thoughts about themselves relative to those with higher self-esteem and lower neuroticism, and that this would serve as a mechanism by which these personality variables affected mood as shown in a mediational analysis.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

One hundred and seven undergraduate psychology students (59 males and 48 females) were recruited for a study of personality and experience sampling. Participants were paid \$120 for their involvement in the study.

2.2. Procedure

The measures used in this study were taken from a larger research project on personality and ongoing experience. For previous published research using this database, see Hart, Field, Garfinkle, and Singer (1997) and Oosterwegel, Field, Hart, and Anderson (2001). Although data from the experience sampling measures was used in these past studies, the present study involved the first attempt to examine within-person relationships on this database. The Hart et al. study examined proximities between representations of self and others in their relation to personality measures of adjustment and experience sampling aggregate mood scores. The Oosterwegel et al. study examined the relationship between self-esteem variation, as assessed in experience sampling, and personality measures of psychological adjustment.

Those who agreed to participate were given a packet of questionnaires to complete at home consisting of personality and mood measures that included the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (Rosenberg, 1965) NEO-FFI Neuroticism (Costa & McCrae, 1992), and the Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1979). After completing and returning the packet of questionnaires, participants were then given a booklet of experience sampling forms and a preprogrammed electronic organizer with an alarm function capable of being programmed to sound at a random time within a fixed interval. Participants were electronically signaled seven times a day between 8 A.M. and 10 P.M. at random

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