



The mirror effect: Self-awareness alone increases suicide thought accessibility



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ABSTRACT

According to objective self-awareness theory, when individuals are in a state of self-awareness, they tend to compare themselves to their standards. Self-to-standard comparison often yields unfavorable results and can be assimilated to a failure, activating an escape motivation. Building on recent research on the link between failure and suicide thought accessibility, the present experiment tested the hypothesis that mirror exposure alone provokes an increase in suicide thought accessibility. Participants were exposed to their mirror reflection (or not) while completing a lexical decision task with suicide-related words. Self-to-standard discrepancy salience was manipulated by asking participants to list actual and ideal traits before versus after the lexical decision task. As predicted, mirror-exposed participants recognized suicide-related words quicker than those unexposed to their mirror image. Self-to-standard discrepancy salience did not moderate this effect. Discussion focuses on the role of the motivation to escape self-awareness in the availability of suicide-related ideas.

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1. Introduction

Self-awareness, the capacity for self-reflective thoughts (Carver & Scheier, 1981; Duval & Wicklund, 1972), is believed to play a major role in suicide. For instance, escape theory (Baumeister, 1990) suggests that aversive self-awareness is one of the most proximal causes of suicide attempts. In this framework, individuals who attempt suicide do not actually want to die, but see suicide as the only means to terminate the painful state of self-awareness that follows a failure blamed on the self. In this paper, we build on escape theory and research on the effects of self-awareness to derive and test the hypothesis that mirror exposure temporarily increases suicide-thought accessibility.

1.1. Self-awareness

The capacity for self-awareness is necessary for psychological well-being. It allows individuals to have a sense of continuity over time, which is at the very basis of identity (e.g., Morin, 2011). It is also necessary for action planning and execution, and more generally for self-regulation (Leary, 2004; Silvia & O'Brian, 2004). Indeed, if we did not evaluate the distance that separates us from our objectives, a process made possible by self-awareness, we would be unable to adjust our behavior in a way that allows us to approach those aims. Self-awareness also enables us to feel secondary emotions, some of which are positive, such as pride, and can thus contribute to maintaining self-esteem (Silvia & O'Brian, 2004). It can even facilitate

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creative achievement through self-evaluation and self-criticism (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Finally, by being able to take one's own thoughts and feelings as the object of attention, the individual also acquires the ability to imagine oneself at another's place, that is, the ability of perspective-taking, which is likely to facilitate interpersonal communication (Silvia & O'Brian, 2004).

Nevertheless, despite being necessary for adaptive functioning, self-awareness has its downside: it appears to be associated with a number of psychological disorders (Wells & Matthews, 1994), in particular with depression (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987). Even in populations that do not suffer from disorders, self-awareness is what makes individuals vulnerable to feelings of guilt and shame, for instance, and is more generally associated with negative affect (Fejfar & Hoyle, 2000; Mor & Winquist, 2002). Finally, self-awareness has been argued to be involved in alcohol consumption (Hull, 1981) and a number of other self-defeating behaviors, the most radical of which is suicide (Baumeister, 1990, 1991).

However, self-awareness is not a unified construct. Literature has distinguished private from public self-awareness (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975; Govern & Marsch, 2001). *Private* self-awareness refers to focusing on one's personal attributes: one's internal state (feelings, thoughts, sensations), one's memories, or one's personal standards. This is the construct that we are interested in here. In contrast, *public* self-awareness implies a focus on one's attributes that are presented to others, such as one's physical appearance or one's behavior as it relates to social norms and standards. We have chosen to focus on private self-awareness because associations between this construct on one side and negative self-evaluation and depression on the other side, have been consistently shown in past research (Ingram & Smith, 1984; Smith & Greenberg, 1981; Smith, Ingram, & Roth, 1985).

According to objective self-awareness theory (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Silvia & Duval, 2001), when in a state of self-awareness, individuals tend to compare themselves to their idealized selves or their personal standards. This theoretical assumption has been tested and demonstrated by Scheier and Carver (1983), in a series of four experiments. To manipulate self-awareness, these authors relied on the most commonly used manipulation: exposure to one's mirror reflection (Carver & Scheier, 1978; Geller & Shaver, 1976; Silvia & Gendolla, 2001). They have shown that mirror-exposed participants who were copying a complex geometrical figure looked at the model (i.e., the standard) more frequently than participants who were not exposed to a mirror (Study 1). Similarly, the higher was their dispositional private self-awareness, the more frequently participants looked at the model (Study 2). Other studies indicate that highly self-aware participants generally seem more motivated to see the average performance of their peers on a task that they have just completed than participants who were not highly self-aware (Scheier & Carver, 1983, Studies 3 and 4). The authors argued that participants look at the model (for the geometrical figure) and the average peer performance because they *compare* their own actual standing to the standard. Hence, these findings suggest that high self-awareness increases the tendency to compare the self to a relevant standard.

Because the actual self often falls short of ideals, self-awareness makes the discrepancies between the self and the standard particularly salient, and is therefore generally thought to be an aversive state (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Indeed, merely being in a state of self-awareness is sufficient to momentarily make self-evaluation more negative (Heine, Takemoto, Moskalkenko, Lasaleta, & Henrich, 2008; Ickes, Wicklund, & Ferris, 1973). In their studies, Ickes et al. manipulated self-awareness by exposing participants to a recording of their own voice (vs. exposing them to a recording of another person's voice or not exposing them to a voice at all) while they were completing a measure of actual-ideal self-discrepancy. The results showed that participants in the high self-awareness condition reported greater discrepancy between the actual and the ideal self, as compared to participants in the low self-awareness conditions. Furthermore, this increase in perceived discrepancy was due to lowered evaluations of the actual self, rather than heightened standards (i.e., higher scores on the ideal self measure). This suggests that a feeling of failure may be an integral part of the self-aware state.

1.2. Escaping the self

As self-awareness is most often an aversive state, individuals' first reaction is to try to avoid it (McDonald & Eilenfield, 1980; Morin & Everett, 1990). Consistent with this, research indicates that mere exposure to one's image in a mirror increases the appeal of certain forms of mental escape (Burriss & Lai, 2012). In this work, however, the accessibility or the appeal of suicide was not assessed. In what follows, we outline how recent research building on escape theory (Baumeister, 1990) provides ground for a hypothesis that incidental exposure to one's mirror image might suffice to increase the accessibility of the most radical means to escape the self: suicide.

According to escape theory, suicide is a way to escape self-awareness. The suicidal process begins by an important failure or disappointment, which makes salient a large discrepancy between the current and the desired state. When the discrepancy is blamed on the self, a state of aversive self-awareness is activated. It entails negative emotions, which the individual is motivated to attenuate or to suppress. Progressively, s/he reaches a state of cognitive deconstruction, characterized by low levels of awareness and meaningful thinking. This state makes radical solutions such as suicide seem more acceptable. Escape theory is mainly a theory of suicide attempts (Baumeister, 1990). However, recent research has sought to extend it from behavior to cognition.

Building on escape theory, Chatard and Selimbegović (2011) reasoned that when individuals realize that they fail in attaining an important standard, they are motivated to escape negative self-awareness, which may lead suicide-related thoughts to become more accessible. Previous research has shown that individuals who fail are motivated to avoid self-awareness (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Moskalkenko & Heine, 2003). Furthermore, research suggests that when individuals are motivated to attain a given goal, relevant means to attain this goal (especially the most efficient one) automatically

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