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Self-consciousness and psychological distress: A study using the Greek SCS

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Abstract

This study examined the psychometric properties and factor structure of the Greek Self-Consciousness Scale (SCS), and investigated the role of self-consciousness (SC), and personality in psychological distress. Factor analytic results partially supported the factor structure of the SCS. Self-consciousness, particularly the Self-reflectiveness aspect of private-SC, was widely implicated in psychological symptomatology. Neuroticism may exacerbate this association, whereas other aspects of personality, such as Openness and Extraversion may buffer the role of SC in distress.

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1. Introduction

Self-consciousness (SC) is the dispositional tendency to attend to aspects of the self, such as emotions and public image (Panayiotou, 2004). Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975) developed the Self-Consciousness Scale (SCS) to assess it, which contains 23 items forming 3 dimensions:

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Private Self-Consciousness (PrSC, 10 items), Public Self-Consciousness (PuSC, 7 items) and Social Anxiety (SA, 6 items). PrSC refers to attention directed to covert or personal aspects of the self, such as feelings and beliefs; PuSC describes attention to public aspects of the self, such as appearance and manners. Finally, SA represents apprehensiveness about negative evaluation. The instrument has demonstrated good construct validity in many cultures (e.g. Chang, 1998; Nystedt & Smari, 1989; Ruganci, 1995).

High levels of SC characterise many psychopathological states. PuSC is involved in social anxiety, whereas PrSC has been implicated in depression, as it heightens awareness of negative affect (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987; Wood, Saltzberg, & Goldsamt, 1990; Woody, 1996; Woody & Rodriguez, 2000). The debate is still ongoing as to whether SC constitutes a non-specific feature, common to many disorders (Ingram, 1990) or a specific feature of only some disorders (Jostes, Pook, & Florin, 1999).

Self-consciousness is also associated with normal traits. Highly self-conscious individuals are aware of their attitudes (Gibbons, 1983; Scheier, 1980) and prone to dissonance effects (Gibbons & Wright, 1983; Scheier & Carver, 1980). Being aware of one's feelings and thoughts is essential to well-being as part of self-regulation (Lischetzki & Eid, 2003; Trudeau & Reich, 1995).

Hence, SC presents a paradox: How can the same construct be predictive of both psychopathology and well-being? Researchers are converging on the idea that SC may represent a multi-faceted construct with several underlying dimensions that are moderately correlated but represent different personality attributes. Trudeau and Reich (1995) found that whereas psychological mindedness is predictive of well-being, PrSC negatively predicts happiness. They concluded that PrSC may represent excessive rumination and self-scrutiny, which distract one from healthy social functioning. Similarly, Trapnell and Campbell (1999) proposed that PrSC may reflect two different types of motivation, i.e. *rumination* (motivated by perceived threat) and *reflection* (motivated by intellectual curiosity about the self).

Controversy still remains about the sub-factors of SC. The distinction between PrSC and PuSC (Buss, 1980) has received criticism by Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1987) who do not consider that PuSC measures changes in the direction of attention at all, but rather reflects emotional aspects of personality, such as social dependency. Next, the unidimensionality of the public/private scales has been questioned (Watson, Morris, Ramsey, Hickman, & Waddell, 1996), since the exploratory factor analyses (EFA) used to derive them do not exclude items that poorly fit the construct (Mittal & Balasubramanian, 1987).

Confirmatory Factor Analyses (CFA) have in part supported that PrSC may in fact be two-dimensional, including a component of Self-Reflectiveness (SR) and one of Internal State Awareness (ISA—Burnkrant & Page, 1984; Nystedt & Ljungberg, 2002; Piliavin & Charng, 1988), and that PuSC may be divided into Style and Appearance Consciousness (Mittal & Balasubramanian, 1987; Watson, Hickman, Morris, Stutz, & Whiting, 1994). The ISA versus SR distinction is further supported by validation data, showing that they are predictive of different personality features: SR predicts shame, guilt and social anxiety, whereas ISA predicts self-awareness and mental health (Watson et al., 1996). Thus, whether SC predicts well-being or psychopathology may depend on other factors, such as underlying normal personality dimensions. The association between SC and psychopathology, may be attributed to aspects of SC reflecting Neuroticism (Flett & Blankstein, 1987; Monfries & Kafer, 1994), whereas the healthy correlates of SC may be due to aspects reflecting Openness to Experience (Lischetzki & Eid, 2003; Reeves, Watson,

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