

The language of self-exploration and self-control in key life scenes

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(485 words in the body of the abstract)

Introduction

Self-exploration and self-control are important life activities. Manczak et al. (2014) studied how narratives of self-exploration and self-control are aspects of personality differences in promotion and prevention focus. However, anyone could adopt a prevention or promotion focus in the right situation. A way to learn about self-exploration and self-control as motivational states is to ask the same people to describe relevant key scenes in their lives and examine how they describe them. In the current study, we used Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, & Francis, 2015) to categorize the words in these descriptions and analyzed differences between these kinds of scenes. Because this is the first study to do this kind of linguistic analysis of self-exploration and self-control narratives, all of the analyses on LIWC categories were exploratory. Thus, instead of testing specific hypotheses, we asked the following question: how do experiences of self-exploration and self-control differ in the language participants used to describe them?

Method

Participants were 90 Ithaca College students who did this study in exchange for extra credit in their psychology courses. The study asked them to describe two key scenes in randomized order: self-exploration and self-control. To prepare writing samples for LIWC, we corrected spelling errors, which were rare.

Results

We conducted paired-samples *t*-tests on the 41 word categories that participants used at least 2% of the time. In order to limit the potential for false-positive results, we did a Bonferroni adjustment of $p = .05/41 = .00122$. According to G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Bucher, 2007), the minimum Cohen's *d* effect size to achieve this *p*-value with 80% power in two-tailed, paired-samples *t*-tests is $\pm .443$. Twelve word categories showed between-condition differences of this size or larger. In the following results, positive *ds* indicate higher scores in the self-exploration condition.

Descriptions of self-exploration scored higher on analytical versus dynamic thinking ($d = .572$), authenticity ($d = .633$), and tone ($d = .667$). Additionally, they used more first-person singular pronouns ($d = .481$), more positive emotion words ($d = .470$), and more words about work ($d = .635$).

Descriptions of self-control scored higher on clout/influence ($d = -.504$). Additionally, they used more function words ($d = -.552$), including pronouns ($d = .515$) and personal pronouns ($d = -.471$); more negative emotion words ($d = -.584$) and more words about social processes ($d = -.769$).

Discussion

Descriptions of self-exploration appear to have been more about work about which participants were proud. In contrast, descriptions of self-control appear to have been more about social experiences that were less positive, and that participants described more narratively. Limitations of the current study include the small sample and the fact that we used a within-subjects design, which could increase the sizes of differences between conditions because participants get to contrast the conditions. Future research could examine how much the current findings reproduce with a larger, more diverse sample in a between-subjects design.

References:

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