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Riding a wave of self-esteem: Perseverative tendencies as dispositional forces ☆

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Abstract

Traits, defined in terms of dispositional forces, should be more consequential to the extent that the person favors old, activated behaviors to new ones. On the basis of this idea, the current studies measured individual differences in perseveration, defined in terms of tendencies toward response facilitation (i.e., RT speedup) when consecutive trials of choice reaction time tasks require repeated (versus switched) responses. Using global self-esteem as the trait measure of interest, we predicted and found that correlations between self-esteem and relevant outcome measures were particularly strong among individuals high in perseverative tendencies and particularly weak among individuals low in perseverative tendencies. The findings, involving three studies and 208 participants, provide a mechanism by which traits produce trait-relevant outcomes. Specifically, such trait–outcome relations are particular to those who display a tendency to repeat past responses in their cognitive transactions with the environment.
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Introduction

Traits are often conceptualized as dispositional forces that create consistency in individuals' experiences and actions. Traits, in this view, carry the past into the present across the diverse circumstances of people's lives. This perspective has two limitations. First, the predictive value of global trait constructs can sometimes be surprisingly low (Mischel, 1968; Pervin, 1994). This suggests that, for some people at least, current contextual forces may often be more influential than dispositional ones. Second, the explanatory value of the trait construct is potentially limited. Trait constructs can be useful in summarizing the frequency or intensity of a given type of experience or behavior (e.g., Buss & Craik, 1983). However, these constructs sometimes fail to specify psychological mechanisms that are responsible for the consistencies that are observed (Cervone, 1997; Robinson, Vargas, & Crawford, 2003). Identifying and explaining trait-related consistencies therefore remains a central scientific challenge.

Traitedness and habit

During the era of the person–situation debate, investigators confronted the predictive limitation of trait measures by suggesting that some individuals might be more "traited" (or predictable) than others (Bem & Allen, 1974). The initial promise of this view was quelled by failures to replicate original findings (Mischel & Peake, 1983) as well as methodological criticisms (Tellegen, 1988). Although more recent work has revealed that there are significant moderators of trait-related consistency, such moderation effects are somewhat small in

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magnitude (Zuckerman et al., 1988). Perhaps more important, it is desirable to specify, from a process-oriented point of view, what makes individuals more versus less traited (Tellegen, 1988).

Traits can be defined as consistent tendencies to think, feel, and behave in a particular manner. At least two types of consistency are crucial to the trait construct: consistency across situations and over time (Mischel, 1968). Historically, efforts to explain cross-situational consistency have been somewhat successful. For example, we would expect people to be more consistent across situations to the extent that they appraise (Cervone, 1997, 2004) or categorize (Kelly, 1963; Robinson, 2004) diverse situations in a similar manner. The cognitive basis of temporal consistency has received less attention, which is to some extent surprising given James' (1890) sophisticated analysis of habits in the formation of traits. As people go about life, they develop habitual patterns of thought, experience, and action. The stronger the habit, the more likely past tendencies will be enacted in the present and future.

One fascinating implication of James' (1890) analysis of personality is that individuals are likely to differ in their tendencies to be habitual, inasmuch as habit is a developmental consequence of practice that varies across individuals (James, 1890). Some people may tend to favor old activated response tendencies, and disfavor new ones, in their interactions with the environment. On the other hand, other people may be quite proficient at adjusting their behavior in light of the current context. The first group of people should be more traited than the second. We reasoned that habitual response tendencies could be assessed implicitly and that such tendencies toward habit should moderate trait–outcome relations. Such predictions were examined within the context of individual differences in perseveration.

Individual differences in perseveration

Perseveration can be defined in terms of cognitive or behavioral inertia. The construct has appeared in at least three literatures. One literature has defined perseveration in terms of the repetition of past behaviors that are no longer being rewarded. Perseverative errors, for example as examined by the Wisconsin Card Sorting Test (Milner, 1995), are sensitive to frontal lobe damage, but not particularly useful in distinguishing among normal individuals (Pennington, Bennetto, McAleer, & Roberts, 1996).

However, other literatures have sought to define perseveration in terms of reaction times. In one older literature, Cattell (e.g., Cattell, 1935) and others (e.g., Pinard, 1932) sought to examine individual differences in perseveration through the use of reversal-type tasks (e.g., speed to write "qpqp" versus "qqqq" or "pppp"). Such early RT-based procedures for examining perseveration have recently appeared in a newer literature related to "task switching difficulties" (e.g., Rogers & Monsell, 1995). This recent research has suggested that perseveration is far from abnormal. Rather, perseveration can be defined as a "default" information processing tendency that can be overcome through the use of executive attentional control (Rogers & Monsell, 1995; Shallice & Burgess, 1993). The present research sought to measure perseveration through the use of reaction time tasks, which should be relatively useful in a normal personality context such as the present one (Pennington et al., 1996).

Overview of present studies

Participants in the present studies were asked to categorize consecutive stimuli within various choice reaction time tasks. When stimuli are selected at random, as they were here, there will be a 50% probability that two consecutive trials will involve the same response (e.g., 1 key-1 key) and a 50% probability that they will involve different responses (e.g., 1 key-9 key). A tendency to repeat prior, activated responses would translate into faster RTs when the same response is required twice in a row (versus when a response switch is required). To the extent that task performance generalizes to everyday life, we would expect those high in perseveration to operate in a more habitual and therefore more traited manner.

In all studies, our trait measure was global self-esteem, which is often viewed in terms of a top-down tendency toward positive or negative affect in appraisal, experience, and behavior (Brown, 1998). Global self-esteem correlates positively with extraversion and negatively with neuroticism (Watson, Suls, & Haig, 2002) and therefore has particular relevance to experiences of subjective well-being (Watson et al., 2002). Indeed, the correlation between self-esteem and measures of subjective well-being can be as high as $r = .5$–$.6$ (Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996), rendering this context a useful challenge for our contention that the relation might disappear among those low in perseverative tendencies. We measured the cognitive component of subjective well-being, namely life satisfaction, in all three studies. We measured the affective component of subjective well-being, namely mood states, in Studies 2 and 3. Studies 2 and 3 also measured experiences of general distress, which have frequently been linked to self-esteem in previous research (Brown, 1998). Finally, Study 1 examined whether the present interaction characterizes overt behaviors indicative of self-esteem, as judged by observers. In all studies, we hypothesized that self-esteem would predict the outcome measures better among those high in perseveration.

Study 1

Study 1 offered an initial opportunity to examine the correlation between self-esteem and life satisfaction,

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