

4-18-2012

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Recommended Citation

"Do Autonomous Individuals Strive for Self-Positivity? A Test of the Universal Nature of Self-Enhancement" (2012). *Stander Symposium Posters*. 113.

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Do Autonomous Individuals Strive for Self-Positivity? A Test of the Universal Nature of Self-Enhancement

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Self-Enhancement

Self-enhancement is the motivation to feel positively about the self.

The desire to see the self positively is a widespread and dominant motivation, and has been shown to exist cross-culturally (e.g., O'Mara, Gaertner, Sedikides, Zhou, & Liu, 2011; Sedikides, Gaertner, Toguchi, 2003).

Autonomy

Autonomy is also a dominant motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Highly autonomous individuals feel in charge of their own lives: that their choices and behaviors are self-made and are consistent with their beliefs and values (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Although people have varying levels of autonomy, high levels of autonomy is associated with psychological well-being (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2008).

The Present Study

Previous research found that autonomous individuals do not self-enhance (Knee & Zuckerman, 1996); however, only avoidance oriented enhancement was examined.

The present research tested the universality of self-enhancement by examining whether autonomous individuals, instead, engage in approach oriented self-enhancement.

Method

174 participants (84 women, 89 men, 1 did not specify gender) provided reports of self-enhancement and autonomy.

Self-Enhancement:

The 20-item Self-Enhancement and Self-Protection Strategies Scale (Hepper, Gramzow, & Sedikides, 2010) measured four strategies that individuals use to feel positively about the self. Three are approach oriented (favorable construals, self-affirming reflections, and positivity embracement), and one is avoidance oriented (defensiveness).

Autonomy:

The 17 vignette long-form of the General Causality Orientations Scale (Deci & Ryan, 1985; as cited in Hodgins, Koestner, and Duncan, 1996) measured the extent to which people feel in charge of their lives, decisions, and behaviors.

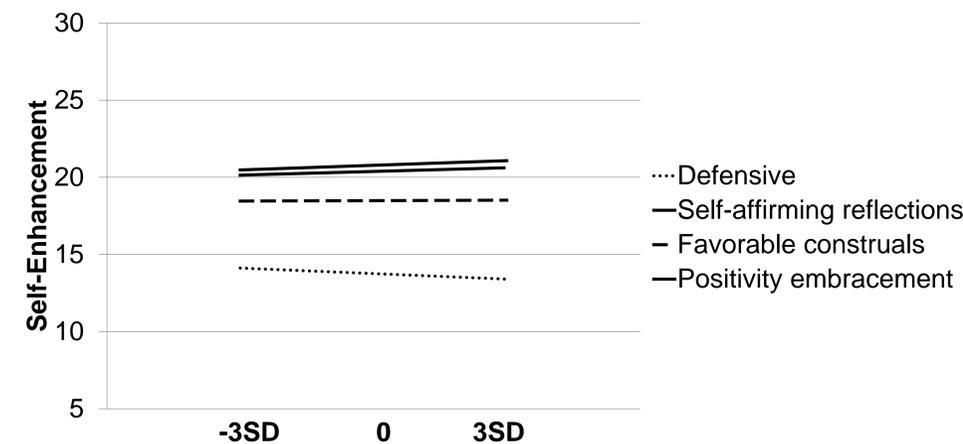
Results

Using a multi-level model, self-enhancement was regressed onto autonomy, and scale.

Autonomy interacted with scale to predict self-enhancement, $F(3,171) = 23.18, p < 0.0001$.

As depicted in the figure, autonomy was negatively associated with defensiveness, positively associated with self-affirming reflections and positivity embracement, and unrelated to favorable construals.

Association between Approach and Avoidant Self-enhancement and Autonomy.



Conclusion

Consistent with previous findings, the present study finds a negative association between autonomy and avoidant-oriented self-enhancement.

Importantly, however, the present study suggests that individuals high in autonomy do self-enhance:

- Less likely to engage in avoidance oriented self-enhancement (e.g., defensiveness)
- More likely to engage in approach oriented self-enhancement (e.g., self-affirming reflections and positivity embracement).

This research provides further support for the universality of self-enhancement by identifying strategies that autonomous people use to have and maintain positive feelings about the self.