

**The Effect of Self-Discrepancies on Emotions and Life Satisfaction**

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**Abstract****Objective**

The objective of this study is to look at the effect of self-discrepancies on emotions and life satisfaction.

**Design**

Questionnaire administration and results analysis design.

**Method**

111 male and 170 female subjects completed a collection of questionnaires in order to examine the effect of different self-guides (actual undesired congruent self, actual ideal discrepant-self and actual ought discrepant-self self), on the specific emotions of anger, sadness, enjoyment and life satisfaction, and to examine the relationship between self-consciousness, self-monitoring and emotions.

**Results**

Those people whose actual selves are discrepant from their ought selves are vulnerable to anxiety and related disorders.

Those people whose actual selves are discrepant from their ideal selves are vulnerable to depression, dejection and related disorders.

Finally, those whose actual selves are congruent with their undesirable selves are vulnerable to hopelessness, self-destructive and suicidal tendencies.

**Conclusions**

The relationship between the four components of the self and the importance of achieving a balance between these four components will have a significant bearing on what is going on inside our skin. It will determine whether you are prone to symptoms such as anxiety, depression, despair, suicidal ideation and hopelessness or whether you are stable, rational and sound in judgment and thinking.

Reducing your undesirable characteristics on the one hand and striving to reach your ideal self on the other will gradually improve our actual self.

**Keywords:** Self-Discrepancies, Self-Empowerment, Self, Emotions, Life Satisfaction

**Practitioner Points**

- The findings and implication of the research is that to establish and maintain an integrated and functioning self, a we need to reduce the discrepancies between actual, ought and ideal selves, whilst at the same time reduce their undesirable behaviors and tendencies.
- The findings have significant therapeutic implications as well. Therapy for those people suffering from anxiety, depression and related disorders needs to be tailored to achieve integration between the various components of the self.
- Study was restricted due to the nature of the cohort which may not be a representative of the general population.
- Subject matter requires further investigation.

“Men are not disturbed by things, but by their perception of things” a quote from the main authority on Stoic morals, the Ancient Greek philosopher Epictatus, who lived sometime in the middle of the first century A.D., echoes one of the central questions of this study. What is the relationship between self-beliefs as mediated by self-perceptions, affect and life satisfaction?

Higgins (1987), advocating that incompatible self-beliefs produce emotional discomfort, identified among a wide range of possibilities, three basic incompatible self-beliefs; contradictions among one's self-perceived attributes that impede a coherent and unified self-concept, inconsistencies between one's self-perceived attributes and external, behavioural feedback related to one's self-perceptions and discrepancies between one's self-perceived attributes and some standard or self-guide. The Self-discrepancy theory, which is an example of the latter type of theory, emphasises the self-evaluative aspect of the self [1]. Higgins (1987) proposed that the self-concept consisted of the actual-self, the ideal-self and the ought-self and that these self-representations comprised of attributes that one believes one actually possesses, would ideally like to possess and ought to or should possess.

Higgins (1987) argued that certain emotions occur as a consequence of discrepancies between pairs of psychological entities. Namely, the absence of positive outcomes which is associated with actual-ideal discrepancy which consists of a discrepancy between one's perceived actual-self and one's ideal-self and which yields dejection emotions such as sadness, and the presence of negative outcomes which is associated with actual-ought discrepancy which consists of a discrepancy between one's perceived actual-self and one's ought self, which yields agitation emotions such as anger [2].

The self-discrepancy theory proposed by Higgins (1987) and others focuses predominantly on negative affect. The relationships between self-congruence and positive affect have not been explored adequately by the self-discrepancy theory [3-5]. Higgins (1987) argued that the predominant self-discrepancy acts as a self-guide which largely determines the types of negative emotions experienced. Positive affect appears to have been equated with the absence of negative affect.

Ogilvie introduced another self-domain, the undesired-self, which consists of attributes that one does not wish to possess [6]. Ogilvie argued that to pit the actual self in opposition to the desired (ideal-self) may rob the ideal-self of its more logical rival, the undesired-self. He argued that the undesired-self provides a more compelling contrast to the actual-self.

Ogilvie (1987) found that general life satisfaction, which has been defined by Shin and Johnson as a global assessment of a person's quality of life according to his own criteria, was more strongly related to the discrepancy between the undesired and actual-self than to the congruence between the actual and desired (ideal) self [7]. Snyder and Gangstead have maintained that there are individual differences in self-monitoring, and view self-monitoring, which has been defined by Snyder as the degree to which people monitor and regulate their behaviour as a

function of social cues versus internal standards, as a pervasive influence on the expression of emotions [8, 9].

According to Snyder (1987) the high self-monitor uses social cues as guidelines for monitoring his or her behaviour. The low self-monitor, in contrast, is not only less attentive to social information, but is more controlled by inner dispositions, attitudes and values. Lamphere and Leary emphasise the distinction between the public and the private self, noting that self-monitoring seems to be primarily associated with public-self-consciousness, which involves the tendency to focus on aspects of the self that are publicly observable [10]. Private self-consciousness involves the tendency to attend to private aspects of oneself, such as one's feelings, goals and values [11, 12].

In contrast to Snyder's contention that self-monitoring, an activity in which internal and external orientations are assumed to lie on polarised ends of a single continuum, Fenigstein et al. (1975) approach public and private self-consciousness as separate dimensions. The relationships between the various aspects of the self, self-discrepancies, self-monitoring and self-consciousness and specific emotions does not appear to be clear-cut.

The main purpose of this study was to explore the effects of the different aspects of conceptions of the self on specific emotions [13]. More specifically, the study aimed to investigate the effect of the self-guides (A - O, A - I and A - U), on the selected emotions (sadness-depression, anger, enjoyment-happiness) and life-satisfaction. An additional aim of the study was to examine the relationship between the selected emotions, self-monitoring and self-consciousness.

It was hypothesised that: those subjects in the discrepant from Ought-self group would be significantly higher on the emotion trait of anger than those in the congruent with Undesired-self and discrepant from ideal-self groups,

those subjects in the discrepant from the Ideal-self group would be significantly higher on the emotion trait of sadness than those in congruent with Undesired-self and the discrepant from Ought-self group,

those subjects in the congruent with Undesired-self group and the discrepant from Ought-self group would be significantly higher than the discrepant from Ideal-self group on the emotion trait of enjoyment,

those subjects in the congruent with Undesired-self group would have lower life satisfaction than those subjects in the discrepant from Ideal-self and the discrepant from Ought-self groups.

## Method Subjects

111 males and 170 females participated in the present study. Subjects ranged in age between 18 and 80 years ( $M = 29.67$  years,  $SD = 11.08$  years). Approximately half of the subjects were 3rd year Psychology students and each subject was required to select an additional participant. 92.2% of subjects had completed year 12, secondary and 56.4% were completing their tertiary education.

## Materials

Subjects completed a collection of questionnaires which consisted of:

- i. A background information sheet which asked information regarding subject's demographic details including sex, age, education and employment,
- ii. A modified version of The Selves Questionnaire was developed to measure the magnitude of self-discrepancies. The Selves Questionnaire was used as a free response measure in which subjects were required to list up to 10 self-descriptors to describe the attributes they believe they actually, ideally and ought to possess and to rate the extent to which the adjectives were descriptive of their respective selves on a 4 point scale (0 = not at all, 1 = a little, 2 = somewhat and 3 = a lot). (Refer to Appendix 1). The self-discrepancy scores were obtained by comparing the attributes that the subjects listed to describe their actual selves with the attributes describing the self-guides. Discrepancy scores were calculated for each self-guide.
- iii. A modified version of the Differential Emotions Scale, DES IV-A, was used to measure how frequently subjects felt particular emotions in their daily lives [14]. The DES IV-A consisted of a 36 item questionnaire. Subjects rated each item on a 5 point scale (1 = rarely or never, 2 = hardly ever, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = very often). The following Chronbach reliability co-efficient were obtained for the relevant emotions of Anger = .74, Sadness = .82 and Enjoyment = .75 (Refer to Appendix 2).
- iv. The Self-Monitoring Scale, was used to measure the extent to which subjects can and do observe and control their expressive behaviour and self-representations. The Self-Monitoring Scale consisted of an 18 item questionnaire which asked subjects to indicate whether the items were a true or false description of themselves. A Chronbach reliability co-efficient of .62 was obtained for the Self-Monitoring Scale (Refer to Appendix 2).
- v. The Eysenck Personality Inventory, EPI Shortform, consisted of a 12 item questionnaire which required subjects to respond with a 'yes' or 'no' to each of the questions. The EPI results were not incorporated into the overall results [15].
- vi. The revised Self-Consciousness Scale, consisted of 22 items which required subjects to indicate the extent to which each of the statements was descriptive of themselves [16]. The Self-Consciousness Scale which was used to measure subject's level of private and public self-consciousness also included a measure of subject's level of social anxiety. Subjects rated each item on a 4 point scale (0 = not at all like me, 1 = a little like me, 2 = somewhat like me and 3 = a lot like me) (Refer to Appendix 1). The additional instructions which caution subjects to be as honest and as accurate as they can throughout, and try not to let their answers to one question influence their answers to other questions and the explicit instruction that there were no correct or incorrect answers, was not included in the present study. Chronbach reliability co-efficient were obtained for private self-consciousness (.78), public self-consciousness (.85) and social anxiety (.82).
- vii. The Life Satisfaction Scale (SWLS) consisted of 2 sections. The first section consisted of 5 statements which required subjects to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the statements [17]. Subjects rated each item on a 7 point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = slightly disagree, 4 = neither agree or disagree, 5 = slightly agree, 6 = agree and 7 = strongly agree).

The second section required subjects to a) rate the description of their feelings in relation to how satisfied they were with the quality of their friendships as a whole, on a 7 point scale 1 = completely dissatisfied, 2 = very dissatisfied, 3 = fairly dissatisfied, 4 = Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 5 = fairly satisfied, 6 = very satisfied and 7 = completely satisfied) and b) rate how they felt about life as a whole, on a 7 point scale (1 = terrible, 2 = very unhappy, 3 = unhappy, 4 = mixed, 5 = pleasant, 6 = very pleased and 7 = delighted) (Refer to Appendix 1). A Chronbach reliability co-efficient of .90 was obtained for the Life-Satisfaction Scale (Refer to Appendix 2). The Scales were administered in different order to avoid order effects.

## Procedure

Questionnaires were administered to 3rd year undergraduate psychology students as a group during a lecture. Each subject was required to administer a questionnaire to a selected participant. Subjects were informed that participation in the study was voluntary, that they were not required to put any identifying material on the questionnaire and that they could discontinue at any time.

Subjects were advised that the main purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between self-discrepancies, affect and life satisfaction. The subjects were instructed that the questionnaire would take approximately 30 minutes to complete and asked to follow the written instructions on the questionnaires (Refer to Appendix 1).

In order to differentiate the sample into the three experimental groups: Congruent with Undesired self, Discrepant from the Ideal self and Discrepant from Ought self-group, subject's responses for the Selves Questionnaire were scored. Subject's ratings of the adjectives for their actual self was used as a comparison by subtracting their ratings of the self-descriptors for the undesired self, the ideal self and the ought self. The difference scores were then summed and divided by the number of self-descriptors given in each category to obtain an average discrepancy scores for the undesired, ideal and ought selves.

Subjects were allocated to the Congruent with Undesired self-group if they scored in the lowest 30% of the sample on the average discrepancy between actual and Undesired self, and below the mean on average Actual-Ideal and Actual-Ought discrepancy scores ( $n = 18$ ;  $M = 11$ ,  $F = 7$ ).

Subjects were allocated to the Discrepant from the Ideal self-group if they scored in the upper 30% of the sample on the average discrepancy between Actual and Ideal self, and below the mean on average Actual-Ought discrepancy scores and above the mean on average Actual-Undesired discrepancy scores ( $n = 18$ ;  $M = 6$ ,  $F = 12$ ).

Subjects were allocated to the Discrepant from Ought self-group if they scored in the upper 30% of the sample on the average discrepancy between Actual and Ought self and below the mean on average Actual-Ideal discrepancy scores and above the mean on Actual-Undesired discrepancy scores ( $n = 19$ ;  $M = 10$ ,  $F = 8$ , 1 missing case).

## Results

Respective ANOVAs and correlations were obtained using the SPSSPC+ statistical package to test the relevant hypotheses of the present study. Table 1. outlines mean scores and standard

deviations for reported levels of anger, sadness, enjoyment and life-satisfaction for the Congruent with Undesired-self, Discrepant from Ideal-self and Discrepant from Ought-self groups.

**Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for the Selected Differential Emotions and Life-Satisfaction for the 3 Experimental Groups (A-U, A-I, A-O) (N =281)**

Selected Emotions & Life Satisfaction								
	Anger		Sadness		Enjoyment		LifeSat	
Groups	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1	7.68	2.49	7.44	2.57	8.72	1.60	13.44	6.91
2	6.55	2.17	9.50	2.14	7.88	1.52	17.05	5.76
3	8.73	1.75	7.42	2.36	9.52	1.43	20.78	7.46

As expected in the first hypothesis, the discrepant from Ought-self (A-0) group had a higher mean score for the emotion trait of anger than the congruent with Undesired-self (A-U) group and the discrepant from Ideal-self (A-I) group (Refer to Table 1). A one-way ANOVA revealed that there was a difference in the degree of anger experienced between the groups,  $F(2,52) = 4.78, p < .05$ . However, the Scheffe post hoc analysis showed that the difference in reported anger was significant between the A-0 and the A-I groups.

the A - 0 group would yield higher mean scores than the A - I group for the emotion trait of enjoyment. As expected the mean scores for the A - U group and the A - 0 group were higher than the A - I group for enjoyment. A one-way ANOVA showed that there was a significant difference in the degree of enjoyment experienced between the groups,  $F(2,52) = 5.36, p < .05$ . Contrary to expectation Scheffe's post hoc analysis indicated that the significant difference was specifically between the A - 0 and the A - I group.

As expected in the second hypothesis, the A-I group had a higher mean score for the emotion trait of sadness than the A - U and A - O groups. A one-way ANOVA revealed that there was a significant difference between the 3 groups,  $F(2,52) = 4.61, p < .05$ . Scheffe's post hoc analysis indicated that the difference in the reported sadness was between the A-I group and both the A-U and A-0 groups.

For life-satisfaction, it was hypothesised that the A - U group would have lower mean life-satisfaction scores than the A - I group and the A - O group. Analysis of the means scores for life-satisfaction indicates that the A - 0 group obtained a higher mean score than the A - I and A - U groups (Refer to table 1). A one way analysis of variance revealed that there was a difference in the degree of life- satisfaction experienced between the groups. A Scheffe's post hoc analysis showed that this difference was significant between the A - 0 and A - U groups.

In the third hypothesis it was expected that the A - U group and

**Table 2: Correlations between Selected Emotions, Life-Satisfaction, Self-Consciousness, Social Anxiety and Self-Guides (a-U, A-I and A-O)**

	Anger	Enjoy	Sadness	Lifesat	Public	Private	Socanx	Selfmont	Undesird	Ideal
Anger	-									
Enjoy	-.01	-								
Sadness	.40***	-.32***	-							
Lifesat	-.15*	.41***	-.46***	-						
Public	.23***	-.03	-.40***	-.20***	-					
Private	.17***	-.03	.34***	-.08	.50***	-				
Socanx	.13*	-.14*	.34***	-.29***	.30***	.01	-			
Selfmont	.05	-.02	-.18*	.16*	.05	.20***	-.49***	-		
Undesird	-.11	-.14*	.11	.27***	-.005	.04	-.16*	.07	-	
Ideal	.07	-.20***	.33***	-.25***	.25***	.06	-.32***	-.09	-.17**	
Ought	.23***	-.08	.20***	-.20***	.07	-.01	.17*	-.12*	-.15*	-.50

N = 281 \* p < .05 (two-tailed)  
 \*\* p < .01 (two-tailed)  
 \*\*\* p < .001 (two-tailed)

Correlations using Pearson's r showed that there was a moderate positive correlation between the emotion trait of anger and the A-0 self-guide,  $r = .23, p < .001$ . Enjoyment was found to be strongly correlated with life satisfaction,  $r = .41, p < .001$ , and a

strong negative correlation with sadness,  $r = -.46, p < .001$ .

Sadness was found to be strongly but negatively correlated with public-self- consciousness,  $r = -.46, p < .001$  and moderately but

positively correlated with private self-consciousness,  $r = .34$ ,  $p < .001$ . Social anxiety was found to have a moderate positive correlation with public self-consciousness,  $r = .30$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

The results of the present study support Higgins' self-discrepancy theory. Higgins (1987) argued that for a person who is A-0 discrepant, the current state of his or her attributes does not match the state that the person believes it is his or her duty or obligation to attain. This discrepancy therefore, represents the general psychological situation of the presence of negative outcomes and thus the self-discrepancy theory would predict that the person would be vulnerable to agitation-related emotions. This was consistent with the result for the first hypothesis in relation to the agitation emotion of anger.

From a conflict point of view, it can be argued that when a person is confronted with a situation where they are required to decide between what they would want to do for themselves and what they feel they ought to do for others, which is internalised, the person would be confronted with having to make a decision that is a no win situation. Anger at not being able to do what they want and resentment for having to do what is expected of them may be a natural consequence, unless a realistic compromise is reached between the ought-expectations. Higgins (1987), in relation to the dejection-related emotions argue that for a person who possesses the A-I discrepancy, the current state of his or her actual attributes does not match the ideal state that he or she personally hopes or wishes to attain. This discrepancy then represents the general psychological situation of the absence of positive outcomes. The person is therefore expected to be vulnerable to dejection-related emotions. This was also consistent with the results for the second hypothesis regarding the dejection emotion of sadness. However, although Higgins (1987) argued that dejection-related emotions such as sadness was a consequence of a discrepancy between actual: ideal self, in contrast, it can be argued that people seek to achieve their ideals. The ideal self is a desired self and is reward based. Therefore, any transgression from the ideal-self can be interpreted as a mere setback or a learning exercise, in order not to repeat the same failure in the future and reap the rewards. Consequently, the person would be expected to experience positive affect rather than dejection.

The third hypothesis predicted that those whose actual selves were congruent with their undesired selves and those whose actual selves were discrepant from their ought selves, would experience greater enjoyment than those whose actual selves were discrepant from their ideal-selves.

The findings supported the hypothesis. Those whose actual selves were discrepant from their ought selves were found to experience much more enjoyment compared to others. The rationale of this hypothesis was based on the expectation that those whose actual selves were discrepant from their ought selves would experience low actual:ideal discrepancy and low actual:undesired congruency. Higgins (1987) argued that the predominant self-discrepancy serves as a determining self-guide which effects the negative emotions experienced.

Higgins (1987) equated positive affect such as enjoyment with

the absence of negative affect. A more appropriate measure of enjoyment may have been to investigate actual:desired (ideal) congruency. As Ogilvie (1987) suggests, the ideal self contains more than images of memories of me when I was good. It also contains internalised images of perfected parents and fictional finalisms of culturally supported, highly desirable end states.

The final hypothesis in relation to life satisfaction was partially supported in that those whose actual selves were discrepant from their ought-selves were found to experience significantly greater life-satisfaction than others. These findings although significant, are inexplicable given Diener, Emmons, Larson and Griffin's (1985) contention that the judgement of how satisfied people are with their present state of affairs is based on a comparison with a standard which each individual sets for him or herself; it is not externally imposed. It is conceivable that the significant findings are attributable to the expected low actual: ideal and actual: undesired congruence.

## The findings and Conclusions Confirm That

Those people whose actual selves are discrepant from their ought selves are vulnerable to anxiety and related disorders, This may be because, the Actual person is not being accepted by those important to them and they are always having to defend themselves, their actions and choices. Those people whose actual selves are discrepant from their ideal selves are vulnerable to depression, dejection and related disorders, This may be because the person feels powerless with the insight that as each moment passes, they are moving further away from who they would ideally like to be.

Finally, those whose actual selves are congruent with their undesirable selves are vulnerable to hopelessness, self-destructive and suicidal tendencies. This may be because the hardest form of depression to treat is self-directed aggression. Therefore, if self-directed self-destructive behaviors are predominant, the Actual in this instance, is also Undesirable, devalued and punished. It may also be the case that, when the Undesirable and accompanying self-hatred permeates all aspects of the person's life domains, they resort to suicide.

Higgins, (1987) states that for many years, it has been understood that psychological situations are a function of both the nature of external events and people's interpretations of those events. Higgins is not going to get any arguments from Epictatus. He died more than two thousand years ago. However, in any given situation, to understand how much of the outcome is attributable to the nature of external events and how much is attributable to people's interpretations of those events would contribute significantly to controlling undesired outcomes. Self-discrepancy theory enables us to take one more step in understanding how the discrepancies within the self-effects our emotions and consequently, our interpretation of external events [18-22].

Contrary to Epictetus, the core notion advocated here is that men are not disturbed by things but by their powerlessness to effect change as a measure of the discrepancy between intrapersonal and interpersonal variables which requires further investigation.

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