



## Weight-related actual and ideal self-states, discrepancies, and shame, guilt, and pride: Examining associations within the process model of self-conscious emotions

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine the associations between women's actual:ideal weight-related self-discrepancies and experiences of weight-related shame, guilt, and authentic pride using self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987) and self-conscious emotion (Tracy & Robins, 2004) theories as guiding frameworks. Participants ( $N=398$ ) completed self-report questionnaires. Main analyses involved polynomial regressions, followed by the computation and evaluation of response surface values. Actual and ideal weight self-states were related to shame ( $R^2 = .35$ ), guilt ( $R^2 = .25$ ), and authentic pride ( $R^2 = .08$ ). When the discrepancy between actual and ideal weights increased, shame and guilt also increased, while authentic pride decreased. Findings provide partial support for self-discrepancy theory and the process model of self-conscious emotions. Experiencing weight-related self-discrepancies may be important cognitive appraisals related to shame, guilt, and authentic pride. Further research is needed exploring the relations between self-discrepancies and a range of weight-related self-conscious emotions.

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### Introduction

Over 70% of older adolescent girls and 80% of adult women are dissatisfied with their body weight (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2005; Neighbors & Sobal, 2007). While the thin ideal continues to be strongly promoted through the mass media and cultural discourse, the prevalence of overweight and obesity has increased steadily (Ogden, Carroll, Curtin, McDowell, Tabak, & Flegal, 2006), displacing the average women's body weight further away from the already unattainable ideal. Discrepancies between actual and ideal weight standards (Thompson & van den Berg, 2002) can drive negative body image perceptions (Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2006; Stice & Shaw, 2002; Swami & Tovée, 2009; Szymanski & Cash, 1995). These discrepancies can also have important implications for the development of a range of maladaptive behaviors and emotions such as decreased self-esteem, happiness and increased disordered eating, depressive symptoms, body-related shame (e.g., Bessenoff & Snow, 2006; Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Eisenberg, 2006; Stice

& Shaw, 2002; Swami, Begum, & Petrides, 2010). While informative, the majority of extant weight-related self-discrepancy research has not been theoretically based and has limited practical implications. Conducting theoretically grounded research may help inform interventions aimed at promoting mental and physical health among women. This study attempts to fill this gap.

### Self-Discrepancy Theory

Based on self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), individuals compare their actual self to self-evaluative ideal self standards (i.e., representation of attributes the individual would like to possess). Subsequently, differences between a woman's actual attributes and the attributes she wishes to attain (ideal self) may give rise to negative emotions, including the self-conscious emotion of shame (Higgins, 1987). These propositions have been tested, and support for an association between actual:ideal self-discrepancies and shame has been reported both generally (Tangney, Niedenthal, Covert, & Barlow, 1998), and specific to body shape and weight (Bessenoff & Snow, 2006; McKinley, 1998). Positive associations between actual:ideal discrepancies and shame related to appearance, body shape, and weight have been reported in female (Bessenoff & Snow, 2006) and mixed sex (McKinley, 1998) samples. However, there is little available data regarding the links

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between weight and body-focused self-discrepancies and other self-conscious emotions such as guilt and authentic pride. The model of self-conscious emotions (Tracy & Robins, 2004) is a framework that complements self-discrepancy theory and may help provide additional insights into associations between discrepancies and a wide-range of self-conscious emotional experiences is.

### Process Model of Self-Conscious Emotions

Self-conscious emotions, such as shame, guilt, and authentic pride, are distinct emotions that involve reciprocal social judgment and evaluations as well as a set of standards on which to evaluate the self and others (Lewis, Stanger, Sullivan, & Barone, 1991; Tracy & Robins, 2004). Shame is an acutely painful emotion that individuals experience when they fail to meet internalized social standards. Shame implies the perceived or feared loss of social status and a failure to live up to one's own standards of excellence, with an attributional focus on internal, stable, uncontrollable, and deeply rooted global causes (e.g., "I am a fat person"; Lewis, 1971; Tracy & Robins, 2006). Guilt is a negative emotion involving a sense of tension, remorse, and regret over a behavior, with an attributional focus on internal, unstable, controllable, and specific causes (e.g., "I ate too many cookies and gained weight"; Lewis, 1971; Tracy & Robins, 2006). Thus, shame involves negative feelings about the self, whereas guilt involves negative feelings about a specific behavior or action taken by the self. Authentic pride is a pleasant emotion in response to meeting internalized social standards and is believed to result from positive attributions to internal, unstable, controllable, and specific causes as well as feelings of genuine accomplishment (e.g., "I am satisfied with eating healthy to maintain my weight"; Tangney, 1999). Based on the process model of self-conscious emotions, weight-related self-discrepancies may be positively related to the self-conscious emotions of shame and guilt, and negatively related to authentic pride.

To date, there has been an under-representation of the guilt and pride emotions in comparison to shame in studies linking self-discrepancies and self-conscious emotions. It is important to examine whether actual:ideal discrepancies elicit both shame and guilt emotions given that they have distinct antecedents, outcomes, and phenomenological experiences (Lewis, 2008; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996) that could be modifiable and targeted in intervention and clinical practice. It is also important to investigate whether experiences of actual:ideal congruence (i.e., lack of discrepancy) elicits positive self-conscious emotions for several reasons. In particular, authentic pride has been linked to feelings of achievement (e.g., successful, ability), increased self-esteem, adaptive personality factors, and motivation to engage in goal-directed behaviors such as physical activity (e.g., Carver, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2010; French, Story, Downes, Resnick, & Blum, 1995; Sabiston, Brunet, Kowalski, Wilson, Mack, & Crocker, 2010; Tracy & Robins, 2007) – a distinct contrast from the maladaptive correlates and outcomes linked to shame and guilt. Thus, research examining the relations between weight-related self-discrepancies and guilt and pride may offer unique contributions to the literature on self-conscious emotions and offer support for the process model of self-conscious emotions.

Based on causal attributions, shame is likely to be the primary negative self-conscious emotion elicited from failure to attain one's ideal weight (Tangney et al., 1998) because shame involves negative evaluations of the *self* (e.g., one's perceptions of body weight), whereas the focus of guilt is on a specific behavior (e.g., physical inactivity). Similarly, authentic pride focuses on a specific behavior in response to achieving one's ideal weight. Thus, feelings of guilt and authentic pride are apt to be less intense compared to shame, yet still present, in relation to weight discrepancies focused on the self. Furthermore, based on the process

model of self-conscious emotions (Tracy & Robins, 2004), self-conscious emotions are elicited when there is *agreement* in actual and ideal self-states such that increasing values on both self-states are related to higher reports of shame and guilt and lower reports of authentic pride. For example, an overweight woman who gains weight may feel increasingly ashamed as her weight goes up, guilty for her failed attempts at weight loss, and less pride by increasing the discrepancy between her current weight and her goal (ideal) weight of 15 pounds lighter. Also, a larger *discrepancy* between one's actual self and one's ideal self is proposed to link to higher reports of shame and guilt whereas a lower or minimal discrepancy is associated with experiences of authentic pride. For instance, a woman who currently weighs 150 pounds and wants to weigh 135 pounds may feel greater shame than if she currently weighed 145 pounds. Finally, if the actual self-state is 'worse than' the ideal self-state, shame and guilt are more likely to be elicited compared to situations when the ideal self is in line with, or better than, the actual self-state. That is, a woman is more likely to feel ashamed or guilty if she weighs 30 pounds more than she wants to weigh, compared to if she achieved her weight goal or was thinner than her ideal weight. Hence, there are a number of theoretically based relations between actual:ideal self-discrepancy and the self-conscious emotions of shame, guilt, and authentic pride that remain unexplored.

Researchers have rarely tested the unique agreement, discrepancy, and direction of the associations between self-discrepancies and self-conscious emotions. This may be a statistical/measurement challenge due to the use of simple difference scores in previous studies (i.e., ideal ratings minus actual ratings). However, polynomial regression and response surface methods have been proposed as superior alternatives to the use of difference scores (Cafri, Van den Berg, & Brannick, 2010; Edwards, 2002; Kazén & Kuhl, 2011; Shanock, Baran, Gentry, Pattison, & Heggstad, 2010) since they can help test unique associations between agreement, discrepancies, and direction of the discrepancies and the outcomes. Given the limitations of simple difference scores, including reduced reliability, ambiguity, confounded effects, untested constraints, and dimension reduction (Edwards, 2002), polynomial regression enables the retention of the independent effects of each component (e.g., actual and ideal self-states). When used with response surface methodology, agreement, degree of discrepancy, and direction of discrepancy between the actual and ideal weight self-states and the relation to each of the self-conscious emotions can be examined.

In light of the advantages of polynomial regression and response surface values, researchers have started to employ these methods to test actual and ideal self-states. In general, the use of this analytic strategy has enabled researchers to predict a higher proportion of the variance in eating disorder and muscle dysmorphia symptoms when compared to the use of difference scores (Cafri et al., 2010). Furthermore, researchers have found that the independent factors of actual and ideal self-states relate differently to physical activity, eating disorder symptoms, and muscle dysmorphia symptoms (Brunet, Sabiston, Castonguay, Ferguson, & Bessette, 2012; Cafri et al., 2010). Finally, researchers using polynomial regression with response surface values have found that the direction of the discrepancy (e.g., when actual silhouette/physical ratings are larger than ideal silhouette/physical ratings) is related to the outcome, and that the degree of the discrepancy (low versus high discrepancy) influences the outcome (Brunet et al., 2012; Cafri et al., 2010). The use of simple difference scores would have confounded the findings by analyzing actual and ideal self-states together and would not have permitted the individual prediction of self-states on the variables (Cafri et al., 2010). Overall, there is a substantial gain in information related to body-related discrepancies that result from the use of polynomial regression and response surface values.

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