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The positivity effect in temporal comparisons

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ABSTRACT

The study concerns the positivity effect in temporal comparisons involving the self (one's view of the self in the past versus present versus future). We examined whether teenagers would perceive personal progress from the past to the future and from the present to the future. Forty eight participants (35 women) aged between 17 and 18 ($M = 17.51$, $SD = 0.51$) evaluated a set of 18 characteristics (9 positive and 9 negative). The set of traits included characteristics from the fundamental dimensions of social judgment (agency and communion) and from the dimension of morality. All participants evaluated each trait three times. They indicated the degree to which the traits described them 3 years ago, then the degree to which the traits describe them now, and the degree to which the traits will describe them in 3 years. Answers were given using a 7-point scale with endpoints of 1 (*not at all*), through 4 (*moderately*) to 7 (*extremely so*). The results confirmed most of our predictions and they were consistent with the theory of temporal self-appraisal [11]. In the case of positive traits on each dimension participants rated their present selves higher than their past selves, and they also rated their future selves higher than their present selves. In the case of negative traits the positivity effect occurred only for the changes that participants predicted would occur from the present to the future. More specifically, participants' ratings of their future selves were lower than their ratings of their present selves. The results indicate that teenagers tend to rate themselves to be better and better over time (from the past to the future) and that they are particularly optimistic about their future changes.

Keywords: time perspective, temporal comparisons, agency, communion, morality

1. INTRODUCTION

The study concerns the positivity effect in self-evaluation, which is defined as the tendency for people to see themselves more positively than might be expected. The purpose of this study was to examine teenagers' conceptions of changes in temporal comparisons involving the self (one's view of the self in the past versus present versus future). According to temporal self-appraisal theory [11] we expected teenagers to rate themselves to be better and better over time (from the past to the future).

Self-evaluation is commonly driven by a motive to protect and enhance positive self-regard [7]. One way to maintain or enhance a positive self-view is by comparing oneself to less fortunate others. This is called downward social comparison, and it can increase self-esteem and enhance subjective well-being [9]. One of the best means people use to feel better about themselves is to compare themselves with an average person [14]. An established body of research indicate that people tend to see themselves as better than average on various dimensions [8]. For example, people usually rate themselves as above average on positive characteristics (e.g., friendliness, honesty) and as below average on negative characteristics (e.g. arrogance, irresponsibility) [2]. This better-than-average effect (BTA) [2] is one of the most replicated phenomena from the literature on social comparison [3].

People compare themselves not only to other people. They can also compare themselves to their past standing (past selves) and perhaps also to their future standing (future selves) [10]. It has been observed that people benefit most from downward comparison when the standard of comparison (the object to whom people compare themselves) is close or similar to them [11]. When it is difficult to find a person who is similar on a relevant dimension the past self might be the most useful referent point for comparison with the current self. In fact, temporal comparisons can be much easier to make than social comparison because information about past standing is usually readily accessible and pertinent to current evaluation.

Research shows that people tend to derogate their past selves if it makes them feel better about their current selves [11]. In such cases, they evaluate their present selves as better than their past selves. These downward temporal comparisons have an additional benefit. By comparing their present self with their "worse" past self people see themselves as improving over time [12]. Whether this perception of improvement from the past to the present is correct (some abilities and skills increase with age and experience) or illusory it allows people to feel good about their current standing and can lead to increased well-being and present life satisfaction [11,12].

Although the perceived improvement in temporal comparisons with the past self is quite well documented it is less clear whether such perceived improvements extend into future. Because the future self is not well known, comparison with one's future standing seems to be rare. Some research suggests that people do not appreciate possible future changes and they do not expect their personalities to change in the future [5], whereas other research indicates that people tend to expect positive changes in their future standing [4,6].

It is possible that young adults in particular may anticipate continued improvements in their future lives [6].

According to the theory of temporal self-appraisal we can expect that in addition to comparing the present self with the past self, people can compare their current selves with expected future selves [10]. In this study we assumed that improvement is especially valuable

for teenagers, and we examined the perceived improvement using the fundamental dimensions of social judgment (agency and communion) proposed by Abele and Wojciszke [1] and the dimension of morality. Based on self-appraisal theory we predicted that teenagers will perceive personal progress from the past to the future and from the present to the future. We predicted that they would rate themselves to be better now than they were in the past and that they would be better in the future than they are now in terms of traits that refer to agency, communion, and morality.

2. METHOD

Participants were 48 high school students (35 women and 13 men) aged between 17 and 18 ($M = 17.51$, $SD = 0.51$). They were all in the second year of a three year high school program.

Participants evaluated a set of 18 characteristics (9 positive and 9 negative). The list included traits from the fundamental dimensions of social judgment: agency (ambitious, effective, intelligent, passive, insecure, inefficient), communion (cooperating, compassionate, helpful, antisocial, hostile, mean) and morality (honest, righteous, truthful, immoral, merciless, and cruel) [13].

All participants rated themselves on each trait regarding the three different time perspectives: the past (3 years ago - when they were in the middle school), the present standing, and the future (in 3 years - when they will be in a college). They answered the question: "Please, try to indicate the degree to which the following traits describe you now, to what degree they described you 3 years ago, and to what degree you suppose these traits will describe you in 3 years". Answers were given using a 7-point scale with endpoints of 1 (*not at all*), through 4 (*moderately*) to 7 (*extremely so*).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We expected a positivity effect in temporal self-evaluation on three dimensions: agency, communion, and morality. We predicted that participants would rate themselves higher and higher over time (from the past to the present and from the present to the future) on positive traits and lower and lower over time on negative traits. We computed mean ratings for each participant for the six trait categories: positive vs. negative and agency vs. communion vs. morality. These means of ratings were then analyzed with a one-way ANOVA with time perspective (past vs. present vs. future) as within-subjects factor.

As can be seen from Table 1, the results confirmed most of our predictions. In the case of positive traits on each dimension participants rated their present selves higher than their past selves and they also rated their future selves higher than their present selves. Only the difference between mean ratings for present self vs. future self in the case of communion dimension was not statistically significant. This general pattern of means in the case of positive traits is consistent with the theory of temporal self-appraisal [11], and it indicates that participants tend to perceive an improvement over time, from the past to present and from the present to the future as well.

The positivity effect occurred also for negative traits but only in the case of ratings of present self vs. future self. On each dimension participants' ratings for future selves were lower than their ratings for present selves. This means that consistent with the theory of temporal self-appraisal participants predicted to be better in the future than they are currently. The results were not as consistent in the case of differences between past self vs. present self. In the case of agency and communion dimensions the differences were not significant, whereas in the case of morality dimension the ratings for present self were on average higher than the ratings for past self.

The last result suggests that in terms of negative traits from the morality dimension participants saw themselves to be "worse" now than they were in the past. This result may be explained by the fact that high school students are often criticized for behaviors that may happen often at that age (e.g., first sexual contacts, reduced of obedience of parents, attempts to be independent expressed by insubordination). They may simply incorporate social critiques of them into their current self-view. These results may represent the fact that it is particularly difficult moment in the personal and social development. Interestingly however, participants were quite optimistic about their future personal development, and they predicted that they would be "better" on all dimensions including the morality dimension.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for self-evaluation by condition and significance tests (one-way ANOVA, $df = 2, 46$) of differences between means. Means sharing same subscripts in the same row do not differ at $p < .05$.

Traits' category	Time perspective			Test of significance		
	Past <i>M (SD)</i>	Present <i>M (SD)</i>	Future <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Positive traits						
Agency	4.70 (1.10) _a	5.08 (0,91) _b	5.76 (0,87) _c	24.37	<.001	0.51
Communion	4.93 (1.29) _a	5.35 (1,06) _b	5.46 (1,14) _b	7.37	=.002	0.24
Morality	4.91 (1.11) _a	5.21 (0,97) _b	5.54 (0,92) _c	13.73	<.001	0.37
Negative traits						
Agency	3.16 (1.06) _a	2.93 (0,90) _a	2.58 (1,10) _b	4.71	=.014	0.17
Communion	2.40 (1.04) _{ab}	2.54 (1,20) _a	2.29 (1,28) _b	3.78	=.030	0.14
Morality	2.11 (1.13) _a	2.42 (1,36) _b	2.04 (1,10) _a	6.99	=.002	0.23

4. CONCLUSIONS

In the current paper we demonstrated teenagers' tendency to rate themselves to be better and better over time (from the past to the future) on three dimensions: agency, communion, and morality. Consistently with the temporal self-appraisal theory [11] teenagers

believed that they possess positive traits currently more than they possessed them 3 years ago and they expected to possess these traits even more in their future (in 3 years). In terms of negative traits although teenagers did not perceived past changes they still expected to better in the future and they expected to possess negative traits less than they possess them currently.

We believe that the current results are important because they replicate previous findings on temporal comparison in a sample different from those that have been studied previously using different methods that have been used in the past. More important, the present results add to research about temporal comparison by suggesting that temporal comparisons may vary across individuals of different ages. If the present logic holds, it may be useful to determine if temporal comparison varies as a function of other characteristics such as educational level or mental health status.

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