



Who we are and how we feel: Self-discrepancy theory and specific affective states



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ABSTRACT

Self-discrepancy theory proposes that specific conflicting cognitive representations of the self result in “emotional vulnerabilities” (Higgins, 1987). We investigated relationships between self-discrepancies (i.e., ideal-own, ideal-other, should-own, and should-other) as measured by the Integrated Self-Discrepancy Index (Hardin & Lakin, 2009) and lower-order specific affective states (i.e., sadness, joviality, self-assurance, guilt, fear, hostility, attentiveness, shyness, fatigue, serenity, and surprise) as measured by Positive and Negative Affect Schedule-Expanded (Watson & Clark, 1994) among undergraduate students ($N = 450$). Sadness was positively associated with the ideal-own self-discrepancy; and joviality, self-assurance, and surprise were negatively associated with the ideal-own self-discrepancy. Serenity was negatively associated with the ideal-other self-discrepancy. Guilt was positively associated with the should-other self-discrepancy, and attentiveness was negatively associated with both the ideal-own and should-own self-discrepancies. Overall, results found support for the notion that self-discrepancies are associated with specific affective states, with the ideal-own self-discrepancy emerging as the most consistent predictor of specific affective states.

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Many psychological theories postulate a relationship between overall cognition and generalized affect (Beck, 1976; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Duval, Silvia, & Lalwani, 2001; Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Ellis & Joffe-Ellis, 2011). Self-discrepancy theory goes further and proposes that specific conflicting cognitive representations of the self result in “emotional vulnerabilities” (Higgins, 1987). Previous investigations into the relationship between self-discrepancies and affect have produced inconsistent results, perhaps due to differences in the operationalization of both self-discrepancies and affect as well as psychometric issues with the measures of both (e.g., Ozgul, Heubeck, Ward, & Wilkinson, 2003; Tangney, Niedentahl, Covert, & Barlow, 1998). In this study, we operationalized emotional vulnerabilities as specific affective states: lower-order emotions under the two higher-order dimensions of positive affect and negative affect (Watson & Clark, 1994). The purpose of this study was to investigate whether self-discrepancies are associated with specific affective states among U.S. college students.

1. Self-discrepancy theory

Self-discrepancy theory proposes two dimensions of self-beliefs: domains of self and standpoints of self (Higgins, 1987). Domains of self include actual, ideal, and should selves. The actual self refers to

the attributes a person believes they currently possess; ideal self refers to the attributes the person desires or hopes to possess; and should self refers to the characteristics a person feels they should possess – their moral obligations or responsibilities (Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986). Standpoints of self are the viewpoints from which an individual may be evaluated, be it their own personal standpoint or that of a significant other (Higgins et al., 1986). A discrepancy is the distance between the actual self and the domain of self (ideal or should) from a standpoint of self (own or other). Self-discrepancies have been operationalized in many ways (Barnett & Womack, 2015; Hardin & Lakin, 2009; Higgins, 1987; Veale, Kinderman, Riley, & Lambrou, 2003; Watson, Bryan, & Thrash, 2016); however, in this study, we investigated four self-discrepancies: ideal-own (i.e., the discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self from the individual's own standpoint), ideal-other (i.e., the discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self resulting from the individual's belief that other people wish or would like them to possess), should-own (i.e., the discrepancy between actual self, from the person's own standpoint, does not match the state that the person believes it is their duty or obligation to attain), and should-other (i.e., the discrepancy between actual self, from the person's own standpoint, does not match what the person believes some significant other person considers their duty or obligation to attain).

2. Self-discrepancies and affect

Higgins (1987) proposed that self-discrepancies result in emotional vulnerabilities such as dejection or agitation. The ideal-own discrepancy

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was associated with dejection, and specifically disappointment, dissatisfaction, and feelings of failure. The ideal-other discrepancy was also associated with dejection, but in the form of shame, embarrassment, and feeling downcast. The should-own discrepancy was linked to agitation, and specifically guilt, self-contempt, and uneasiness. The should-other discrepancy was also linked with agitation, but manifesting as feeling threatened, apprehension, fear of punishment, and panic (see Higgins' classification, 1987 displayed in Table 1).

Researchers have operationalized emotional vulnerabilities broadly, such as dejection as depression and agitation as anxiety (e.g., Hardin & Lakin, 2009; Higgins, 1987; Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985; Phillips & Silvia, 2010; Strauman et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2016) or by measuring overall positive and negative affect (e.g., Boldero, Moretti, Bell, & Francis, 2005; Phillips & Silvia, 2005; Fromson, 2006; Forston & Stanton, 1992; Przybylski, Weinstein, Murayama, Lynch, & Ryan, 2012; Barnett & Womack, 2015). However, as previously described, Higgins (1987) suggests that self-discrepancies should correspond with more discrete affective states.

Affect has been categorized into two bipolar dimensions: positive affect and negative affect. Below these two higher-order affective dimensions are eleven lower-order specific affective states: fear, sadness, guilt, hostility, shyness, fatigue, joviality, self-assurance, attentiveness, serenity, and surprise (Watson & Clark, 1994). There is some evidence that self-discrepancies may predict specific affective states. The should-own self-discrepancy has been linked with anger-related emotions (e.g., hostile, aggressive, resentful, and anger at others; Petrocelli & Smith, 2005), and the ideal-own self-discrepancy has been associated with self-assurance/self-confidence (Beattie, Hardy, & Woodman, 2004). Contrary to Higgins' (1987) findings that the should-own discrepancy is associated with guilt, later investigations have not found links between self-discrepancies and guilt (Ozgul et al., 2003; Tangney et al., 1998).

3. Measurement issues

Subsequent investigations into self-discrepancies and affect have yielded inconsistent results, with some studies supporting the theory's predictions (e.g., Higgins et al., 1986; Strauman & Higgins, 1987; Strauman & Higgins, 1988; Boldero et al., 2005; Scott & O'Hara, 1993) and others failing to do so (e.g., Gralinski, Safyer, Hauser, & Allen, 1995; Tangney et al., 1998; Ozgul et al., 2003; Fromson, 2006; Phillips & Silvia, 2005, 2010). Researchers have questioned the psychometric properties of self-discrepancy measures (Ozgul et al., 2003; Scott & O'Hara, 1993; Tangney et al., 1998; Phillips & Silvia, 2005; Francis, Boldero, & Sambell, 2006; Hardin & Lakin, 2009). Previous measures of self-discrepancies have utilized some value for the actual self across calculating the various self-discrepancies, which has produced intercorrelations, which was noted by Higgins et al. (1985). Researchers have compensated for the correlation issue using various statistical procedures: partial correlations, semi-partial correlations, double-partial correlations, latent-variable modeling, and hierarchical regressions

(for review see Boldero et al., 2005) as well as Euclidian distances (e.g., Boesch, Koss, Figueredo, & Coan, 2001; Grieve & Watkinson, 2016; Peng, Wan, & Poon, 2013). However, newer measures of self-discrepancies have been developed that resolve the autocorrelation issue (Hardin & Lakin, 2009). This enables us to determine which discrepancy or discrepancies have the strongest association with specific affective states, while controlling for the effects of the other discrepancies.

4. The current study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the predictions of Higgins' self-discrepancy theory (1987) – specifically, whether self-discrepancies are associated with specific affective states. In Table 1, we attempted to identify the closest match between the terminology used by Higgins (1987) and specific affective states. Previous studies have found correlations between self-discrepancies (Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1999; Higgins et al., 1985; Ozgul et al., 2003; Phillips & Silvia, 2005; Tangney et al., 1998; Watson et al., 2016). Because the self-discrepancies share variance, we sought to explore whether, considered together, individual self-discrepancies emerge as unique predictors of specific affective states. We hypothesized that (H_1) sadness would be positively associated with ideal-own discrepancy (i.e., a greater discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self from one's own perspective would be associated with higher levels of sadness). We hypothesized that (H_2) joviality would be negatively associated with the ideal-own (i.e., a greater discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self from one's own perspective and from another's perspective would be associated with lower levels of joviality). We hypothesized that (H_3) self-assurance would be negatively associated with the ideal-own discrepancy and that (H_4) guilt would be positively associated with the should-own. We hypothesized that (H_5) fear and (H_6) hostility would be positively associated with should-other discrepancy. We hypothesized that (H_7) attentiveness would be negatively associated with the should-own discrepancy. Self-discrepancy theory does not provide a means to hypothesize the specific affective states of shyness, fatigue, serenity, and surprise; however, we included these as exploratory analyses.

5. Method

5.1. Participants

Participants consisted of undergraduate students ages 18–53 ($M_{\text{age}} = 21.95$, $SD = 3.61$; $N = 450$; 33.3% males; 66.7% females) enrolled in a psychology course at a large public university in the southern U.S. Participants were recruited through the department research website, where students can sign up to participate in research studies in exchange for course credit. Demographic characteristics are displayed in Table 2.

Table 1
Hypothesized relationships between specific affective states and discrepancies.

| Self-discrepancy | Higgins' classification | Associated examples | Hypothesized specific affective state | Hypothesized relationship with self-discrepancies |
|------------------|-------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| Ideal-own | Dejection | Disappointment, dissatisfaction, sadness | Sadness | Positively associated with ideal-own |
| Ideal-own | Dejection | Disappointment, dissatisfaction, sadness | Joviality | Negatively associated with ideal-own |
| Ideal-other | Dejection | Shame, embarrassment, feeling downcast | Self-assurance | |
| | | | Surprise ^a | |
| | | | Serenity ^a | Negatively associated with ideal-other |
| | | | Shyness ^a | |
| Should-own | Agitation | Guilt, self-contempt, uneasiness | Guilt | Negatively associated should-own |
| | | | Attentiveness | |
| Should-other | Agitation | Feeling threatened, apprehension, fear of punishment, panic | Hostility | Positively associated with should-other |
| | | | Fear | |

^a Exploratory analysis.

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