The impact of grounded procedures can vary as a function of perceived thought validity, meaning, and timing

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Abstract

Cleansing (separation) inductions reduce the impact of negative and positive reactions, whereas connection manipulations magnify them. We suggest that grounded procedures can produce these effects by affecting the perceived validity of thoughts. In accord with the self-validation theory, we also note the importance of considering how moderators, such as the meaning of the action and the timing of inductions, affect outcomes.

Physical-cleansing procedures can lead people to psychologically wash away their recent thoughts, reducing their impact on judgment. Lee and Schwarz (L&S) explain this and related phenomenon with an impressive unifying framework which organizes a diverse set of embodied inductions under the psychological processes of separation versus connection from one's thoughts. Across multiple procedures and paradigms, cleansing and related inductions are found to mitigate the impact of negative reactions (e.g., the guilt from transgression), but also reduce the impact of positive thoughts. In contrast, connection inductions (e.g., physically touching) magnify (rather than undermine) the influence of both positive and negative thoughts.

In making this separation-connection distinction to account for the impact of diverse operations on thought use, the authors join a number of prior frameworks that address the important distinction between having thoughts and using them (i.e., primary vs. secondary cognition; Briñol & DeMarree, 2012; Jost, Kruglanski, & Nelson, 1998). For example, Alter and Oppenheimer (2009) brought together a wide array of manipulations related to the fluency/disfluency dimension, and showed how they could affect thought use. Huntsinger, Isbell, and Clore (2014) organized a diverse set of treatments related to the positive/negative emotion dimension and showed how they could influence the use of thoughts and thought processes. Bernstein et al. (2015) integrated a variety of approaches that use mindfulness and distance inductions to reduce the impact of thoughts. Our own self-validation theory (SVT; Briñol & Petty, 2009; Petty, Briñol, & Tormala, 2002) is an even more general framework that brings together a broad coalition of variables capable of affecting thought reliance, including fluency (Briñol, Tormala, & Petty, 2013b), emotion (Petty & Briñol, 2015), mindfulness (Luttrell, Briñol, & Petty, 2014), and most relevant to this comment, embodied inductions (Briñol, Petty, & Wagner, 2012).

In brief, SVT holds that having thoughts is not sufficient for them to have an impact on judgment and behavior. Rather, one must also think that those thoughts are valid to use either because the thoughts seem correct (called *cognitive validation*) or people feel good about or like them (*affective validation*; Briñol et al., 2018). As thought validity increases, so too does the influence of those thoughts on subsequent judgments. In our view, SVT can accommodate many of the separation-connection effects reviewed by L&S, but importantly, it also points to several potential moderators not previously considered in this domain. This comment illustrates how some of the general findings from SVT can be usefully applied to and potentially advance the separation-connection theory.

First, consider how grounded procedures can affect perceived thought validity. In the initial study on cleansing, the presumption was that because of the strong link between cleansing and removing dirt, cleansing would be especially likely to wash away negative thoughts and states (Lee & Schwarz, 2011; Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006). However, because SVT views cleansing as a general invalidating action (associated with disliking something), it can be applied to positive and negative thoughts alike. Subsequent research on cleansing confirmed this prediction (Florack, Kleber, Busch, & Stöhr, 2014). Similar to any other embodied action linked to invalidation such as head shaking (Briñol & Petty, 2003), postural slumping (Briñol, Petty, & Wagner, 2009), frowning (Paredes, Stavraki, Briñol, & Petty, 2013), or throwing something away (Briñol et al., 2013a), cleansing procedures can reduce the effect of virtually any thought (or goal, or memory, and so on) if they operate by undermining thought validity.

Second, SVT holds that the meaning of an action is critical for determining its impact, not the action itself. For example, although cleansing is typically seen as removing something bad (e.g., dirt), it is possible for the same action to be viewed as adding something good (purity). If so, according to SVT, the impact would be reversed. In an illustrative study, Kim, Lee, Duhachek, Briñol, and Petty (2018) had participants think about a recent time they did something wrong and then gave them the opportunity to wash their hands. When the action of washing was framed as removing dirt (the default meaning), the results showed that guilt over the wrong action decreased, replicating the original effect of hand washing. In contrast, when the same action was framed as *adding* purification to the body to help listen to one's mind, the experienced guilt increased, reversing the original effect.

Beyond the meaning of particular actions, the meaning of the self as an origin or destination to which thoughts are connected or separated is also important. Although the self tends to be associated with high validity by default, changing its meaning (from high to low validity or vice versa) can change the effect of grounded procedures on thought usage (Gascó, Briñol, Santos, Petty, & Horcajo, 2018).

Third, consistent with SVT predictions (Briñol et al., 2013a), L&S propose that separation and connection manipulations produce stronger effects when they involve physical actions rather than simulations. Briñol et al. (2017a) offered several reasons to explain why effects can be stronger when inductions involve actual bodily responses. For example, having the body engaged in any induction can activate a link to the self. The active-self account of prime-to-behavior effects suggests that primes can change the content of one's self-concept and linking the prime to the self-concept increases the impact of primes on judgments and behavior (Wheeler, DeMarree, & Petty, 2007). Perhaps

performing physical actions such as washing one's hands makes a stronger link to the self and thus people feel cleaner compared to merely seeing or imagining cleaning.

By focusing on the particular procedures of separation-connection, L&S have developed useful but rather specific rationales for why the particular inductions of interest (e.g., cleansing) would matter. Using SVT as a more general framework, we noted the importance of considering how moderators can contribute to specifying when separation and connecting procedures would be expected to operate by affecting perceived validity. We highlighted how the meaning of the action can matter, but SVT also points to other moderators such as the timing of the inductions (e.g., does cleansing precede or come after thought generation?). As was the case for other variables (e.g., ease, emotion, and power), we hope that SVT can contribute to understanding and advancing separation-connection effects.

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