Individuality, Relatedness, Or None of the Above? How Thinking Concretely Can Impair the Activation of Self-Relevant Goals

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This research shows the importance of mindsets as cognitive processes that can interact with people’s self-representations and impact their interpretations of consumer situations. In four experiments, we show that individuals are more likely to bring to mind goals linked to a primed self-concept when they are in an abstract mindset (compared to a concrete mindset). Participants in an abstract mindset who are primed with independence bring to mind more independence goals whereas those primed with interdependence bring to mind more relatedness goals. In contrast, participants in a concrete mindset focus on concrete experiences from the situation regardless of self-concept priming.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People often have two different perceptions of their relationship to others. That is, one may have a conception of oneself as either as separate from other persons (i.e., an independent self-concept) or as connected to others (i.e., an interdependent self-concept, Markus and Kitayama 1991). These two self-concepts are associated with distinct knowledge representations that can coexist in memory and that can be brought to mind (i.e., primed) at different times, depending on the situation (Trafimow, Triandis, and Goto 1991). Abundant research has shown how these alternative self-concepts affect persuasion (e.g., Agrawal and Maheswaran 2005), judgments (e.g., Mandel 2003), and choices (e.g., Briley, Morris, and Simonson 2000). Frequently, researchers rely on a motivational explanation for their findings arguing that the activation of the distinct motivations associated with the temporary accessibility of these two self-concepts (i.e., independence vs. relatedness, Markus and Kitayama 1991) lead individuals to make judgments and take actions instrumental for these motivations (see Kim and Drolet 2003; Torelli 2006). However, recent research that shows that a temporarily accessible self-concept can be more likely to influence judgments under certain conditions (see Agrawal and Maheswaran 2005; Torelli 2006) suggests that there are situations that facilitate (or inhibit) the activation of the high-level motivations associated with a given self-concept. In this research, we study the impact of people’s mindsets on the activation of the distinct motivations associated with the temporary accessibility of an independent and an interdependent self-concept.

Mindsets are general cognitive orientations that facilitate a given task (Gollwitzer 1996) and that can have an impact on motivation-related variables (Freitas, Gollwitzer, and Trope 2004). In particular, abstract and concrete mindsets have been found to affect the types of goals one attends to in a situation (Freitas et al. 2004). An abstract mindset facilitates individuals’ focus on the high-level, abstract aims of a situation, whereas a concrete mindset facilitates the focus on the low-level, concrete aspects and experiences of the same situation. As cognitive operations, mindsets are subject to activation (Bargh and Chartrand 2000). Once activated, there is increased likelihood that these operations will be used in upcoming tasks to interpret new information (Freitas et al. 2004; Higgins 1996). Thus, the activation of a particular mindset (i.e., mindset priming) can affect the level of abstraction at which an individual constructs a situation in a subsequent task.

Priming a given self-concept can increase both its accessibility in memory and that of its associated motivations and cognitions (Trafimow et al. 1991). A vital part of these activated mental representations are goals-means associations that can guide individual’s future behavior (Markus and Nurius 1986). These goals-means associations are conceptualized as goal hierarchies that include a fundamental goal, close to the core sense of self, at the top of the hierarchy that is served by a larger number of concrete activities, or means (Carver 1996; Shah, Kruglanski, and Friedman 2003). Thus, priming independent or interdependent self-concepts can bring to mind distinct goal hierarchies with goals of independence and competition at the top of the hierarchy (as in the case of the independent self-concept), or with overarching goals of relatedness to others (for the interdependent self-concept).

Distinct goal hierarchies brought to mind by a temporarily accessible self-concept would make more likely the activation of their corresponding high-level goals when individuals are in an abstract mindset. In this context, the more abstract goal activated by a higher-level identity would be upper in the goal hierarchy (Carver and Scheier 1999) and closer to the channeling out of fundamental, self-relevant motivations (Levy, Freitas, and Salovey 2002; McClelland, Koestner, and Weinberger 1989). In contrast, individuals in a concrete mindset would focus on goals at the lower-level of the hierarchy and/or concrete experiences from the situation, which would take them away from bringing to mind high-level goals linked to the self, regardless of the accessible self-concept. We then hypothesize the following:

**H1**: Individual’s mindset would moderate the goals brought to mind after being primed with a given self-concept:

**H1a**: Upon the activation of an abstract mindset, individuals primed with independence (interdependence) would be more likely to bring to mind independence (relatedness) goals than their counterparts primed with interdependence (independence).

**H1b**: Upon the activation of a concrete mindset, individuals primed with independence and interdependence would focus on concrete goals, and they would not differ in terms of the independence and relatedness goals they bring to mind.

Four experiments provided empirical support for these hypotheses using varied operationalizations of goal activation. In experiment 1, participants listed their thoughts related to performing specific tasks. In experiment 2, we assessed the goals participants spontaneously projected onto a hypothetical consumer. In experiment 3, participants made inferences about the traits of a hypothetical user of a product. Finally, in experiment 4, we assessed the subordination of feasibility to desirability information. Overall, the findings support the notion that priming one’s interdependent self activates a motivation to relate to others and priming one’s independent self activates a motivation to be independent and seek personal achievements. However, these motivations are more likely to be brought to mind when individuals are in an abstract mindset. When individuals are in a concrete mindset, they are more likely to focus on concrete processes and experiences of the situation, which inhibits their focus on the high-level motivations linked to the temporarily accessible self-concept.

A key contribution of this research is showing the importance of mindsets as cognitive processes that can interact with people’s self-representations and impact the way in which individuals interpret consumer situations, which adds to the growing view of human actions that integrates motivation and cognition into synergistic frameworks with more explanatory power (Sorrentino 2003). Findings from this research can help to understand the impact of self-concept on people’s actions under the presence of factors that can affect the level of abstraction used by individuals to interpret their actions. We discuss in the paper some of these factors like temporal distance, level of personal agency, and level of familiarity. We also derive some implications from our findings in the areas of persuasion, self-regulation, and decision-making.

REFERENCES


