Taking it personally: self-esteem and the protection of self-related attitudes

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Chapter 5

General discussion
Taking it personally

“Talk to the hand ‘cause the face ain't listening!” According to Urban Dictionary (www.urbandictionary.com), this saying is used “to ignore and disregard a comment or an insult when you can’t think of a way to counter it.” At times, all of us are confronted with information that we prefer not to hear. This could be an unfavorable appraisal by students of one’s teaching, a rejection by a journal or potential partner, or information that challenges a treasured attitude. However, the reaction outlined above is just one of many possible reactions. For instance, one could also try to rebut the comment, start to cry, derogate the source or simply walk away. The present dissertation focused on how people manage unfavorable information targeted at an attitude that is closely connected to how they see themselves and explored the role of self-esteem. In this final chapter, I will first summarize the main empirical findings of chapters 2 to 4 and discuss their implications. Moreover, some limitations to this research will be presented and I will outline a number of directions for future research.

Main Contributions

The goal of this dissertation was to advance our understanding of the strategies individuals rely upon in order to protect cherished attitudes. The first contribution of the present research is that it underlines the benefits of a functional approach to the study of attitudes. The recent literature on attitudes and attitude change pays limited attention to the functional value of attitudes and this relative neglect might explain some of the contradictory findings obtained in this research field. Our emphasis on the value-expressive function of an attitude and value-relevant involvement also triggered the decision to look at the role of self-esteem and self-defense. Perhaps the most important contribution of this dissertation is that it combines insights from previous research on attitude-protection with research on self-defense and self-esteem. This made it possible to generate and test new predictions with respect to how we defend our attitudes. More specifically, by treating attitudes as part of the
self-concept, the motive to protect an attitude could be translated to a self-defense motive, thereby unlocking the literature on self-esteem. I related self-esteem to two behavioral strategies of attitude-protection, that is, an active-defensive and a passive-defensive strategy, and investigated their nature and impact. This distinction provided a possible explanation for the mixed findings obtained in research on the congeniality effect, i.e. the tendency to remember pro-attitudinal information better than counter-attitudinal information.

An additional methodological contribution concerns the manipulation of value-relevance. Quite often value-relevance has been included as a continuous variable given the individual differences in the perceived value-relevance of most if not all attitudinal issues. The resulting correlational analyses do tell us something about the role of value-relevant involvement. However, an experimental manipulation of the context in which the attitudinal issue is judged provides a way to manipulate the perceived value-relevance of a specific attitudinal issue and allows more firm causal inferences about the role of this factor.

Main findings, limitations, implications and directions for future research

A key assumption in this dissertation is that counter-attitudinal information targeted at an attitude that is connected to the self-concept, poses a threat to the recipients’ self and self-esteem. Similar ideas have been put forward in the literature on stereotype threat (e.g. Fein & Spencer, 1997; Förster, Higgins, & Werth, 2004) and memory for negative feedback (Sedikides & Green, 2000, 2004). Often these kinds of assumptions lack direct empirical validation. The research presented in this dissertation provides new evidence for this assumption, but future research should further investigate the dynamics of self-related attitudes under threat. For instance, one would expect participants to be more involved in tasks that offer them a chance to enhance their self-esteem after confrontation with counter-attitudinal information. Indeed, our more recent studies show that participants spent more time on a
Taking it personally

task that offered them the opportunity to enhance their self-esteem after having read a counter-attitudinal essay (Wiersema, 2008). Interestingly, the strength of these effects did not depend on participants' self-esteem. Thus, participants low and high in self-esteem were equally motivated to enhance their self-esteem. These results lend support to the claim that information that contradicts attitudes connected to the self-concept is a threat to the self and triggers self-protective behaviors. Other means to test this assumption are employing direct measures of self-esteem.

As described earlier in this dissertation, self-esteem is related to two global strategies of attitude-protection. These were introduced as strategies either aimed at dealing with counter-attitudinal information directly or avoiding counter-attitudinal information altogether. It was expected that low and high self-esteem individuals differed in their preferred strategy, with low self-esteem individuals using a passive-defensive strategy and high self-esteem individuals employing an active-defensive strategy. Moreover, these differences should be more pronounced when the attitude in question is high in value-relevance. The research presented in Chapter 2 was a first step in finding support for these predictions. The focus was on memory for attitude-relevant information. It was expected that the mixed findings obtained in research inspired by the congeniality hypothesis could be attributed to low and high self-esteem individuals employing different processing strategies when dealing with counter-attitudinal content. More specifically, the passive-defensive processing of counter-attitudinal information of low self-esteem participants should render pro-attitudinal relatively more memorable while the active-defensive processing employed by high self-esteem individuals will result in better memory for counter-attitudinal information. In order to test these predictions, participants were confronted with statements that were either pro- or counter-attitudinal. At a later stage we tested their memory for these statements.

Results of Study 2.1 confirmed our predictions. Moreover, as expected, these differences in memory were found only at high levels of value-relevant involvement. These results provided support for the predictions concerning the impact of self-esteem, i.e. low self-esteem individuals having enhanced memory
for pro-attitudinal information and high self-esteem individuals having enhanced memory for counter-attitudinal information. However, a limitation of Study 2.1 was the correlational design. In order to corroborate the role of value-relevant involvement, the amount of value-relevant involvement was manipulated in Study 2.2. In the high value-relevance condition, results confirmed the pattern of biased memory obtained in Study 2.1. Unexpectedly, the low value-relevance condition revealed a reversal of this. At this point, I do not have an explanation for this effect.

The goal of Study 2.3 was twofold. The first aim was to firmly establish the role of self-esteem by manipulating it. The second aim was to investigate when differences in memory originate. The idea of two defensive processing strategies places the origin of biases in memory at the encoding stage. However, another possibility is that these differences originate when information is retrieved from memory. By manipulating self-esteem either before or after encoding (but before retrieval), the origin of biased memory could be located. Since the manipulation consisted of providing participants with the opportunity to enhance their self-esteem, the manipulation should only affect low self-esteem participants. Indeed, results indicated that enhancing the self-esteem of low self-esteem participants affected memory for attitude-relevant information when this preceded encoding. That is, in this condition the pattern of memory of low self-esteem participants resembled the pattern normally obtained for high self-esteem individuals. Thus, in this condition, low self-esteem participants demonstrated enhanced memory for counter-attitudinal information. However, when the same manipulation was administered after encoding, low self-esteem participants showed their “usual” pattern that is, enhanced memory for pro-attitudinal statements.

All in all, results of this study strongly indicate that differences in memory for attitude-relevant information are the result of processes taking place while encoding information as opposed to processes taking place at retrieval. Moreover, the role of self-esteem was established more firmly by including a manipulation of self-esteem.
The research presented in Chapter 2 demonstrates that self-esteem affects memory for attitude-relevant information. More specifically, Study 2.3 demonstrates that this memory results from processes taking place at the encoding stage, lending further support for the idea of two different defensive processing strategies. These results are important for understanding the mixed results obtained in prior research on memory for attitude-relevant information. However, as mentioned before, the two strategies that are assumed to cause these biases in memory were treated as global strategies. As such, there is still a lot we do not know about the specific contents of the two strategies. This particularly pertains to the passive-defensive strategy, as I will explain below. But first, I would like to focus on the active-defensive strategy. In discussing the two strategies, I will summarize the main findings of the research presented in chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation.

There are several reasons for claiming that counter-arguing is the essence of the active-defensive processing mode. First, because counter-arguing is the one behavior that will result in enhanced memory for counter-attitudinal content. Second, the fact that counter-arguing requires a certain amount of cognitive capacity implies that attitude change should increase when counter-arguing by high self-esteem individuals is impaired. This hypothesis was investigated in Study 4.1. In this study, half of the participants encoded counter-attitudinal information under cognitive load. In the load condition, the attitudes of high self-esteem participants proved less resistant to persuasion relative to the condition where their capacity was not impaired. These results confirm that high self-esteem individuals most likely use counter-arguing to prevent their attitude from changing. A limitation of the studies reported in this dissertation is that they do not show that counter-arguing actually take place. Thus, future research should employ more direct measures, for instance by including a thought-listing task.

The focus of the passive-defensive processing mode is said to be the avoidance of (the processing of) counter-attitudinal content. Theoretically, this can be established by several means, for instance by source derogation, suppression, or distraction. The aim of the research in Chapter 3 was to gain a
more concrete understanding of this strategy. More specifically, I investigated whether the use of distraction is part of the passive-defensive strategy. In the first study (Study 3.1), participants had the opportunity to postpone reading a counter-attitudinal article by engaging in other experiments first. It was expected that especially low self-esteem participants would take this chance and that this effect would be more pronounced in the high value-relevance condition. Results confirmed these predictions.

In Study 3.1, the motivation to engage in other experimental tasks was interpreted as a distraction-strategy. If low self-esteem individuals are so eager to engage in distracting tasks, one would also expect them to perform better on these tasks. Since the allocation of resources to another task directs attention away from the counter-attitudinal information, this fits the passive-defensive strategy that focuses on the avoidance of counter-attitudinal information. In the next study (Study 3.2), distraction was thus operationalized as a performance score on a task that participants performed before having to read a counter-attitudinal article (which, in fact, they never did). Low self-esteem participants performed better on this task relative to a pre-measure, but only when the article was counter-attitudinal and only when their attitudes were high in value-relevant involvement. High self-esteem participants demonstrated the opposite pattern, suggesting that they preferred allocating their resources to the upcoming counter-attitudinal article, most likely by counter-arguing expected counter-attitudinal statements.

The last study of Chapter 3, Study 3.3, provided the most rigorous test of the idea that distraction is part of the tools of low self-esteem individuals. In this study, attitude-relevant information was presented simultaneously with distracting information. Participants watched an interview with an alleged historian, which contained several attitude-relevant statements. At the same time, scrolling news headlines were presented at the bottom of the screen. Afterwards, participants' memory for the attitude-relevant information and that for the news headlines was assessed. In case of high value-relevance, the interaction of self-esteem and attitude indicated that low self-esteem participants tended to demonstrate better memory for the distracting
information when the information conveyed by the interviewee was incongruent as opposed to congruent with their attitude. For high self-esteem participants, the opposite pattern was found. These findings lend further support to the idea that low self-esteem individuals use distraction in order to avoid counter-attitudinal material. Low and high self-esteem individuals did not differ in their memory for the attitude-relevant information itself, which was opposite to expectations. I have argued that this could be due to the absence of a filler task after watching the interview and before the memory-assessment. In this study, the use of distraction was inferred from participants’ performance on a memory task. The next step would be to employ a more direct measure of distraction, such as an eye tracker to assess the attention paid to the different sources of information. As such, one could actually assess distraction in a direct manner.

The three studies presented in Chapter 3 together support the claim that low self-esteem individuals use distraction in order to avoid processing counter-attitudinal content. Of course, this need not imply that other strategies, such as source derogation and suppression, are not part of the passive-defensive style of low self-esteem participants. Probably, the strategy that is being employed depends on situational influences and opportunity. For instance, in order to derogate the source, one needs to know who the source is. It is up to future research to explore what other strategies are being employed by low self-esteem individuals.

The research in this dissertation indicates that low and high self-esteem individuals employ different strategies of attitude-protection. However, results also contain some inconsistencies, as discussed earlier in this dissertation. A possible explanation for these inconsistencies is illustrated by recent research that distinguishes specific forms of self-esteem. In particular, the focus of this research is on individuals that are high in self-esteem but uncertain nonetheless. This uncertainty stems from the self-esteem being unrealistically high, from self-esteem that fluctuates a lot (i.e. unstable high self-esteem; e.g. Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993), or from high explicit self-esteem that is accompanied by low levels of implicit self-esteem (i.e.
defensive self-esteem, e.g., Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Brown, & Correll, 2003). The uncertain nature of their high self-esteem makes these individuals highly sensitive to events that threaten their self-esteem, even if these events are not directly relevant to their self-esteem (Greenier et al., 1999). Moreover, they are keen to exploit and seek out situations that give them the opportunity to validate their high level of self-esteem (e.g., Foster & Trimm, 2008).

With respect to the topic of this dissertation, one might expect these individuals to have stronger reactions to counter-attitudinal information that targets a cherished attitude. It could even be possible that they employ defensive strategies that differ from those employed by individuals who possess more stable (secure and less defensive) forms of self-esteem. Although going into these extra distinctions within the concept of self-esteem was beyond the scope of the present dissertation, it would be interesting for future research to investigate their effects.

An important contribution of this dissertation is that it underlines the functional value of attitudes and the “personal” relationship people have with their attitudes. This aspect has often been ignored in prior research. Thus, attitudes on issues such as the death penalty and organ donation have been treated in the same way as attitudes on, for example, implementing a new kind of examination in universities. Obviously, these attitudes are not the same and are likely to have a different base as well as having a different functional value. For one, attitudes that are (typically) high in value-relevant involvement, such as the above examples of the death penalty and organ donation, have been found to be more resistant to persuasion than attitudes that are low in this kind of involvement, or that fulfill other psychological functions (e.g., the utilitarian function). This persistence of value-relevant attitudes (and thus behavior) is a challenge to governments, institutions, and others who try to instigate societal change. For instance, there is still an enormous lack of organ donors even though a considerable amount of effort has been made to persuade people to consent to donate their organs.
Taking it personally

One explanation in this dissertation for the recurring stability of value-relevant attitudes is that they are tied to the self-concept. Since people are generally quite reluctant to change their self-concept, they are automatically also reluctant to change attitudes linked to their self-concept. In addition, the arguments and beliefs that apply to value-relevant attitudes seem to differ from the arguments that apply to other kinds of attitudes. The arguments and beliefs that people associate with their value-relevant attitudes often relate to underlying norms and values, to feelings of “right” and “wrong”. For instance, the discussion on abortion is often summarized as pro-life versus pro-choice, where the opposing viewpoints represent different moral convictions. Other value-relevant attitudes also tend to be rooted in moral convictions.

This moral aspect of attitudes has a strong impact on how an individual thinks, feels, and behaves (e.g. Rokeach, 1973; Rozin, 1999). For instance, the moralization of cigarette smoking as causing harm to others has had a strong impact on how we think about smoking and people who smoke nowadays (see Rozin, 1999). Other examples are attitudes toward wearing fur and commercial hunting of whales. These attitudes have also become moralized and are likely to be based on basic values for a majority of the people in Western society. Thus, value-relevant attitudes have a strong personal impact. However, they are also important on an interpersonal level. For instance, we tend to like others that share similar attitudes (law of attraction, Byrne, 1961; Byrne & Griffitt, 1966). Indeed, groups and whole societies are built upon the sharing of values. Moreover, attitudes grounded in moral convictions are often associated with a specific class of emotions: the moral emotions. These encompass such emotions as disgust, anger and contempt, but also sympathy and empathy (see Haidt, 2003). Depending on which specific emotion is activated, moral emotions can bind people together or set them apart. As such, it is important that we gain understanding on the workings of values and value-relevant attitudes. This dissertation has taken an important first step, showing that low and high self-esteem individuals use different strategies to protect their value-relevant attitudes.