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Brief Report

Action-construal levels and perceived conflict among ongoing goals: Implications for positive affect

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ABSTRACT

The present work tested whether increases in level of action construal would relate to perceiving greater concordance among one's ongoing goals, thereby facilitating positive affect. In two studies, construing action abstractly was found to relate to experiencing positive affect, independent of self-esteem, perceiving meaning in life, and focusing on desirable goal outcomes. Increased across-goal concordance helped explain the relationship between levels of action construal and of positive affect. The findings thus appear consistent with the proposal that construing action abstractly promotes perceiving individual, specific goals and standards as related to a broader, coherent construal of one's self-regulatory efforts, thereby promoting positive affect and sustaining motivational intensity. Further implications for achievement, affect, and social judgment are considered.

1. Introduction

As suggested in research on decision making (Poynor & Haws, 2009), attitudes (Elliot & Devine, 1994), and stress (Segerstrom, 2001), conflicts among goal pursuits can strongly impact subjective and objective indicators of well-being. Holding ongoing goals that are antagonistic toward one another (e.g., "being fair" but also "dominating"), for example, is associated with physical symptoms of poor health (Emmons & King, 1988). Given that everyday life typically compels simultaneous pursuit of multiple ongoing goals, it is important to understand how individuals come to perceive their goals as discordant or concordant with one another. Toward this end, the present research examined affective implications of individual differences in level of action construal, as described next.

Vallacher and Wegner (1989) showed that people differ in their tendencies to view action in high-level, abstract terms relative to low-level, concrete terms. Whereas one person might construe "paying the rent" as "writing a check" (a low-level representation, describing how an action is performed), for example, another person might construe the same action as "maintaining a place to live" (a high-level representation, describing why an action is performed). Individual differences in level of action construal relate to variability in self-regulatory processes including action initiation (Dewitte & Lens, 2000), feedback-seeking (Freitas, Salovey, & Liberman, 2001), and compulsivity (Belayachi & Van der Linden, 2009). Moreover, following Trope and Liberman's (2003) theory that increases in psychological distance cause increases in level of action construal, experimental work shows that construal levels impact social-cognitive phenomena ranging from self-control (Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006) and person perception (Nussbaum, Trope, & Liberman, 2003) to political-candidate evaluation (Freitas, Langsam, Clark, & Moeller, 2008) and many other aspects of decision making (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). Most relevant to the present investigation, people form broader action categories for temporally distal than proximal events (Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002). Further suggesting a relation between level of action construal and breadth of action-category representations, individuals construing action abstractly appear particularly likely to view themselves as sharing goals with diverse others (Levy, Freitas, & Salovey, 2002).

By broadening action representations, increases in level of action construal may relate to increases in perceived concordance among one's goals. Consider, for example, different ongoing goals one might have of "excelling at work" and of "avoiding unhealthy foods." On their surface, these goals are quite distinct from one another, given their different content domains as well as their different strategic emphases (Higgins, 1997). When construed in high-level terms, however, both goals can be related to broader aims one may hold of exercising self-discipline, of achieving competence, or of being generally successful in one's endeavors. To the extent that one construes one's actions in terms of their relatively abstract purposes, then, one may be more likely to perceive one's different life endeavors as related coherently to one another, thereby promoting the perception that one's efforts towards those endeavors sustain rather than conflict with one another, which should promote positive affective experience.

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2. Study 1

To test the above reasoning, we first sought evidence of meaningful covariation between action construal and affective experience. We assessed level of action construal via Vallacher and Wegner's (1989) Behavior Identification Form (BIF), which, in a forced-choice format, asks respondents to re-label actions (e.g., "ringing a doorbell") in either low-level terms (e.g., "moving your finger," coded 1 in the present work) or high-level terms ("seeing if someone's home," coded 2 in the present work). We assessed affective experiences via Watson, Clark, and Tellegen's (1988) positive and negative affect schedule (PANAS), which measures positive affect (PA) and negative affect (NA). The high-arousal positive affect (e.g., "enthusiasm") measured by the PA subscale appears well-suited to testing our proposal that high-level action construals promote construing greater concordance among one's goals, thereby promoting positive affect and sustaining motivational intensity.

We also sought to address several alterative explanations for our anticipated results. Action identification theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987) suggests that individuals often adopt low-level action construals in response to action failures. As envisioned by Vallacher and Wegner (1989, p. 669), "the low-level agent can be looked on as a chronic klutz, someone who commonly makes action errors and so must keep focusing on the details of action." From this perspective, variability in self-esteem (reflecting variability in self-perceived performance efficacy), rather than variability in perceived concordance among one's goals (as presently proposed), could be hypothesized to explain any relation found between level of action construal and positive affect. Accordingly, in two separate samples potentially affording direct replication, we assessed and controlled statistically for well-validated measures of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979) and state self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). Given its focus on effective performance (e.g., "I feel frustrated or rattled about my performance"), the latter of those two measures appears well-suited to evaluating the possibility that level of action construal relates to positive affect solely as a result of variability in self-perceived performance efficacy.

Another alternative concerns the broader meaning individuals extract from their lives. As Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler (2006) have demonstrated, PA relates positively to one's perceived presence of meaning in life but not to one's experience of searching for meaning in life. Because construing action abstractly entails extracting meaning from behavior, BIF plausibly could relate to either of those two variables. Thus, it is possible that satisfaction deriving from presence of meaning in life, rather than from the presently proposed mediating processes, accounts for the anticipated relation between BIF and PA. To evaluate this possibility, in an additional sample, the present work assessed and controlled statistically for perceived presence of and search for meaning in life.

2.1. Methods

In three separate data collections, 322 undergraduates (132 males), aged 16–48 ($M = 18.80$), 358 undergraduates (218 males), aged 16–48 ($M = 18.73$), and 186 undergraduates (79 males), aged 17–36 ($M = 20.03$), composed Samples 1, 2, and 3, respectively. In Samples 1 and 2, all participants completed, in randomly varying orders, Vallacher and Wegner's (1989) 25-item BIF ($M = 1.56$, $SD = 0.22$, $\alpha = .84$; and $M = 1.54$, $SD = 0.23$, $\alpha = .85$, respectively), Watson et al's (1988) 20-item PANAS, which includes 10-item measures of PA ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.82$, $\alpha = .88$; and $M = 2.77$, $SD = 0.85$, $\alpha = .90$, respectively), and NA ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 0.62$, $\alpha = .86$; and $M = 1.67$, $SD = 0.63$, $\alpha = .86$), Rosenberg's (1979) 10-item measure of self-esteem ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.48$, $\alpha = .87$; and $M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.47$, $\alpha = .85$, respectively), and Heatherton and Polivy's (1991) 20-item measure of state self-esteem ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.64$, $\alpha = .92$; and $M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.61$, $\alpha = .90$, respectively). In Sample 3, participants completed, in randomly varying orders, the BIF ($M = 1.61$, $SD = 0.19$, $\alpha = .80$) and PANAS (for PA, $M = 2.65$, $SD = 0.73$, $\alpha = .85$; for NA, $M = 1.67$, $SD = 0.64$, $\alpha = .83$) scales described above, Steger et al.'s (2006) 5-item scales assessing search for (e.g., "I am always looking to find my life's purpose" $M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.49$, $\alpha = .92$) and presence of meaning in life (e.g., "I understand my life's meaning"; $M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.18$, $\alpha = .85$), and measures of personal standards and political-candidate evaluation not discussed further in this report.

2.2. Results and discussion

In Sample 1, BIF correlated significantly with PA ($r = .21$, $p < .001$) but not NA ($r = -.08$, n.s.), self-esteem ($r = .10$, n.s.), or state self-esteem ($r = .09$, n.s.). In Sample 2, BIF again correlated significantly with PA ($r = .25$, $p < .0001$) but not NA ($r = .04$, n.s.), self-esteem ($r = .04$, n.s.), or state self-esteem ($r = .04$, n.s.). Replicating past work (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001), PA correlated positively with self-esteem and state self-esteem in Sample 1 ($r = .44$ and $r = .40$, respectively), and Sample 2 ($r = .42$ and $r = .41$, respectively; all $ps < .0001$). Controlling for self-esteem, state self-esteem, and NA in simultaneous regressions did not appreciably attenuate BIF's relation to PA in Sample 1 ($b = .64$, $se = .19$, $\beta = .17$, $t(317) = 3.43$, $p < .001$) or Sample 2 ($b = .82$, $se = .17$, $\beta = .22$, $t(353) = 4.79$, $p < .0001$). In Sample 3, BIF correlated significantly with PA ($r = .25$, $p < .001$), but not NA ($r = .05$, n.s.), presence of ($r = .07$, n.s.), or search for meaning in life ($r = .07$, n.s.). Replicating past work (Steger et al., 2006), PA correlated significantly with presence of ($r = .36$, $p < .0001$) but not search for meaning in life ($r = .02$, n.s.). Controlling simultaneously for NA, presence of and search for meaning in life did not appreciably attenuate BIF's relation to PA, $b = .82$, $se = .25$, $\beta = .22$, $t(181) = 3.22$, $p < .002$. In summary, data from three independent samples documented an association between positive affect and level of action construal, which does not appear dependent on state or trait self-esteem or on reported presence of or search for meaning in life.

3. Study 2

Having addressed several alternatives, we next sought more direct evidence of the process by which level of action construal relates to positive affect. Besides again assessing individual differences in those two constructs, the present study assessed the extent to which participants experienced their ongoing goals as concordant or discordant with one another. Subjective experiences of goal pursuit have proved amenable to study via the *personal strivings* approach (for review, see Emmons, 1996), which examines individuals' perceived underlying motivations for their goals and perceived conflicts among their goals. Of greatest relevance here, the latter of those two phenomena is assessed via a matrix in which participants rate the facilitative vs. inhibitory impact of each of their goal pursuits on each of their other goal pursuits, yielding a single summary score reflecting the amount of concordance each participant perceives across all of his or her ongoing goals (Emmons & King, 1988). That methodology appears well-suited to testing our mediational hypothesis that abstract action construals facilitate positive affect by promoting perceived

Table 1
Correlations among level of action construal (assessed via Vallacher & Wegner's (1989), behavior identification form); participant ratings of the importance of their goals, of how often they thought of their goals, and of how much happiness they associated with their goals; positive and negative affect (assessed via Watson et al.'s (1988), positive and negative affect schedule); and goal concordance (assessed via Emmons and King's (1988), goal-conflict matrix).

	Goal importance	Goal often	Goal happiness	Positive affect	Negative affect	Goal concordance
Level of action construal	.11	.18†	.18†	.28**	.10	.32**
Goal importance	–	.57***	.57***	.38**	.26*	.27*
Goal often		–	.54***	.33**	.08	.14
Goal happiness			–	.21*	.10	.34**
Positive affect				–	.07	.29**
Negative affect					–	−.09

Note: Due to missing values, *Ns* ranged between 90 and 91.
† $p < .10$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .0001$.

concordance among one's ongoing goal pursuits.[1] Finally, because high-level action construals facilitate focusing on desired action outcomes rather than on action means (Liberman & Trope, 1998), it is possible that construing action abstractly promotes positive affect partly through sustaining a focus on affectively pleasant consequences of goal pursuit. To evaluate this alternative possibility, we also assessed participants' ratings of the importance of their goals, of their chronic focus on their goals, and of the affective positivity of their goals.

3.1. Methods

Ninety-one undergraduates (25 males), aged 18–31 ($M = 20.18$), participated. Participants first completed, in randomly varying orders, the BIF ($M = 1.57$, $SD = 0.22$, $\alpha = .80$) and PANAS (for PA, $M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.85$, $\alpha = .85$; for NA, $M = 1.64$, $SD = 0.53$, $\alpha = .83$) scales described above. Participants next completed an adaptation of Emmons and King's (1988) goal-conflict measure. Participants initiated this task by listing ten ongoing personal goals, defined as "goals," "purposes," and "strivings," and illustrated by several examples. Participants next used a 5-point scale (0 = "not at all"; 4 = "extremely") to rate, for each of the ten goals, (a) "how important each striving is to you" ($M = 3.20$; $SD = 0.48$; $\alpha = .76$); (b) "how often you have thought of each striving in the last week" ($M = 2.96$; $SD = 0.57$; $\alpha = .77$); and (c) "how much happiness you feel (or will feel) when you are successful in each striving" ($M = 3.45$; $SD = 0.45$; $\alpha = .77$). Participants lastly completed the goal-conflict matrix by indicating, for all possible combinations of all 10 goals, the extent to which "succeeding in [each] striving" has "a very helpful effect" (+2), "a somewhat helpful effect" (+1), "no effect" (0), "a somewhat harmful effect" (−1), or "a very harmful effect" (−2) on each other striving. The resulting maximum of 90 ratings per participant were averaged into an index of overall perceived concordance among ongoing goals ($M = 0.65$; $SD = 0.45$; $\alpha = .94$).

3.2. Results and discussion

As reported in Table 1, BIF, PA and goal concordance correlated significantly with one another, whereas the goal-focus variables related marginally to BIF and significantly to PA and to goal concordance. To clarify the nature of these relationships, we next report two series of hierarchical regressions. The first series tested whether taking account of the goal-focus variables would attenuate the relation between BIF and PA. Controlling for NA, the effect of BIF on PA was $b = 1.11$, $se = .40$, $\beta = .28$, $t(87) = 2.75$, $p < .01$. When next adding predictor terms representing participants' ratings of how often they thought of their goals, how much happiness they associated with their goals, and the importance of their goals, the effect of BIF remained significant, $b = 0.96$, $se = .39$, $\beta = .25$, $t(84) = 2.49$, $p < .02$; of the goal-focus variables, goal importance alone accounted for a significant proportion of unique variance in PA, $b = 0.60$, $se = .23$, $\beta = .34$, $t(84) = 2.62$, $p < .02$. The second series of regressions tested whether taking account of goal concordance would attenuate the relation between BIF and PA. Controlling for NA, the effect of BIF on PA was $b = 1.09$, $se = .40$, $\beta = .28$, $t(88) = 2.71$, $p < .01$.[2] When next adding goal concordance as a predictor, the effect of BIF was reduced to $b = 0.78$, $se = .41$, $\beta = .20$, $t(87) = 1.88$, $p = .0635$, and goal concordance accounted for a significant proportion of unique variance in PA, $b = 0.44$, $se = .20$, $\beta = .24$, $t(87) = 2.23$, $p < .05$. Shrout and Bolger's (2002) re-sampling method of assessing statistical mediation, accomplished via Preacher and Hayes' (2008) bootstrapping algorithm (with N of samples = 1000), established a significant ($p < .05$, two-tailed) indirect effect ($b = 0.34$) of BIF on PA through goal concordance, with a .95 confidence interval placing the size of the indirect effect between $b = 0.06$ and $b = 0.74$. Accordingly, the relation between positive affect and level of action construal appears to depend to a significant degree on the concordance one perceives across one's ongoing goals, rather than on one's focus on the goals themselves. Finally, it is important to note that goal concordance accounted for 28.44% of the total effect of BIF on PA, suggesting that this relationship also may reflect additional underlying mechanisms, such as direct impacts of affective experience on level of action construal (Beukeboom & Semin, 2005).

4. General discussion

Independent of one's self-esteem, one's perceived meaning in life, and one's focus on one's goals, construing action abstractly

[1] Previous work has not always found significant relations between goal concordance and PA (Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). In our view, those results partly may reflect the earlier work's joint focuses on participants' perceptions not only of concordance among their goal pursuits but also of their reasons for goal pursuit. Just before making goal-concordance judgments, participants in the earlier work considered the extent to which they pursued their goals for different reasons, such as to achieve relatedness with others or to achieve competence. Deliberating in this way on the reasons for one's actions can impact one's level of action construal (Freitas, Gollwitzer, & Trope, 2004), which we presently hypothesize to impact perceived goal concordance. Moreover, categorizing goals in terms of their motivational significance conceivably could impact their perceived interrelations, with goals categorized as serving the same motivational function potentially perceived as most highly concordant with one another (cf. Shah & Kruglanski, 2000). For these reasons, participants in Study 2 were not instructed to reflect on the motivational functions of their goals.

[2] This result differs slightly from the analogous result given above (in the regression series including goal-focus variables as predictors) because one participant did not provide responses to any goal-focus measures and thus could not be included in the above analyses (which consequently also had 1 fewer *df*).

was found to relate to experiencing positive affect. Mediational analyses were consistent with the proposal that this relationship reflects a positive impact of level of action construal on perceiving concordance among one's ongoing goals, such that individual, specific goals appear related to a broader, coherent construal of one's self-regulatory efforts. Together with evidence that high-level action construals promote self-control (Fujita et al., 2006), the present findings suggest that high-level action construals may facilitate successful goal achievement partly through facilitating a sense of consonance among one's behaviors, which has been theorized to promote taking decisive action (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2008).

The current findings also may suggest implications for whether or not people detect conflicts between their behaviors, attitudes, and values. Construing action abstractly, as a function of general self-regulatory mindsets (Freitas et al., 2004), has been shown to facilitate organizing one's behaviors in relation to one's important values (Torelli & Kaikati, 2009). Given the present findings, however, it may be that high-level action construals also promote broader representations of values themselves, such that a wider array of actions can appear concordant with them. Thus, whereas high-level action construals may increase the motivational and affective intensity of detecting dissonance between one's behaviors and one's values and/or attitudes, high-level action construals also may decrease the likelihood of detecting such dissonance. We look forward to future work testing these and other implications of the presently reported relation between construing action abstractly and perceiving concordance among one's ongoing endeavors.

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