



# Ruminative self-focus and autobiographical memory

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## Abstract

Many studies have shown a positive relationship between elevated dispositional self-focus and emotional disorder. Trapnell and Campbell (1999) proposed that this relationship was only true for ruminative forms of self-focus, reflective self-focus being associated with psychological health. The present study aimed: (1) to examine the replicability of Trapnell and Campbell's (1999) questionnaire-based differentiation of reflective and ruminative dispositional self-focus; (2) to see whether reflection and rumination could also be differentiated using measures of autobiographical memory; (3) to see whether such memory measures could elucidate mechanisms underlying different forms of dispositional self-focus. 130 volunteers retrieved autobiographical memories to neutral cue words and completed questionnaires. Questionnaires differentiated reflection and rumination: reflection correlated with openness to experience, whereas rumination correlated with neuroticism, replicating previous findings that it is specifically ruminative self-focus that is maladaptive. Memory measures also differentiated reflection and rumination: reflection was unrelated to the affective qualities of memories, whereas rumination correlated with measures of the happiness, unhappiness and at-oneness of memories. Dispositional ruminative self-focus, like neuroticism, was specifically related to increased accessibility of memories of events where individuals felt "not at all at-one with things". This style of memory access could underpin dispositional ruminative self-focus, which is closely linked to neuroticism. © 2003 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

Systematic research in self-focus has its origins in Duval and Wicklund's (1972) theory of objective self-awareness. This theory included two core assumptions. First, attention can be directed either outward to the environment or inward to the self. Second, when attention is directed

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inward to the self (the state Duval and Wicklund termed objective self-awareness), it is to the self as a conceptual object, and a comparison is instigated in which the self (as an object) is evaluated against a standard. It was assumed that this comparison normally reveals discrepancies between standards and self, and that these discrepancies generate negative affect.

Research arising from Duval and Wicklund's (1972) theory (reviewed by Carver & Scheier, 1982, 1990; Gibbons, 1990; Ingram, 1990; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987) suggests that individuals reliably differ from each other in objective self-awareness, as indicated by their reported habitual tendencies to focus on self as opposed to environment. Most of these studies have used Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975) private self-consciousness scale (PrSC) as a questionnaire measure of the tendency to focus on one's inner feelings, thoughts and physical sensations. Reviews of this literature (e.g. Ingram, 1990) have concluded that a heightened tendency to focus attention on the self, as measured by PrSC, is consistently associated with negative affect and with emotional disorders such as depression.

Recently, a more complex picture of the relationship between trait self-focus and negative affect has emerged. For example, Trapnell and Campbell (1999) pointed out that the association of heightened self-focus with psychological disorder appears to contradict long established assumptions that self-awareness increases self-knowledge, and that self-knowledge, in turn, facilitates psychological adjustment. Trapnell and Campbell called this apparent contradiction the self-absorption paradox. As a resolution of this paradox, they suggested that the items of the PrSC are motivationally ambiguous, failing to differentiate between neurotic motives for attending to the self (e.g. anxiety) and philosophical or epistemic motives (e.g. curiosity). The self-absorption paradox is resolved, Trapnell and Campbell suggested, once it is recognized that only epistemically motivated self-attention leads to adaptive self-knowledge. Neurotically motivated self-attention, by contrast, is associated with psychological distress.

To support their suggestions, Trapnell and Campbell (1999) developed questionnaire measures to differentiate neurotically motivated self-focus (*ruminative*) from intellectual self-attentiveness (*reflective*). Ruminative items included, for example, "I always seem to be rehashing in my mind recent things I've said or done", whereas reflective items included, for example, "I love analysing why I do things". Trapnell and Campbell found that their ruminative measure correlated uniquely and substantially only with the neuroticism factor of the Five Factor Model of personality (FFM) (Digman, 1990). Conversely, their reflective measure correlated uniquely and substantially only with the openness to experience factor of the FFM. These findings support the fractionation of private self-consciousness into at least two, motivationally distinct, forms of self-attention, only one of which, ruminative self-focus, is associated with negative affectivity.

A recent meta-analysis lent further support to the suggestion that it is specifically ruminative private self-focus that is associated with negative affect. Mor and Winquist (2002), synthesised 226 effect sizes reflecting the relation between self-focused attention and depression, anxiety and negative mood. Overall, self-focus was associated with negative affect, but this association was stronger for ruminative forms of self-focus than for non-ruminative self-focus.

The present study sought to replicate and extend Trapnell and Campbell's (1999) finding of differential relationships of reflection and rumination with neuroticism. In particular, it sought to extend investigation of the distinction between trait reflective self-focus and trait ruminative self-focus into their relationships with autobiographical memory. There are several reasons such an investigation is of interest. First, it offers an opportunity to examine the generalisability to non-

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