



Self-discrepancy and chronic social self-consciousness: Unique and interactive effects of gender and real-ought discrepancy

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on theories of self-discrepancy and self-focused attention, two studies tested the associations between self-discrepancy and chronic social self-consciousness (CSSC), a trait-like view of the self as a social object. In Study 1, hierarchical regression analyses demonstrated that real/own-ought/other discrepancy was uniquely associated with CSSC independent of impression management, neuroticism, and real/own-ideal/own discrepancy among women but not men. In Study 2, the unique relation between real/own-ought/other discrepancy and CSSC was replicated in a larger sample of women after controlling several robust competing variables including the importance of physical appearance. Discussion considers real/own-ought/other discrepancy as a unique psychological predictor of taking a chronic view of the self as a social object among women.

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1. Introduction

Viewing the self as a social object is a distinct component of the self-concept (Cooley, 1902/1964; Duval & Wicklund, 1972; James, 1890/1981; Mead, 1934). According to Cooley, “We perceive in another’s mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on” (p. 184). Although, taking an external observational view of oneself is necessary to a certain degree, chronically viewing the self from an external perspective may actually be maladaptive. Indeed, considerable empirical research has demonstrated the negative effects of chronically viewing the self as a social object (Davis & Franzoi, 1991; Gibbons, 1990). Individual differences in viewing the self as a social object are believed to develop from multiple antecedents including socialization, personality, and self-discrepancies (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Harter, 1997; Steenbarger & Aderman, 1979); however, tests of potential psychological factors that may predict a chronic view of the self as a social object remain largely unexplored (Klonsky, Dutton, & Liebel, 1990). This paper begins to address this gap by examining one of these links: the relationship between individuals’ self-discrepancies and chronically viewing the self as a social object.

1.1. Chronic social self-consciousness

Decades of research on the self has led to the conceptualization of individual differences in the tendency to view oneself more or

less as a social object (Gibbons, 1990), which we refer to here as *chronic social self-consciousness*. Chronic social self-consciousness (CSSC) is characterized by public self-focused attention and a vigilant monitoring of self and body. In this research, three specific individual difference constructs were selected to provide an integrative and parsimonious assessment of CSSC. *Public self-consciousness* refers to a chronic tendency to be aware of and focus on the self ‘as a social stimulus’ (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). *Public body consciousness* refers to a chronic tendency to be aware of and focus on publicly observable body parts (Miller, Murphy, & Buss, 1981). *Self surveillance* refers to a chronic tendency to watch the self as an outside observer (McKinley & Hyde, 1996).

Previous research has demonstrated significant, positive relationships among these three constructs: Miller et al. (1981) reported a high zero-order correlation between public self-consciousness and public body consciousness for men, $r = .71$, and women, $r = .66$. McKinley and Hyde (1996) reported moderate to high zero-order correlations between self surveillance and public self-consciousness, $r = .73$, and between self surveillance and public body consciousness, $r = .46$, among women. It is important to note that these three constructs were selected because they emphasize a perspective on the self as a social object *without an evaluative component* (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Mead, 1934). The need to identify potential predictors of CSSC is underscored by the multitude of negative consequences associated with this self-perspective: increased adolescent alcohol use (Pluddemann, Theron, & Steel, 1999), depression (Siegrist, 1995), disordered eating (Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004), decreased cognitive performance (Wicklund & Hormuth, 1981), and increased sensitivity to

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interpersonal rejection and social pressure (Fenigstein, 1979; Froming, Corley, & Rinker, 1990; Raichle et al., 2001).

1.2. Self-discrepancies as predictors

We propose that one psychological predictor of CSSC may be the degree to which people experience discrepancies between different aspects of their self-concept (Higgins, 1987; Rogers, 1959). A self-discrepancy constitutes a cognitive component of the self-structure that occurs when attributes representing the real self do not match with attributes representing important self-guides. Higgins's self-discrepancy theory separates the self-concept into three domains: The *real* (or actual) self represents the attributes that an individual believes she or he to currently possess; the *ideal* self represents the attributes that an individual believes she or he would ideally like to possess; and the *ought* self represents the attributes that an individual believes she or he should possess. Additionally, each domain may be perceived from one's own or others' standpoint.

Real/own-ideal/own discrepancy (RI) represents the absence of positive outcomes by not meeting personally relevant wishes and aspirations, producing feelings of dejection and disappointment. Real/own-ought/other discrepancy (ROO) represents the presence of negative outcomes in the form of anticipated punishment for violation of duties and obligations, producing feelings of agitation and fear. These links between self-discrepancy and emotional distress have largely been supported in correlational and experimental studies (Boldero & Francis, 1999; Scott & O'Hara, 1993; Strauman & Higgins, 1988); although, some published research has failed to support these distinct relations (e.g., Bruch, Rivet, & Laurenti, 2000; Phillips & Silvia, 2005).

Beyond emotional distress, however, prior work suggests some links between self-discrepancy and public self-focused attention. For example, Diener and Srull (1979) demonstrated that the saliency of social standards is more strongly associated with self-directed attention than the saliency of personal standards. More recent research found the link between self-discrepancy and emotional distress to vary as a function of self-monitoring, such that low self-monitors report more distress in association with self-discrepancies from their own standpoint whereas high self-monitors report more distress in association with self-discrepancies from the standpoint of others (Gonnerman, Parker, Lavine, & Huff, 2000). This research extends this prior work by proposing that RI and ROO represent significant psychological predictors of a more *trait-like* view of the self as a social object.

More specifically, we argue that conceptual differences between the ideal-own and ought-other self should lead to differential relations between self-discrepancy and CSSC. That is, the ought-other stems more directly from internalized representations of others' expectations compared to ideal-own and continues to be experienced as the "felt presence of external others" (Moretti & Higgins, 1999; Shah & Higgins, 1997). Thus, we expect ROO to be more directly related to CSSC than RI. Moreover, documented differences in the socialization and self-regulatory practices of women and men suggest that ROO is more accessible in women than men (Cross & Madson, 1997; Moretti & Higgins, 1999; Moscovitch, Hofmann, & Litz, 2005). Indeed, women are held to more prescriptive and higher social standards compared to men (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Because it is the most accessible self-discrepancies that will exhibit the strongest associations with the relevant outcomes (Higgins, 1987), we expect gender to moderate the effect of ROO on CSSC such that the relationship will be stronger for women than men. Finally, we expect the relationship between self-discrepancy and CSSC to remain significant when controlling the potential confounding effects of neuroticism and impression management.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 108 (54 female) undergraduates [mean age of 18.89 years ($SD = 1.10$)] participated in fulfillment of a research-participation requirement at a southeastern American university. In this sample, 88% self-identified as European American, 3.7% Asian American, 2.8% African American, and 5.6% unspecified. In groups of four to eight, participants ostensibly completed two independent studies about self-perceptions and student life by first completing a computer-based measure, and then counterbalanced paper-pencil questionnaires.

2.1.2. Measures

2.1.2.1. Self-discrepancies. RI and ROO were measured using an idiographic approach that relied on participant-generated rather than experimenter-generated characteristics because it is more likely to assess the most accessible and relevant self-discrepancies (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2006; Higgins, 1999; Watson & Watts, 2001). Self-discrepancies were assessed with the *Self-Concept Questionnaire – Personal Constructs*, a computer program developed by Watson (2000) that is similar to Higgins's Selves Questionnaire (Higgins, 1987). A subsequent version of this measure demonstrated strong psychometric properties (Bryan, Watson, & Thrash, 2007).

Participants provided six characteristics that described the real self from one's own standpoint ("yourself as YOU see yourself in your own eyes"), six characteristics that described the ideal self from one's own standpoint ("yourself as YOU would like to be in your own eyes"), and six characteristics that described the ought self from the standpoint of others ("yourself as OTHERS think you ought or should be"). Elicitation instructions were presented in one of six possible counterbalanced orders and participants' responses to these instructions generated 18 self-relevant characteristics. Presented in randomized order, participants rated the real, ideal, and ought self on each characteristic using the above definitions and a scale from 1 (*never or almost never true*) to 7 (*always or almost always true*). The order of the rating instructions followed the same counterbalanced order as the elicitation instructions. To compute a RI score, the absolute value of the difference between the real self and ideal self rating was determined for each of the six characteristics elicited with the real self-instruction and the six characteristics elicited with the ideal self-instruction. The mean of these absolute difference values yielded a RI score. The same procedure was used to compute a ROO score. Higher scores indicate a larger RI and ROO.

2.1.2.2. Chronic social self-consciousness. Three well-validated measures were used to assess CSSC. For each of the subscales, all items were scored on a 7-point scale from 1 (*not true of me*) to 7 (*always true of me*), with higher scores indicating higher levels of the respective variable. The *public self-consciousness* subscale (Fenigstein et al., 1975) included seven items measuring a chronic tendency to be aware of and focus on the self 'as a social stimulus' (e.g., "I'm concerned about what other people think of me") ($\alpha = .91$). The *public body consciousness* subscale (Miller et al., 1981) included six items measuring a chronic tendency to be aware of and focus on publicly observable body parts (e.g., "I am very aware of my best and worst facial features") ($\alpha = .85$). Good construct validity has been demonstrated (Miller et al., 1981). The *self surveillance* subscale (McKinley & Hyde, 1996) included eight items measuring a chronic tendency to watch the self as an outside observer (e.g., "I rarely think about how I look") ($\alpha = .87$).

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