Ideal-self, self-focus and value-behaviour consistency

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Abstract

Two experiments were conducted to examine the role of the ‘idealism’ variable and self-focus in value-behaviour consistency. The idealism variable was measured by means of a questionnaire (Idealism Scale—IS) devised by the author. The scale is based on the assumption that although every individual is able to declare his or her ideal-self if requested, only some of them actually develop such a structure and use it in their behavioural choices. The first experiment revealed that the level of defensive attribution was a predictable function of the content of the ideal-self for individuals with high scores on the IS to a greater extent than it was for low scorers. The second experiment showed that both high ‘idealism’ and situationally induced self-focus were necessary to obtain a predictable influence of the preference of the value ‘honesty’ on cheating behaviour. Processes which are likely to mediate between ideal-self content and behaviour are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The gap between people’s attitudes, beliefs and values on the one side and behaviour on the other is usually wide enough to discourage the simple view that to believe in something inevitably (or even frequently) means enacting the belief. This fact has been well-documented for years (cf. Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977; Mischel, 1968; Wicker, 1969; Zanna, Higgins and Herman, 1982), and theories which try to describe and explain the link between hot knowledge and behaviour are blooming in social psychology (e.g. Fazio and Zanna, 1981; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975, and the impressive volume edited by Zanna et al., 1982). The present paper deals with two variables which are hypothesized to influence value-behaviour consistency: ‘idealism’ and situationally induced self-focus.

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The notion of idealism refers to the assumption that people differ in the degree to which they develop an ideal-self as a distinct cognitive structure and use it as a source of information directing their behavioural choices. The ideal-self is conceived here as a system of personal values, i.e. as a cognitive representation of the desired features or states of the subject’s own self (like honesty, intelligence, tenacity, etc.). Preference is the basic relation organizing a set of distinct values into the system of personal values.

Although every individual is able to declare his or her ideal-self if requested, only in the case of some individuals do such declarations result from the ideal-self structure actually ‘existing’ in the subject’s mind. In the case of the remaining individuals their declared ideal-selves may rather be artificial entities produced simply on researcher’s demand, especially when the demand is accompanied by a provided set of items for description of the ideal-self (which has been the rule in research on this topic). Behaviour consistent with verbally declared ideal-self may be reasonably expected only in the case of the former—but not of the latter—type of individuals.

The Idealism Scale (IS) for the measurement of these individual differences has been recently devised by Wojciszke (Note 1). The IS is a 31-item, true–false questionnaire measuring the tendency to use self-related ideals as a source of information directing behavioural choices. IS includes items expressing: (a) the view that the value of a goal is a more important reason for activity than the probability of goal attainment (e.g. ‘I do not engage in activity if I see poor chance of success at the beginning’); (b) the same view but as related to the self, i.e., in the case of conflict between behaviour implied by the real-self and the ideal-self, the latter tendency overcomes the former (e.g. ‘I adjust my personal decisions to my capacities rather than my desires’), and (c) the general approval of ideals (e.g. ‘I am sure I will never abandon many of my ideals’). The reliability of IS in terms of internal consistency is high, and varies from 0.70 to 0.95 depending on the sample and method of estimation (cf. Wojciszke, Note 1, for details).

The Idealism Scale is based on the assumption that certain contents of subjective, self-referring beliefs (i.e. that one believes in some personal values and is committed to their enactment) result from an objective fact—i.e. from the development of the ideal-self as an actual structure in one’s cognitive system. Two independent studies supported the assumption of cognitive-structural differences between idealists (high IS scorers) and non-idealists (low IS scorers). The first of them (Wojciszke, Note 2, Study 1) showed strong correlation between the IS score and the transitivity of preferences of personal values, which suggests that the personal value system is much more hierarchized for the idealists. The second study (Wojciszke, Note 2, Study 2) has shown that the association between the self-structure and representation of a highly preferred value is detectable only for idealists. The idealists also showed significantly stronger temporal stability of value preferences and lower responsiveness of the preferred value to current situational influences. Taken together these studies clearly corroborate the idea that the personal value system (i.e. the ideal-self) is better established as a cognitive structure in idealists than in non-idealists.

Two experiments which are reported below explore the behavioural consequences of idealism. It is expected that in the case of idealists, the ideal-self is not only better established but also plays a greater role in the regulation of behaviour. Idealists are hypothesized to reveal behaviour which is consistent with their own personal values (constituting the content of their ideal selves), while the behaviour of non-idealists
is hypothesized to be generally non-predictable from the content of their ideal selves.

The first experiment tests the hypothesis in the context of defensive attribution conceived of as a mode of self-presentation, the second one in the context of cheating. Both experiments involved measurement of subjective preferences for values potentially relevant to the behaviours in question. Self-focus was manipulated in both studies (although in different ways) to test the hypothesis that idealism influences value-behaviour consistency especially in self-focusing situations, i.e. in conditions, where the self-structure and the preferred values (associated in the case of idealists with self-structure) are highly accessible as a source of information directing behavioural decisions. The finding of self-awareness theory that self-focusing situations increase standard-behaviour consistency (Carver and Scheier, 1981; Wicklund and Frey, 1980) as well as a considerable number of research corroborating this finding (e.g. Carver, 1975; Gibbons, 1978; Hormuth, 1982) constituted the second and related reason for the inclusion of self-focus into the present experiments.

EXPERIMENT 1

The tendency to ascribe one’s own successes to internal factors more than to external ones and failures to external factors more than to internal ones (ego-defensive attribution) is one of the best replicable relationships in attribution research. Several studies have shown this tendency (cf. Bradley, 1978; Miller and Ross, 1975; Nisbett and Ross, 1980; Zuckerman, 1979), although it is far from being found in every condition, as the cited reviews have shown.

The experiment reported here has looked for factors influencing the intensity of ego-defensive attribution on the assumption that the attributional pattern may be viewed as a form of self-presentation. If defensive attribution is a form of self-presentation, such behaviour may be hypothesized to conform to the values in which the subject believes. Specifically, because defensive attribution means self-presentation as a 'man-of-success', while the counter-defensive attribution means self-presentation as a 'man-of-modesty', it is predicted that the defensive pattern is more characteristic for persons who prefer the value ‘ambition’ to the value ‘modesty’, while the counter-defensive attribution is relatively more characteristic for persons who prefer modesty to ambition. In other words, consistency of self-presentation with the rank-ordering of preferences for the two values is predicted. In line with previous theorizing underlying the idealism variable, this prediction should hold only for idealists, but not for non-idealists. This is hypothesis 1 of the present study.

Hypothesis 2 predicts that the tendency postulated in hypothesis 1 is more pronounced (or appears only) in self-focusing conditions, i.e. in a situation where self-structure and ideal-self are readily accessible cognitive structures. Two self-focusing conditions were included into the design: private self-focus (subjects sat in front of a mirror), and public self-focus (subjects sat in front of two observers). Mirrors and observers are probably the most divergent manipulations of self-focus although they have been shown to produce partially convergent consequences (cf. Scheier and Carver, 1983).
Method

Overview

The experiment consisted of two sessions. At the first session, personality measures were administered and the subjects also listened to a short lecture. Then they answered several questions referring to the lecture content. The questions constituted the experimental task. At the beginning of the second session, subjects received feedback about their results in the experimental task (success for half the participants and failure for the remainder). The attribution measures were taken in a private self-focus condition for one third of subjects, in a public self-focus for the other one third of subjects, and in a low self-focus (control) condition for the remainder. The design of the experiment was four-factorial with type of result (success versus failure), self-focus condition (private versus public versus low), value preference (ambition preferred to modesty versus modesty preferred to ambition), and idealism (idealists versus non-idealists) as inter-individual factors.

Subjects

Eighty-two students (aged 18–19 years) in their final year at high school participated in the study. Due to absence and the necessity to equate number of subjects per cell, the results of 72 persons (20 males dispersed over conditions) were finally analysed.

Personality measures

At the beginning of the first session, which was run in one group, IS was administered as well as a Rokeach-type scale of values, with 'ambition' and 'honesty' inserted in the whole 20-item set of values. All of them were positive personality traits, like intelligence, helpfulness, sincerity, etc. The scales were introduced as part of validation study for some new psychological tests. Based on their IS scores, the subjects were divided into idealists (above the median) and non-idealists (below the median). Based on this scale of values, subjects who preferred ambition to modesty or modesty to ambition were identified.

Manipulation of success and failure

At the end of the first session subjects were asked to listen to a 20-minute lecture on drug dependency. The topic was believed to be new enough for the subjects to prevent their self-orientation in their own results in the subsequent memory task. The lecture was presented as part of a competition among a few psychologists applying for the same position of consultant before local education authorities. City authorities purportedly decide to check the applicants' ability to communicate with youngsters. The applicant whose audience did best at a memory task following the lecture was supposed to be employed. After the lecture subjects were asked several questions referring to the lecture topic. Three or four days later, at the beginning of the second session which was run individually, participants received randomly assigned feedback about success (their answers were allegedly in the top 10 per cent of the whole sample), or failure (their answers were allegedly in the bottom 10 per cent of the whole sample).
Manipulation of self-focus

During the whole second session subjects were randomly assigned to private, public, or low self-focus condition. In private self-focus they sat in front of a large mirror (the most frequently used method for increase in self-focus). In public self-focus they sat in front of two observers looking at them (purportedly two psychology students learning how to observe people). In low self-focus the subject sat in the same room without mirror or observers.

Dependent measures

Attribution measures were inserted in a set of questions referring to the lecture and the lecturer (allegedly a further test of the lecturer's ability to communicate with youngsters). The defensive attribution index was based on the answer to the following question: 'Please imagine 100 per cent of responsibility for your own result in the memory test after the lecture. You can divide this sum and ascribe it to yourself, to the lecturer, and to other factors (if any). What percentage of your result in the task is due to you . . . , to the lecturer . . . , to other factors . . . '. The defensive attribution index was the percentage of internal responsibility minus and percentage of lecturer's responsibility for the 'successful' group, and the percentage of lecturer's responsibility minus internal responsibility for the 'failure' group.

At the end of the experiment participants were once more asked to divide responsibility (100 per cent) among the four classical attributional factors (Heider, 1958; Weiner, Frieze, Kukla, Read, Rest and Rosenbaum, 1972): ability, effort, task difficulty and (good or bad) luck. The sum of percentages ascribed to the first and second factor constituted an 'internal attribution' index which served for estimation of the effectiveness of the success–failure manipulation.

Results and discussion

Preliminary analysis

A 2(task result) × 3(self-focus condition) analysis of variance performed on the internal attribution index, revealed a main effect of task result, $F(1,66) = 8.80$, $p < 0.005$. Attribution in the 'successful' group (mean = 68.75) was significantly more internal than that of the 'failure' group (mean = 51.56). This result proves the effectiveness of success–failure manipulation and suggests the possibility of ego-defensive tendencies in the present experiment. There was no main effect of self-focus on internal attribution $F(1,66) = 2.08$, n.s., or interaction of self-focus with task result, $F < 1$.

Defensive attribution

The main analysis was performed on the defensive attribution index. Because the task result influenced defensive attribution neither as a main effect nor in interaction with any other variable this factor is excluded from further discussion. An analysis of variance did not reveal any main effect of self-focus, of value preference, or of idealism (all these $Fs$ are below 1). The interaction of value preference with idealism appeared to be the only highly significant effect in the analysis, $F(1,48) = 13.94$, $p < 0.005$. This supports hypothesis 1. The shape of the interaction is illustrated in Figure 1.
The interaction generally means that idealists yielded self-presentation patterns relatively more consistent with their value preferences. Idealists who preferred ambition to modesty presented themselves in a ‘man-of-success’ way (showed relatively defensive attribution) to a higher degree than idealists who preferred modesty to ambition (who showed relatively counter-defensive attribution). The non-idealists yielded attributions generally unpredictable from their own value preferences. As a matter of fact, they even tended to give paradoxical attribution patterns, i.e. those who preferred modesty tended to be more defensive than those who preferred ambition.

Because the analysis of variance is a rather crude measure, simple effect analysis (Winer, 1971) of value preferences for different combinations of idealism and self-focus was also performed. The predicted simple effect of value preferences for idealists appeared significant in the low self-focus condition, $F(1,48) = 4.46, p < 0.05$; marginally significant in public self-focus, $F(1,48) = 3.73, p < 0.10$; and non-significant in private self-focus, $F < 1$. The paradoxical effect of value preferences for non-idealists appeared significant only in the private self-focus, $F(1,48) = 4.36, p < 0.05$, but not in the other two conditions. This pattern of results is generally in line with hypothesis 1. However, the support for the hypothesis is not strong, as the obtained interaction is partially due to the paradoxical attribution of non-idealists. Unfortunately there is no convincing explanation for the latter result.

As Figure 1 shows, the general shape of the interaction is replicated in all three conditions. Analysis of variance revealed no effect of conditions on the basic interaction (i.e. the value preferences x idealism x conditions interaction was non-significant). This result disconfirms hypothesis 2. Consistency between the attributions and value preferences of idealists and non-idealists was not affected by self-focus. One plausible speculation about the reasons of this lack of effect refers to the probably self-focusing nature of the dependent variable measurement. Because this measurement involved self-other comparisons in terms of responsibility for the task result, it may be viewed as a self-focusing procedure (see some further remarks in the context of the next experiment). If so, there is the possibility that self-focus induced by the attribution measurement procedure overcame the effects of mirrors or observers, and all three conditions appeared equally highly self-focusing.
EXPERIMENT 2

The second study was conducted to enlarge the range of the idealism variable by applying it to the ‘honesty’ value and to cheating behaviour. Further exploration of the role of self-focus in the influence of idealism on value-behaviour consistency was the second goal of the experiment. For that reason, a new method of self-focus was invented—self-other comparisons. It was hypothesized that any self-other comparison increases self-focus, because such comparisons inevitably need some activation of self-knowledge, especially when the dimension of comparison is subjectively important or ego-involving.¹

According to these considerations, an experiment was planned, where idealists and non-idealists who valued honesty to a high or low extent faced a task where they could reach high results by cheating in an apparently undetectable way. The task was solved in a high self-focus condition (immediately after important self-other comparisons) or in a low self-focus (control) condition. Two alternative hypotheses were verified in the experiment. Hypothesis 1 predicted that idealists (but not non-idealists) who valued honesty highly will cheat less frequently than idealists who valued honesty to a low extent. Hypothesis 2 predicted this influence of idealism on value-behaviour consistency for the high self-focus condition only, i.e. for the condition where the self-structure and probably also ideal-self structure is fully activated and accessible as a source of information directing behavioural choices.

Method

Overview and subjects

The experiment consisted of two, purportedly unrelated, group sessions, which were run by two different researchers. The first session, which included personality measures, was introduced to subjects as a sociological study comparing personalities of students who choose different courses of studies. The second session, which included self-focus manipulation and solving the ‘cheating task’, was introduced as psychological study on learning ability.

One hundred and five high school graduates (participants of the preparatory course for university studies) participated in the first session. Ten were absent at the second session, nine persons were excluded because of incomplete data, and six others were randomly excluded to equalize the number of subjects per cell. The data from 80 subjects (27 males dispersed over conditions) were finally analysed.

Personality measures

IS and a Rokeach-type scale of values (with the value ‘honesty’ inserted into the whole set of 15 items) were administered during the first session. Based on these scores, subjects were divided into idealists and non-idealists, who valued honesty to a high or low extent (in both cases the appropriate medians served as the criteria for dividing subject into groups).

¹A recently completed study has shown also that social comparison increases the level of self-attention measured by the number of self-related endings in an incomplete sentence task (Banaśkiewicz and Wojciszke, Note 3).
Manipulation of self-focus

Transfer in learning tasks of increasing difficulty was the alleged goal of the research in the second session (the successive trials of the experimental task actually increased in visual complexity). Immediately before the task subjects were asked seven questions referring to learning—the bogus goal of the experiment. In the control (low self-focus) condition the questions dealt with learning in animals (e.g. ‘How long does it take for a rat to learn that pressing a bar results in food reinforcement: (a) one hour, (b) 24 hours, (c) one week?’). In the high self-focus condition questions referred to the subject and the answers needed self–other comparisons on evaluative dimensions (e.g. ‘If you want to get the same grade on an exam as most people in your group do you have to study: (a) more than others, (b) an equal amount of time, (c) less than others?’).

Dependent measures

The experimental task involving the possibility of cheating consisted of a series of geometric puzzles identical to those employed by Vallacher and Solodky (1979). The puzzles consisted of line drawings of geometric forms (e.g. rectangle embedded in a triangle). The subject was to trace over the lines of each puzzle without lifting the pencil from the paper and without retracing any line. There were 15 test puzzles (with 1 min allowed for each), preceded by five practice ones. The subjects were encouraged to attempt as many solutions to each puzzle as he or she desired during each 1-min period. If the subject solved the puzzle, he or she was to place a ‘+’ on the answering sheet. All of the practice puzzles where solvable but only three of 15 test puzzles (the first, third and fourth) were solvable, the remaining 12 being unsolvable. Thus an indication of ‘+’ on an unsolvable puzzle provided a direct, unobtrusive index of cheating.

Results and discussion

The proportion of subjects in each condition who cheated is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Proportion of cheaters as a function of high versus low self-focus, high versus low rank position of value ‘honesty’ and the idealism variable (Experiment 2)
In nominal data terms hypothesis 1 predicted the number of cheaters to be lower for idealists (but not for non-idealists) who valued honesty highly, than for idealists who valued honesty to a low extent. Hypothesis 2 predicted the same relationship but for high self-focus only. Accordingly $\chi^2$ analyses were performed on the relative frequencies of cheaters and non-cheaters in each self-focus condition separately, as a function of value preference and idealism. For the high self-focus condition, four combinations of personality variables produced significantly differing frequencies of cheating, $\chi^2(3) = 8.65, p < 0.05$ (Yates' correction for continuity was applied). The observed number of cheaters differed mostly from the expected value in the high honesty $\times$ idealism combination. For the low self-focus condition however, cheating frequency did not differ among the combinations of personality variables, $\chi^2(3) = 1.31$, n.s. An additional analysis revealed that in the high self-focus condition, the proportions of cheaters among idealists who valued honesty highly (0.30) and to a low extent (0.80) differed significantly, $z = 2.25, p < 0.03$. In the low self-focus condition however, the analogous proportions (0.60 and 0.70 respectively) did not differ significantly, $z = 0.47$, n.s. The same analysis for non-idealists showed no differences between proportions in either condition ($zs$ are below 1). Hypothesis 2 is clearly supported in the light of these data: idealism influences value-behaviour consistency only in the high self-focus condition.

The procedure of the experiment also enabled the analysis of rank correlation between value 'honesty' preference and the intensity of cheating for different combinations of self-focus and idealism. The correlation appeared significant only for idealists acting in high self-focus (Kendall’s $\tau = -0.42, p < 0.01$), while it was on the border of significance for idealists acting in low self-focus ($\tau = -0.28, p < 0.10$) and non-significant for non-idealists both in high ($\tau = -0.06$) and low ($\tau = -0.21$) self-focus conditions. This pattern of correlations corroborates hypothesis 2 rather than hypothesis 1.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The results of these studies provide some support for the specific hypotheses related to the determinants of value-behaviour consistency and also support the construct validity of the idealism variable proposed recently by Wojciszke (Note 1). The experiments have shown that persons whose ideal-selves have high regulatory potential identified by means of a questionnaire (Idealism Scale), reveal behaviour which is consistent with their own personal values which constitute the content of their ideal-selves.

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2The procedure employed also enables the analysis of the number of cheating yielded by a subject. However, this continuous index of cheating may be criticized on the basis that it confounds the direction of behaviour with its intensity (i.e. the qualitative difference between honesty and dishonesty is treated in the same way as a quantitative difference among different degrees of dishonesty). For that reason, a nominal index of cheating was employed in the main analysis.

Parenthetically, the same nominal index of cheating was employed successfully by Vallacher and Solodky (1979) whose procedure for measuring cheating was followed in the present study. The analysis of variance performed on the continuous index revealed only the main effect of value preference, $F(1,72) = 7.97, p < 0.006$, with more cheating by persons who valued honesty to a low extent (3.10) than for persons who valued it highly (1.63). No other main effects (of idealism or conditions) nor interactions appeared significant. The combination favouring most honest behaviour (i.e. honesty highly valued by idealists acting in high self-focus) produced the lowest incidence of cheating. It was also significantly lower (Duncan's test) than the level of cheating in nearly all (3 of 4) combinations involving low preference for honesty.
On the other hand, the behaviour of the non-idealists (i.e. persons characterized by the low regulatory potential of their ideal-selves) is not generally predictable from the content of their ideal-selves. The increase in value-behaviour consistency takes place most probably in self-focusing contexts only, i.e. in situations where the self structure and ideal-self structure are fully accessible as a source of information capable of directing the subject’s behavioural choices.

The exact mechanism underlying idealist versus non-idealist differences in terms of value-behaviour consistency is far from clear in the light of the data gathered until now. As the idealists’ personal values seem to be strongly related to their selves (Wojciszke, Note 2), and the self structure is activated both quickly and frequently (cf. Markus and Sentis, 1982), the idealists could have access to their values more quickly or more frequently than non-idealists. Because of that, they could use their personal values as categories for conceiving social situations and behavioural alternatives relatively often or easily. The content of IS items also suggest the possibility that lower probabilities of value-related goal-attainment are acceptable for idealists to be satisfactory enough to engage in the goal-fulfilling action. One more reason why idealist versus non-idealist differences may be related to the idealists’ stronger tendency to base their own self-esteem on behavioural fulfillment of personally accepted values.

The data in hand do not allow one to decide which of the above mechanisms is responsible for the differences between idealists and non-idealists in terms of value-behaviour consistency. The research programme dealing with the question is still in progress.

Finally, self–other comparison may be a new method for manipulating self-attention. Experiment 2 has shown that this factor influences value-behaviour consistency, and a recently completed study (Banaśkiewicz and Wojciszke, Note 3) has also shown that social comparison increases the level of self-attention measured by the number of self-related completions in an incomplete sentence task. Most of the self-awareness research—although not all of it—tends to use some inanimate objects as self-focusing stimuli (mirrors, cameras etc. — cf. Carver and Scheier, 1981; Wicklund, 1975, 1979), which are obviously separated from social interaction. Social comparison however is frequently the constituent component of social interaction and the awareness of its self-focusing nature seems to be theoretically important.

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REFERENCE NOTES

1. Wojciszke, B. (1984), ‘Idealism Scale for the measurement of individual differences in


REFERENCES


RÉSUMÉ

Deux expériences ont été menées afin d’examiner le rôle de la variable “idéalisme” et de l’estime de soi sur la cohérence d’un comportement valorisé. La variable idéalisme est mesurée au moyen d’un questionnaire (L’échelle d’idéalisme) mis au point par l’auteur. L’échelle est basée sur l’idée suivante: même si chaque individu est capable d’énoncer son propre idéal si on le lui demande, peu d’entre eux en réalité développent une telle structure et l’utilisent dans leurs choix comportementaux. La première expérience révèle que le niveau d’attribution défensive est une fonction qui prédit le contenu de son propre idéal pour les individus ayant des scores élevés à l’échelle d’idéalisme, comparés à ceux dont les scores sont inférieurs. La seconde expérience montre qu’à la fois un fort “idéalisme” et une estime de soi générée par la situation sont nécessaires pour obtenir la préférence de la valeur “honnêteté” dans une situation de tromperie. Les processus qui sont susceptibles d’intervenir entre le contenu de l’idéal de soi et le comportement sont discutés.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG
