



THE RELATION BETWEEN SELF-ASPECT CONGRUENCE, PERSONALITY AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

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Summary—The relationship between self-aspect congruence, subjective well-being (SWB), and personality was examined in two studies. In Study 1, the congruence between ‘real’ and ‘ought’ Q-sort self-descriptions was found to be positively related to measures of SWB and life satisfaction. Among the five personality factors of Costa and McCrae (1991), congruence was negatively related to neuroticism and positively related to agreeableness. In study 2, the congruence between ‘real’ and ‘ideal’ Q-sort self-descriptions was found to be positively related to both self- and non-self-report measures of SWB, and was significantly related to four of Costa and McCrae’s five personality dimensions. Implications for research in the area of emotion and SWB are discussed. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

INTRODUCTION

The concept of the ‘Self’ has long held a prominent position in psychology, particularly within several theories of personality (Allport, 1955; Lecky, 1961; Rogers, 1959). Carl Rogers, for example, theorized that the self was a multi-faceted structure, based on the individual’s phenomenological experience, and consisting of a number of self-aspects. Rogers theorized that two of these self-aspects were the “self as experienced” (or real self) and ideal self (Rogers, 1959). A central premise of Rogers’ theory was the notion of congruence (or alignment) vs incongruence among the self-aspects. If an individual’s actual behavior and experience were closely aligned with his or her ideal, they could be said to approach self-aspect congruence, or to be ‘adjusted’ or ‘fully functioning’ (Rogers, 1959). That is to say, such individuals experience relatively low levels of distress or anxiety because their actual experience of themselves approaches their own perceived ideal. If individuals were to experience a substantial discrepancy between self-aspects, however, they would be said to be incongruent, and would be expected to experience maladjustment and psychological distress (Rogers, 1959). This distress would likely be expressed in the form of anxiety and/or defensiveness, as a reaction to a perceived lack of alignment between their actual experience of themselves and their own ideal-self state.

Building on this basic theme, Higgins (1987) refined the notion of self-discrepancy. In this theory of self-aspect discrepancy, Higgins identified three self-aspects: The ‘actual’, the ‘ideal’, and the ‘ought’ self (Higgins, 1987, p 320). He delineated specific categories of discomfort that might be produced when specific types of self-discrepancies are experienced. For example, Higgins presents evidence that discrepancies between the actual self-state and ideal self-state signify an absence of positive outcomes, and tend to be associated with depression-related emotions such as dissatisfaction and sadness. Self-aspect discrepancies involving the actual self-state and ought self-state, in contrast, represent the presence of negative outcomes, and evoke anxiety-related emotional responses (Higgins, 1987).

In addition to the above examples, other theorists have made the connection between self-aspect discrepancy and some form of psychological discomfort. For example, Festinger’s cognitive dissonance theory (1957) also involves self-discrepancies. The theme of congruence or discrepancy between self-aspects of the individual is a perennial concept of psychological theory.

Surprisingly, despite the evident implications that theories of self-discrepancy and self-aspect congruence have for emotional well-being, most recent theorists of subjective well-being (SWB) have

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not specifically included self-discrepancy or self-aspect congruence in their models. Conceptually, the connection between self-aspect congruence and SWB seems clear, yet specific empirical linkages are largely lacking. Although research has linked congruence to concepts such as self-esteem (Block & Robins, 1993), reviews of the SWB literature by Diener (1984) and more recent authors (e.g. Feist, Bodner, Jacobs, Miles & Tan, 1995; Myers & Diener, 1995) confirm this general lack of empirical linkage between self-discrepancy and SWB. This empirical shortfall has become more significant, as SWB is increasingly identified as a major outcome measure (Diener & Fujita, 1995).

A related issue is the connection between diverse conceptualizations of personality. In a recent review of the field of personality, Mischel and Shoda (1995) identify two major approaches to the understanding of personality: Behavioral dispositional/trait models, and cognitive, mediating process models. Behavioral dispositional/trait models, such as the prominent five-factor model (Costa & McCrae, 1991; John, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1987), generally assume a direct correspondence with dispositions or traits and behaviors. Dispositional/trait models often focus on the structural aspects of personality, such as the number of traits or their relatedness. Mediating process models, in contrast, generally focus on the social cognitive processes (such as self-aspects) that have a dynamic mediating effect on behavior (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Ultimately, any complete account of personality must consider both structural and dynamic aspects of the person. Currently, however, only a few attempts have been made at such an integrative approach. Examining the interface of dispositional and mediating process models using a common phenomenon, such as SWB, should contribute to an integrative view of personality.

A number of critical questions might be clarified through such an examination. Do discrepancies derive from some set of basic traits? If so, do they share large amounts of variance with such traits, or do both traits and self-aspect discrepancies contribute unique variance to the explanation of SWB? Or alternatively, are traits activated and mediated through discrepancies? A clearer resolution of the relationship between dispositional and self-aspect discrepancy conceptualizations should clarify such questions.

As noted above, a number of theories of personality have included various conceptualizations of the self at their core, and these theories generally have a mediating process orientation. Other major models of personality, for example dispositionally-based factorial models (e.g. Costa & McCrae, 1991; McCrae and John, 1992), have a lesser focus on the self. A considerable amount of research (Costa & McCrae, 1980; Emmons & Diener, 1985; Headey & Wearing, 1989; Pavot, Diener & Fujita, 1990) has linked SWB with dispositions such as extraversion and neuroticism. But the question of whether concepts such as self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987) can be meaningfully mapped on to dispositional models such as Costa and McCrae's (1991) five-factor model has not been sufficiently addressed.

Clearly, much earlier research has linked self-aspect discrepancies with various forms of psychological distress. But the experience of subjective well-being (SWB) includes more than just a lack of distress. Global SWB as it is currently conceptualized includes the presence of positive affect (PA) as well as the relative absence of negative affect (NA), and also includes the cognitive element of life satisfaction (Diener, 1984). Therefore, a simple lack of distress is not likely to adequately capture the relationship of self-aspect discrepancy/congruence with global SWB.

In sum, the connection between self-aspect discrepancy and distress has been well established. In contrast, however, very little research has been devoted to another range of the emotional spectrum; and an understanding of the relationship between self-aspect congruence and the experience of global SWB would provide a potentially useful extension of earlier work.

In addition to a general lack of attention to the relation between congruence and SWB, little research has been devoted to exploring the relationship between self-aspect congruence and dispositional models of personality, such as Costa and McCrae's (1991) five-factor model. If significant relations between self-discrepancy/congruence and one or more of Costa and McCrae's (1991) five personality factors exist, such relations could provide a point of convergence for two traditionally diverse theoretical perspectives. Self-discrepancy concepts could be understood from and predicted from a dispositional framework; conversely, dispositional models might be enhanced by inclusion of self-discrepancy concepts as outcomes or mediators of dispositional tendencies. SWB and emotion measures have reliable relations to Costa and McCrae's five factors. If their relation to self-discrepancy/congruence can be reliably established, then SWB and emotion concepts could provide

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