



Case Report

Distanced self-talk changes how people conceptualize the self[☆]Izzy Gainsburg^{*}, Ethan Kross^{*}

University of Michigan, United States of America

ARTICLE INFO

This paper has been recommended for acceptance by Roger Giner-Sorolla

ABSTRACT

Converging evidence indicates that *distanced self-talk* (i.e., using one's own name and other non-first person pronouns to refer to the self) promotes self-control and wise reasoning. However, no research has examined how this process affects how people conceptualize the self. We addressed this issue across two experiments. In Study 1, participants who were randomly assigned to describe themselves using their own name (vs. I) used more abstract descriptors and talked less about their social identities. Study 2 directly replicated these effects in a high-powered pre-registered experiment. It also demonstrated that using one's name to think about the self led to greater shifts in self-concept than those associated with thinking about other people (i.e., a "socially distant" target). Together, these findings demonstrate how subtle shifts in language that promote psychological distance influence the way people cognitively represent the self. They also highlight the need for future research to distinguish between self- and social distance.

1. Introduction

Jennifer Lawrence, the Hollywood actress, was getting anxious. The New York Times interviewer was asking her heavy-hitting questions about how she changed over time. As she shifted uncomfortably in her seat, Lawrence spontaneously muttered, "O.K., get a hold of yourself, Jennifer. This isn't therapy" (Barnes, 2015).

Although it might appear odd at first blush, Lawrence's use of her own name to refer to herself when thinking about a stressful situation is consistent with a growing body of research indicating that this kind of "distanced self-talk" (i.e., referring to oneself using one's own name and other non-first person pronouns) facilitates emotion-regulation (Dolcos & Albarracín, 2014; Kross et al., 2014; Nook, Schleider, & Somerville, 2017; Streamer, Seery, Kondrack, Lamarche, & Saltsman, 2017; for a review see, Kross & Ayduk, 2017) and elements of wise reasoning, such as intellectual humility and dialectical thinking (Grossmann & Kross, 2014). This research leaves open, however, an arguably more basic question: how does thinking about the self using one's own name (vs. I) influence people's self-concept—the collection of traits, social identities, and other features that comprise identity?

1.1. The malleable self

How people think about themselves in any given moment—their

active self-concept—is both the product of a chronic, stable self-concept stored in long-term memory and features of the situation they are in (DeSteno & Salovey, 1997; Markus & Wurf, 1987; McConnell, 2011; Wheeler, DeMarree, & Petty, 2007). Thus, people's active self-concept is malleable and dependent on social context.

Empirical work indicates that a wide range of contextual factors influence people's self-concept, including subtle priming procedures (LeBoeuf & Estes, 2004; Schubert & Häfner, 2003), current mood (DeSteno & Salovey, 1997), similarity or distinctiveness relative to others in one's local environment (Leonardelli, Pickett, & Brewer, 2010; Rios Morrison & Wheeler, 2010), cultural context (Bender & Ng, 2009), and the social role prescribed in a situation (Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993).

In the priming literature, for instance, it has been shown that priming African-American stereotypes can increase the activation of similar traits in oneself (DeMarree, Wheeler, & Petty, 2003). Outside of the laboratory, a longitudinal study of female STEM majors in a calculus class showed that having female (vs. male) instructors increased women's (but not men's) self-identification with math, and in turn, their attitudes toward and self-efficacy for mathematics. This latter example, in particular, illustrates how contextual influences on self-concept can mediate important motivational and behavioral outcomes (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Consistent with this idea, prior research indicates that subtle shifts in self-concept can influence a range of consequential

[☆] This research was supported in part by the Department of Psychology.

Special thanks to the Self-Control Lab and Amena Khan for help with coding.

^{*} Corresponding authors at: Department of Psychology, 530 Church Street, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, United States of America.

E-mail addresses: izzyg@umich.edu (I. Gainsburg), ekross@umich.edu (E. Kross).

outcomes including motivation (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986), social judgment (e.g., Fong & Markus, 1982), and moral behavior (e.g., Mazar, Amir, & Arieli, 2008).

Most research demonstrating the malleability of self-concept, however, has focused on how incidental, contextual factors influence people's self-concept. Comparatively less attention has focused on intentional strategies people can use to see the self differently. Here we examine the possibility that one potential mechanism to address this gap is distanced self-talk.

1.2. Language as a lever for self-concept change

Prior work showing that language influences self-concept supports the idea that a subtle linguistic shift, such as distanced self-talk, could have consequences for how we see the self. Most of this prior work, however, has focused on how language affects independence and interdependence. For instance, manipulations that incidentally prime first-person plural pronouns (e.g., *we*) vs. first-person singular (e.g., *I*) (Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999; Kimmelmeier, 2003; Kühnen & Oyserman, 2002; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001) and prompt bilingual individuals to think in Chinese, rather than English (Trafimow, Silverman, Fan, & Law, 1997), can induce more interdependent self-concepts.

This research suggests that language can be harnessed to change how people see the self. To our knowledge, however, it has only tested the effects of incidental pronoun priming and Chinese vs. English manipulations. By exploring how distanced self-talk affects self-concept, the present research tests a widely accessible and effortless strategy that could intentionally be used to change how people see the self. Supporting the idea that distanced-self talk fits these criteria, prior work indicates that it is a relatively effortless emotion-regulation strategy (Moser et al., 2017; for discussion see Orvell, Ayduk, Moser, Gelman, & Kross, 2019) that is particularly effective for highly stressful experiences (Kross et al., 2014; Orvell et al., 2019). Importantly, prior research provides predictions for how using names to reflect on the self should influence two foundational dimensions of self-concept: abstractness and social identity (Rhee, Uleman, Lee, & Roman, 1995).

1.3. Abstract self-concept

The self can be represented with different levels of abstractness and concreteness. Abstract representations of the self are central to self-concept, context invariant, and more conceptual. Concrete features, on the other hand, are more peripheral to an object's meaning, more context-specific, and more tangible (Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006; Soderberg, Callahan, Kochersberger, Amit, & Ledgerwood, 2015; Trope & Liberman, 2010; Wakslak, Trope, & Liberman, 2012). Because using one's own name to think about the self (i.e., distanced self-talk) increases psychological distance (Kross et al., 2014; Moser et al., 2017), we expected distanced self-talk to lead people to see themselves in more abstract terms.

This prediction is consistent with research indicating that increased psychological distance from an object shifts a perceiver's representation of a stimulus from its concrete to abstract features (Fujita et al., 2006; Soderberg et al., 2015; Trope & Liberman, 2010; Wakslak et al., 2012). Most relevant to the present research, some prior work has demonstrated links between psychological distance and seeing the self more abstractly. For instance, people typically think of their past and future selves (i.e., their temporally distant selves) in more abstract terms than their present selves (Hershfield & Maglio, 2019; Pronin & Ross, 2006; Wakslak et al., 2012; Wakslak, Nussbaum, Liberman, & Trope, 2008). Relatedly, when people recall vivid memories (which are more rich with concrete detail), they are more likely to be from a first-person, rather than third-person, visual perspective (i.e., self-distance; Libby & Eibach, 2002). In sum, the research cited above suggests a relationship

between self-distance and abstraction, but no work has experimentally tested how distanced self-talk influences self-concept or abstraction. Goal one of the present research was to test this prediction.

1.4. Social identities

Another way in which self-concepts can vary is in the relative salience of people's social identities. Social identities are defined by the social roles that people inhabit (e.g., role in school as student or teacher; role in the family as a mother or sibling) and the social groups they belong to (e.g., race, nationality, religion, etc.) (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979; for a review see Thoits & Virshup, 1997). As is the case with other components of self-concept, the relative salience of social identities in one's active self-concept can vary across contexts. With respect to how using one's name to reflect on the self should influence the salience of people's social identities, prior research provides mixed forecasts.

On the one hand, because given names are used to distinguish the self from other people, thinking about the self using one's own name might reinforce the idea of an autonomous, distinct self and decrease the salience one's social identities. In other words, names are a tool for individuating people, and thus may call to mind unique, individuating features of the self, as opposed to one's interconnectedness with other people or groups.

Another reason that distanced self-talk might decrease the salience one's social identities stems from construal level theory. Both empirical work and theory suggest that social identities are often more active in some contexts than others (e.g., a doctor when in the hospital but a mother when at home) (Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Stets & Burke, 2000). However, if distanced self-talk results in a more abstract construal of the self, it might also decrease the salience of social identities. Consistent with this idea, prior research indicates that temporal distancing manipulations lead people to see their personality as more consistent across social roles (Donahue et al., 1993).

Other research, however, demonstrates that visualizing the self from a third-person perspective, which is promoted by using names to refer to the self (Kross et al., 2014), increases the salience of information concerning group relations (Cohen & Gunz, 2002) and of relational schemas around romantic partners (Marigold, Eibach, Libby, Ross, & Holmes, 2015). Names also can communicate social identities such as gender (Slepian & Galinsky, 2016), race (Carpusor & Loges, 2006; Fryer Jr. & Levitt, 2004), religion, and family affiliation. Thus, thinking about the self using one's own name may activate the social identities embedded in one's own name.

In sum, prior research suggests plausible accounts for why distanced self-talk could either increase or decrease the salience of social identities in self-concept. Goal two of the present research was to adjudicate between these competing hypotheses.

1.5. Research overview

Two experiments examined these issues. In Study 1, participants completed a classic measure of self-concept (the Twenty Statements Test; Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) by either answering "Who am I?" or "Who is [participant's name]?" After participants completed the study we coded their responses for abstractness and social identities. Study 2 was designed to directly replicate Study 1 and introduce a third condition where participants answered "Who am I?" in the shoes of their best friend. This condition was used to calibrate the effects of distanced-self talk by examining whether using one's own name to think about the self leads to changes in self-concept that are akin to thinking about another person entirely (i.e., a "socially distant" target). We report all measures, manipulations, and exclusions in these studies.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

We recruited 100 individuals from the United States through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The survey automatically closed after 100 participants fully completed the study, but an additional 27 people participated despite not fully finishing the survey. Of these 127 individuals, 2 were excluded on a priori grounds because English was not their first language, 10 were excluded for not providing their first name, and 12 were excluded for not writing any self-descriptions. The final sample of 103 participants (59.8% Female, 82.2% White, $M_{\text{age}} = 32.65$) had 80% power to detect an effect size of $d = 0.56$ for an independent samples t -test.

2.1.2. Procedure

Participants were told they would reflect on their identity. Next, all participants typed their first name into the survey so it could be piped into the Twenty Statements Test. Participants randomly assigned to the "I" Condition ($N = 51$) provided up to twenty answers to the question, "Who am I?" with each answer prompted by "I am...".

Participants in the "Name" Condition ($N = 52$) completed the identical task, except they answered "Who is [participant's name]?" with the prompts "[Participant's name] is..." (their provided name appeared instead of "[participant's name]"). Finally, participants disclosed their demographic information.

2.1.3. Coding schemes

2.1.3.1. Abstractness. We coded for self-statement abstractness in two ways. First, we used a dictionary with abstractness-concreteness ratings of over 40,000 words and two-word phrases (1 = concrete to 5 = abstract; Brysbaert, Warriner, & Kuperman, 2014). Responses were cleaned for typos, punctuation (e.g., removing periods), and articles (e.g., "a student" vs. "student") to match dictionary entries. Using these criteria, 78.8% responses were matched to dictionary entries; responses that did not match the dictionary were excluded from analyses involving this measure. Self-concept abstractness was calculated by averaging abstractness scores across responses for each participant ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.57$).

We also coded for whether participants used traits to describe the self using a popular coding scheme for the Twenty Statements Test that includes multiple categories, including traits (Rhee et al., 1995). We focused on traits as a measure of abstractness because traits represent general characteristics about the self that transcend specific contexts. They are thus abstract in that they are not grounded in concrete, momentary experiences (for similar rationale, see Rim, Uleman, & Trope, 2009). In this vein, prior research indicates that psychological distance manipulations lead people to describe themselves more in terms of traits (Pronin & Ross, 2006), to spontaneously infer traits in others based on their behavior (Rim et al., 2009), and to expect more trait-consistent behavior themselves (Wakslak et al., 2008). Two condition-blind coders categorized all responses for traits (e.g., "smart," "funny") (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.87$). Discrepancies between coders were resolved through conversation. For hypothesis testing, we calculated each participants' proportion of traits ($M = 0.579$, $SD = 0.259$).

2.1.3.2. Social identities. The Rhee et al. (1995) coding scheme that we used to identify traits also contains a category for social identities (e.g., "student," "a father," "African-American"). Two condition-blind coders categorized all responses for social identities using this coding system (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.90$); discrepancies between coders were again resolved through conversation. For hypothesis testing, we calculated each participant's proportion of social identities ($M = 0.230$, $SD = 0.247$).¹

¹ The Supplement reports the results of exploratory analyses performed on additional dimensions of the Rhee et al. (1995) coding system that we did not have predictions about.

2.2. Results and discussion

Participants in the "Name" (vs. I) condition described themselves using terms that had higher abstractness ratings ($M_{\text{Name}} = 3.54$, $SD_{\text{Name}} = 0.42$, $M_I = 3.14$, $SD_I = 0.64$, $t(101) = 3.73$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.74$). The words they used to describe themselves also contained a greater proportion of traits ($M_{\text{Name}} = 0.648$, $SD_{\text{Name}} = 0.223$, $M_I = 0.505$, $SD_I = 0.274$, $t(101) = 2.90$, $p = .005$, $d = 0.57$), and smaller proportion of social identities ($M_{\text{Name}} = 0.152$, $SD_{\text{Name}} = 0.180$, $M_I = 0.310$, $SD_I = 0.280$, $t(101) = 3.43$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.68$).

The fact that using one's name (vs. I) to refer to the self increased abstractness of self-concept and decreased the salience of social identities is consistent with construal-level theory, which suggests that a manipulation of psychological distance should result in representations of the self that are more abstract and less defined by social context. Still, it is difficult to ascertain from Study 1 the degree to which distanced self-talk affects the abstractness of self-concept and the salience of social identities. Thus, in Study 2 we compared the effects of distanced-self talk on self-concept to those of another dimension of psychological distance—social distance—as a means of calibrating the effects of distanced-self talk.

3. Study 2

Study 2 had two goals. First, we aimed to replicate the findings from Study 1. Second, we aimed to calibrate the effects of distanced-self talk by examining whether using one's own name to think about the self leads to changes in self-concept that are akin to thinking about another person entirely (i.e., a "socially distant" target). Specifically, we added a condition where participants completed the Twenty Statements Test about their best friend by answering the question "Who am I?" in the shoes of their best friend.

We chose social distance as a comparison dimension because differences in how people perceive the self versus others have been of longstanding interest in social psychology (Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Pronin, 2008) and because prior work has used social distance as a comparison dimension when examining the effects of temporal distance on abstract person representation (Pronin & Ross, 2006). Following prior work (Grossmann & Kross, 2014; Pronin & Ross, 2006), we chose a best friend as the socially distant target because the minimal social distance of a best friend makes for an appropriate comparison against the subtlety of the distanced self-talk manipulation. Based on prior work comparing the effects of self-distance and social distance in the domain of wise reasoning (Grossmann & Kross, 2014), we predicted that distanced self-talk would lead to changes in self-concept that are comparable to how people think about their best friend.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

We powered Study 2 to achieve 80% power to detect an effect size of $d = 0.21$, which was the lower bound of the confidence interval for the smallest estimated effect size observed in Study 1, $d = -0.48$, 95% CI $[-0.75, -0.21]$.² A sample size of 357 participants per condition (1071 total) were required to achieve this statistical power. To account for potential exclusions, we recruited 1200 total participants. An additional 345 additional participants provided data before the survey closed. This sample size, as well as plans for analyses, was pre-registered online (osf.io/kt4dg). Of these 1545, 392 were excluded on a priori grounds following the same criteria as Study 1 (27 because English was not their first language, 132 for not providing a name, and 233 for not writing any self-descriptions). Exclusions did not differ by condition. This left a final sample of 1153 participants (53.4% Female,

² The supplement contains an additional study not reported in the main text that informs this effect size estimate and replicates Study 1.

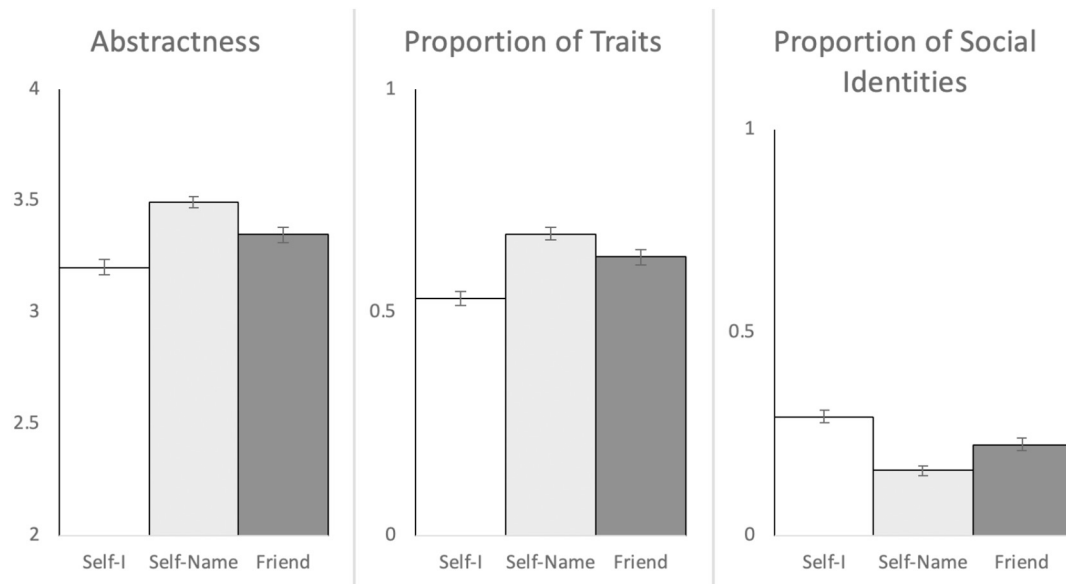


Fig. 1. Study 2 results for all dependent variables. Error bars represent ± 1 Standard Error.

72.0% White, $M_{\text{age}} = 36.5$).

3.1.2. Procedure

The procedure was identical to Study 1, with the following exceptions. First, all participants provided their given name *and* the given name of a best friend. Second, we added a third condition where participants completed the Twenty Statements Test about their best friend by imagining that they were their best friend and subsequently using “I” to describe their best friend. Finally, participants answered several additional questions in the demographics section that were administered for exploratory analyses; they were not analyzed for the present research (for details, see supplement).

3.1.3. Coding schemes

We used the same protocol to code for abstractness (82.1% responses matched to dictionary entries; $M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.63$), traits (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.92$; $M = 0.611$, $SD = 0.306$), and social identities (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.93$; $M = 0.225$, $SD = 0.285$) that we used in Study 1.

3.2. Results and discussion

3.2.1. Replication of Study 1

Directly replicating the Study 1 results, participants in the “Name” (vs. “I”) Condition answered with higher abstractness ratings ($M_{\text{Name}} = 3.50$, $SD_{\text{Name}} = 0.48$, $M_I = 3.20$, $SD_I = 0.68$, $t(769) = 6.97$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.51$), a greater proportion of traits ($M_{\text{Name}} = 0.677$, $SD_{\text{Name}} = 0.271$, $M_I = 0.531$, $SD_I = 0.315$, $t(775) = 6.89$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.49$), and a smaller proportion of social identities ($M_{\text{Name}} = 0.160$, $SD_{\text{Name}} = 0.229$, $M_I = 0.293$, $SD_I = 0.312$, $t(775) = 6.75$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.48$). See Fig. 1.

3.2.2. Calibrating the Effect of Distanced Self-Talk on Self-Concept: Self-Distance vs. Social Distance

These analyses examined whether using one's name to think about the self leads to shifts in self-concept that are similar to the shifts in mental representations that people experience when they think about someone else entirely.³

³ Analyses are from a one-way (Self-I vs. Self-Name vs. Friend) ANOVA. The omnibus effect was significant for abstractness ratings ($F(2, 1141) = 22.18$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.037$), proportion of traits ($F(2, 1150) = 23.19$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.039$), and proportion of social identities ($F(2, 1150) = 21.74$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.036$).

To examine this question, we first compared participants in the “Friend” condition to those in the “Self-I” condition. Consistent with predictions, participants in the “Friend” (vs. “Self-I”) condition answered with higher abstractness ratings ($M_{\text{Friend}} = 3.35$, $SD_{\text{Friend}} = 0.67$, $t(753) = 3.01$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.22$), a greater proportion of traits ($M_{\text{Friend}} = 0.624$, $SD_{\text{Friend}} = 0.314$, $t(775) = 4.07$, $t(748)$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.30$), and a smaller proportion of social identities ($M_{\text{Friend}} = 0.224$, $SD_{\text{Friend}} = 0.292$, $t(758) = 3.11$, $p = .002$, $d = -0.23$). In other words, thinking about a friend led to changes in person descriptions that were in the same direction as thinking about the self from a distanced perspective.

Next, we compared the responses of participants in the “Self-Name” condition to those in the “Friend” condition to identify whether the changes in self concept promoted by self-distance are akin to how people mental represent other people (i.e., social distance). As Fig. 1 illustrates, participants in the “Self-Name” (vs. “Friend”) condition answered with even higher abstractness ratings ($t(760) = 3.51$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.25$), a greater proportion of traits ($t(767) = 2.47$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.18$), and a smaller proportion of social identities ($t(767) = 3.39$, $p = .001$, $d = -0.24$). See the supplement for another study that replicates the Self-I vs. Self-Name effects and additional analyses examining the Self-Name vs. Friend comparison.

These findings support the idea that *self-distance* (i.e., thinking about the self from an observer perspective) and *social distance* (i.e., thinking about another person) constitute different dimensions of psychological distance. Although there are theoretical reasons underlying this distinction (self-distance is distance from the “here and now” self, whose private thoughts and feelings are known; social distance involves distance between the self and other people altogether, whose private thoughts and feelings cannot possibly be known to the same extent), the present work provides empirical data to support this. Indeed, if self-distance were merely another type of social distance, then one would expect that thinking about the self from a distanced perspective would have a *weaker* effect on abstract thinking than thinking about another person altogether (even if that person is a best friend)—instead, we found that the self-distancing had a *stronger* effect on abstraction than thinking about a best friend.

In addition, the results of Study 2 suggest that not all dimensions of psychological distance influence mental construal to the same degree, paving the way for new research that further tests the effects of different dimensions and manipulations of psychological distance against one another. Finally, it suggests that self-distancing via distanced self-

talk is a tool for shifting self-concept: the observed effect sizes were all medium-sized, and were all significantly larger than the effects of thinking about another person entirely.

4. General discussion

The present research explored how distanced self-talk affects the ways people conceptualize the self. Across two studies, people thinking about themselves using their own name (vs. I) construed the self more abstractly and less in terms of their social identities. In addition, this type of distanced self-talk had stronger effects than social distance: people thinking about the self using their own name, compared to those thinking about a best friend, used more abstract language and fewer social identities in their person descriptions. Broadly, these findings show how subtle shifts in language can be harnessed to change how people cognitively represent the self. The present research has three substantive sets of theoretical implications.

First, our findings build on research on self and identity by demonstrating a simple, theoretically grounded way people can shift their self-concept. Prior research indicates that self-concept is malleable and context-dependent (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Wang, Wu, Liu, Wu, & Han, 2015). In addition, prior work has shown that the language people use can affect self-concept (Gardner et al., 1999; Kimmelmeier, 2003; Kühnen & Oyserman, 2002; Trafimow et al., 1991; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). Despite this work, no research has explored tools for intentionally or effortlessly changing people's self-concept; the prior work has all explored incidental cues that change self-concept (e.g., subliminal priming) or tools that are not accessible to the general population (e.g., bicultural individuals thinking about themselves using a different language). In contrast, distanced self-talk via thinking about the self using one's own name has been shown to be cognitively effortless (Moser et al., 2017) and accessible, even for young children (White et al., 2017).

Although the present research used two methods of measuring abstractness of self-concept, it only used one method for measuring social identities. Future research should focus on conceptually replicating the effect of self-talk on the accessibility of social identities to paint a richer picture of this psychological shift, such as measuring concept accessibility using measures such as response time (e.g., Markus, 1977). More broadly, future work should examine the relationship between self-distancing and self-concept in cultures where the self is conceptualized differently (e.g., in interdependent cultures; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), as well as with related constructs such as identity integration (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005) or self-concept clarity (Campbell, 1990).

Second, the present work contributes to research on self-distancing by showing that distanced self-talk has implications beyond emotion-regulation and wise reasoning—it affects how we construe the self. Understanding how distanced self-talk affects self-concept could inform future research into the mechanisms through which self-distancing fosters emotion-regulation and wise-reasoning. For instance, by enhancing an abstract self-concept, distanced self-talk may activate important values to the self that act as a buffer against context-specific stressors (akin to a self-affirmation process; Sherman & Cohen, 2006) or higher-level goals that ward off temptation (Fujita, 2011; Waksalak et al., 2012). Likewise, by showing that distanced self-talk leads people to see the self more similarly to how they see others, the present research offers new potential mechanisms by which self-distancing decreases self-other gaps in wise reasoning (e.g., Grossmann & Kross, 2014).

This latter point speaks to a larger issue in psychology: humans have a fundamental capacity to distinguish the self from others. Moreover, people typically think in fundamentally different ways about the self vs. others. For instance, compared to how they think about others, people make fewer dispositional attributions for their own behavior (Jones & Nisbett, 1971); they have more positive illusions about the self (Taylor & Brown, 1988); and are more loss-averse when making their own

decisions (Polman, 2012). By showing that distanced self-talk leads to shifts in self-concept that are in the same direction as those observed when people conceptualize others, the present research suggests a promising strategy to reduce these gaps in how people think and behave regarding the self versus others. Future research should explore these possibilities.

Third, the present research advances prior work on the intersection of construal level theory and self-concept in several ways. To our knowledge, no research has experimentally demonstrated that distanced self-talk increases abstraction. Instead, prior work on this topic had only explored this relationship with other dimensions of psychological distance (e.g., temporal distance; Pronin & Ross, 2006; Waksalak et al., 2008; Waksalak et al., 2012) or with correlational data showing that the vividness of memories is connected to a first-person (vs. third-person) visual perspective of the self.

In addition, the present research directly compared the effects of self-distance to another dimension of psychological distance for abstract construal. The fact that thinking about the self using one's own name (self-distance) vs. taking the perspective of a best friend (social distance) resulted in even more abstract person representation is consistent with other research showing that different dimensions of psychological distance do not always have equivalent effects (Boroditsky, 2000; Casasanto & Boroditsky, 2008) and can differ in subtle ways such as valence or controllability (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The different magnitude of effects between self- and social-distance highlights the need for future research to distinguish between the qualitative and quantitative differences between different dimensions of psychological distance.

5. Conclusion

Throughout history people have at times referred to themselves using their name (Elledge, 2017; Moreno, Mishra, & Mishra, 2013; Raafilaub & Strassler, 2017; Viswanathan, 1969). Although prior work has suggested that this behavior serves a self-regulatory function, the present work suggests that this behavior can also have basic implications for how we see the self, leading people to think about the self in more abstract terms and less in terms of social identities. Through this lens, thinking about people in terms of their name may not only be a means by which we distinguish between people in our social network, but also a tool for highlighting the core, meaningful features of the self that distinguish ourselves from others.

Acknowledgments

No funding information needs to be included.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2020.103969>.

References

- Barnes, B. (2015). Jennifer Lawrence has no appetite for playing fame games. *The New York Times*, AR58 September.
- Bender, M., & Ng, S. H. (2009). Dynamic biculturalism: Socially connected and individuated unique selves in a globalized world. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 3(3), 199–210.
- Benet-Martínez, V., & Haritatos, J. (2005). Bicultural identity integration (BII): Components and psychosocial antecedents. *Journal of Personality*, 73(4), 1015–1050.
- Boroditsky, L. (2000). Metaphoric structuring: Understanding time through spatial metaphors. *Cognition*, 75(1), 1–28.
- Brybaert, M., Warriner, A. B., & Kuperman, V. (2014). Concrete ratings for 40 thousand generally known English word lemmas. *Behavior Research Methods*, 46(3), 904–911.
- Campbell, J. D. (1990). Self-esteem and clarity of the self-concept. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59(3), 538–549.
- Carpusor, A. G., & Loges, W. E. (2006). Rental discrimination and ethnicity in names. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 36(4), 934–952.

- Casasanto, D., & Boroditsky, L. (2008). Time in the mind: Using space to think about time. *Cognition*, 106(2), 579–593.
- Cohen, D., & Gunz, A. (2002). As seen by the other...: Perspectives on the self in the memories and emotional perceptions of Easterners and Westerners. *Psychological Science: A Journal of the American Psychological Society/APS*, 13(1), 55–59. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9280.00409>.
- DeMarree, K. G., Wheeler, S. C., & Petty, R. E. (2003). The role of self-monitoring in stereotype-to-behavior effects. *Paper presented at the 4th Annual Meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology*, Los Angeles, CA February.
- DeSteno, D., & Salovey, P. (1997). Structural dynamism in the concept of self: A flexible model for a malleable concept. *Review of General Psychology*, 1(4), 389–409.
- Dolcos, S., & Albarracín, D. (2014). The inner speech of behavioral regulation: Intentions and task performance strengthen when you talk to yourself as a You. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 44(6), 636–642.
- Donahue, E. M., Robins, R. W., Roberts, B. W., & John, O. P. (1993). The divided self: Concurrent and longitudinal effects of psychological adjustment and social roles on self-concept differentiation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 64(5), 834–846.
- Elledge, R. (2017). *Use of the third person for self-reference by Jesus and Yahweh: A study of Illeism in the bible and ancient near eastern texts and its implications for Christology*. Vol. 575. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Ethier, K. A., & Deaux, K. (1994). Negotiating social identity when contexts change: Maintaining identification and responding to threat. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67(2), 243–251.
- Fong, G. T., & Markus, H. (1982). Self-schemas and judgments about others. *Social Cognition*, 1(3), 191–204.
- Fryer, R. G., Jr., & Levitt, S. D. (2004). The causes and consequences of distinctively black names. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 119(3), 767–805.
- Fujita, K. (2011). On conceptualizing self-control as more than the effortful inhibition of impulses. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 15(4), 352–366.
- Fujita, K., Henderson, M. D., Eng, J., Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2006). Spatial distance and mental construal of social events. *Psychological Science*, 17(4), 278–282.
- Gardner, W. L., Gabriel, S., & Lee, A. Y. (1999). “I” value freedom, but “we” value relationships: Self-construal priming mirrors cultural differences in judgment. *Psychological Science*, 10(4), 321–326.
- Grossmann, I., & Kross, E. (2014). Exploring Solomon’s paradox: Self-distancing eliminates the self-other asymmetry in wise reasoning about close relationships in younger and older adults. *Psychological Science*, 25(8), 1571–1580. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614535400>.
- Hershfield, H. E., & Maglio, S. J. (2019). When does the present end and the future begin? *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (Advance online publication).
- Jones, E. E., & Nisbett, R. E. (1971). *The actor and the observer: Divergent perceptions of the causes of behavior*. Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press.
- Kemmelmeier, M. (2003). Individualism and attitudes toward affirmative action: Evidence from priming experiments. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 25(2), 111–119.
- Kross, E., & Ayduk, O. (2017). Self-distancing: Theory, research, and current directions. *Advances in experimental social psychology*. Vol. 55. *Advances in experimental social psychology* (pp. 81–136). Academic Press.
- Kross, E., Bruehlman-Sencal, E., Park, J., Burson, A., Dougherty, A., Shaback, H., & Ayduk, O. (2014). Self-talk as a regulatory mechanism: How you do it matters. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106(2), 304–324. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035173>.
- Kuhn, M. H., & McPartland, T. S. (1954). An empirical investigation of self-attitudes. *American Sociological Review*, 19(1), 68–76.
- Kühnen, U., & Oyserman, D. (2002). Thinking about the self influences thinking in general: Cognitive consequences of salient self-concept. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 38(5), 492–499.
- LeBoeuf, R. A., & Estes, Z. (2004). “Fortunately, I’m no Einstein”: Comparison relevance as a determinant of behavioral assimilation and contrast. *Social Cognition*, 22(6), 607–636.
- Leonardelli, G. J., Pickett, C. L., & Brewer, M. B. (2010). Optimal distinctiveness theory: A framework for social identity, social cognition, and intergroup relations. *Advances in experimental social psychology*. Vol. 43. *Advances in experimental social psychology* (pp. 63–113). Academic Press.
- Libby, L. K., & Eibach, R. P. (2002). Looking back in time: Self-concept change affects visual perspective in autobiographical memory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82(2), 167–179.
- Marigold, D. C., Eibach, R. P., Libby, L. K., Ross, M., & Holmes, J. G. (2015). Framing memories of relationship transgressions: How visual imagery perspective activates relational knowledge. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 32(4), 491–508.
- Markus, H. (1977). Self-schemata and processing information about the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 35(2), 63–78.
- Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, 41(9), 954.
- Markus, H., & Wurf, E. (1987). The dynamic self-concept: A social psychological perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 38(1), 299–337.
- Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98(2), 224–253.
- Mazar, N., Amir, O., & Arieli, D. (2008). The dishonesty of honest people: A theory of self-concept maintenance. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 45(6), 633–644.
- McCall, G. J., & Simmons, J. L. (1978). *Identities and interactions: An examination of human associations in everyday life* (Rev. ed.) New York: Free Press.
- McConnell, A. R. (2011). The multiple self-aspects framework: Self-concept representation and its implications. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 15(1), 3–27.
- Moreno, O., Mishra, M., & Mishra, A. (2013). Illeism and decision making. In S. Bottin, & A. Labroo (Vol. Eds.), *NA - advances in consumer research volume*. Vol. 41. Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research.
- Moser, J. S., Dougherty, A., Mattson, W. L., Katz, B., Moran, T. P., Guevarra, D., ... Kross, E. (2017). Third-person self-talk facilitates emotion regulation without engaging cognitive control: Converging evidence from ERP and fMRI. *Scientific Reports*, 7(1), 4519.
- Nook, E. C., Schleider, J. L., & Somerville, L. H. (2017). A linguistic signature of psychological distancing in emotion regulation. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 146(3), 337–346.
- Orvell, A., Ayduk, Ö., Moser, J. S., Gelman, S. A., & Kross, E. (2019). Linguistic shifts: A relatively effortless route to emotion regulation? *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 28(6), 567–573.
- Polman, E. (2012). Self-other decision making and loss aversion. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 119(2), 141–150.
- Pronin, E. (2008). How we see ourselves and how we see others. *Science*, 320(5880), 1177–1180.
- Pronin, E., & Ross, L. (2006). Temporal differences in trait self-ascription: When the self is seen as an other. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(2), 197–209.
- Raaflaub, K. A., & Strassler, R. B. (2017). *The landmark Julius Caesar: The complete works: Gallic war, civil war, Alexandrian war, African war, and Spanish war*. New York: Pantheon.
- Rhee, E., Uleman, J. S., Lee, H. K., & Roman, R. J. (1995). Spontaneous self-descriptions and ethnic identities in individualistic and collectivistic cultures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(1), 142–152.
- Rim, S., Uleman, J. S., & Trope, Y. (2009). Spontaneous trait inference and construal level theory: Psychological distance increases nonconscious trait thinking. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45(5), 1088–1097.
- Rios Morrison, K., & Wheeler, S. C. (2010). Nonconformity defines the self: The role of minority opinion status in self-concept clarity. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 36(3), 297–308.
- Schubert, T. W., & Häfner, M. (2003). Contrast from social stereotypes in automatic behavior. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 39(6), 577–584.
- Sherman, D. K., & Cohen, G. L. (2006). The psychology of self-defense: Self-affirmation theory. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 38, 183–242.
- Slepian, M. L., & Galinsky, A. D. (2016). The voiced pronunciation of initial phonemes predicts the gender of names. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 110(4), 509–527.
- Soderberg, C. K., Callahan, S. P., Kochersberger, A. O., Amit, E., & Ledgerwood, A. (2015). The effects of psychological distance on abstraction: Two meta-analyses. *Psychological Bulletin*, 141(3), 525–548.
- Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (2000). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 224–237.
- Streamer, L., Seery, M. D., Kondrack, C. L., Lamarche, V. M., & Saltsman, T. L. (2017). Not I, but she: The beneficial effects of self-distancing on challenge/threat cardiovascular responses. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 70, 235–241. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2016.11.008>.
- Tajfel, H., Turner, J. C., Austin, W. G., & Worchel, S. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. *Organizational identity: A reader* (pp. 56–65).
- Taylor, S. E., & Brown, J. D. (1988). Illusion and well-being: A social psychological perspective on mental health. *Psychological Bulletin*, 103(2), 193–210.
- Thoits, P. A., & Virshup, L. K. (1997). Me’s and we’s: Forms and functions of social identities. In R. D. Ashmore, & L. J. Jussim (Eds.), *Self and identity: Fundamental issues* (pp. 106–133). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Trafimow, D., Silverman, E. S., Fan, R. M. T., & Law, J. S. (1997). The effects of language and priming on the relative accessibility of the private self and the collective self. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 28(1), 107–123.
- Trafimow, D., Triandis, H. C., & Goto, S. G. (1991). Some tests of the distinction between the private self and the collective self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(5), 649–655.
- Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2010). Construal-level theory of psychological distance. *Psychological Review*, 117(2), 440–463. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018963>.
- Viswanathan, S. (1969). “Illeism with a difference” in certain middle plays of Shakespeare. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 20(4), 407–415.
- Vohs, K. D., & Heatherton, T. F. (2001). Self-esteem and threats to self: Implications for self-construals and interpersonal perceptions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81(6), 1103–1118.
- Wakslak, C. J., Nussbaum, S., Liberman, N., & Trope, Y. (2008). Representations of the self in the near and distant future. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95(4), 757–773.
- Wakslak, C. J., Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2012). Self conceptualization, self knowledge, and regulatory scope: A construal level view. In S. Vazire, & T. D. Wilson (Eds.), *Handbook of self knowledge*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Wang, C., Wu, B., Liu, Y., Wu, X., & Han, S. (2015). Challenging emotional prejudice by changing self-concept: Priming independent self-construal reduces racial in-group bias in neural responses to other’s pain. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 10(9), 1195–1201.
- Wheeler, S. C., DeMarree, K. G., & Petty, R. E. (2007). Understanding the role of the self in prime-to-behavior effects: The active-self account. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 11(3), 234–261.
- White, R. E., Prager, E. O., Schaefer, C., Kross, E., Duckworth, A. L., & Carlson, S. M. (2017). The “Batman Effect”: Improving perseverance in young children. *Child Development*, 88(5), 1563–1571.