

RESEARCH PAPER

Personality and Well-being: The Role of Discrepancy in Individual and Societal Comparison

Alicia A. Stachowski, PhD¹, Marcy Young Illies and John T. Kulas, PhD

Corresponding author

¹ Alicia A. Stachowski, PhD, University of Wisconsin – Stout, Harvey Hall, 470M, 721 3rd Street E, Menomonie, WI 54751, USA
Phone: 715-232-2237
Email: stachowskia@uwstout.edu

Affiliations

¹ Alicia A. Stachowski, PhD, University of Wisconsin – Stout, USA

² Marcy Young Illies, St. Cloud State University, USA

³ John T. Kulas, PhD, Montclair State University, USA

Copyright

© National Wellbeing Service Ltd

Funding

None declared

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest in respect to their authorship or the publication of this paper.

Acknowledgments

None declared

Abstract

Objectives: This paper explores how discrepancies between actual and ideal personality relate to several psychological adjustment outcomes (life satisfaction, self-esteem, and perceived stress), and considers the role of societal ideals in explaining these relationships. Two groups of predictions were made: 1) it was expected that self-ideal congruency would be positively related to psychological adjustment outcomes, and 2) that if one values a given trait (e.g., agreeableness), falling below the societal ideal would be associated with poorer psychological adjustment. **Methods:** A sample of 289 individuals responded to an internet-based survey. Thirty native U.S. graduate students separately provided ratings of the degree to which society values two poles of five broad personality dimensions. **Results:** The results supported the hypothesis that discrepancies in actual and ideal personalities are associated with more perceived stress, less life satisfaction, and lower levels of self-esteem – especially for individuals characterized as being less conscientious and emotionally stable than they would prefer to be. Societal values helped further strengthen discrepancy associations across all personality dimensions. **Conclusions:** This research suggests that differences in actual and ideal self-concept relate to psychological adjustment, particularly regarding conscientiousness and neuroticism. However, taking environmental factors, such as societal ratings, into consideration seems to further affect this relationship for all personality dimensions.

Key words: Self – personality – subjective well-being – perceived stress – life satisfaction – self-esteem

Abstrait

Objectifs: Cet article explore comment les écarts entre la personnalité réelle et idéale sont liés à plusieurs résultats de l'adaptation psychologique (satisfaction de la vie, estime de soi et stress perçu) et examine le rôle des idéaux sociétaux dans l'explication de ces relations. Deux groupes de prédictions ont été faits: 1) on s'attendait à ce que la congruence auto-idéale soit positivement liée aux résultats de l'adaptation psychologique, et 2) que si l'on valorise un trait donné (par exemple, l'agréabilité), tomber en dessous de l'idéal sociétal serait associé avec une mauvaise adaptation psychologique. **Méthodes:** Un échantillon de 289 personnes a répondu à une enquête sur Internet. Trente étudiants natifs des États-Unis ont fourni séparément des évaluations du degré auquel la société valorise deux pôles de cinq grandes dimensions de la personnalité. **Résultats:** Les résultats ont soutenu l'hypothèse selon laquelle les écarts dans les personnalités réelles et idéales sont associés à plus de stress perçu, à moins de satisfaction dans la vie et à des niveaux plus faibles d'estime de soi - en particulier pour les individus caractérisés comme étant moins consciencieux et émotionnellement stables qu'ils ne le souhaiteraient. Les valeurs sociétales ont contribué à renforcer davantage les associations de divergence dans toutes les dimensions de la personnalité. **Conclusions:** Cette recherche suggère que les différences de concept de soi réel et idéal sont liées à l'adaptation psychologique, en particulier en ce qui concerne la conscience et le névrosisme. Cependant, la prise en compte de facteurs environnementaux, tels que les évaluations sociétales, semble affecter davantage cette relation pour toutes les dimensions de la personnalité.

Mots-clés: Soi - personnalité - bien-être subjectif - stress perçu - satisfaction de la vie - estime de soi

Previous research suggests that incongruences between perceptions of who you are and who you want to be has negative implications for psychological well-being (e.g., Barnett, Moore, & Harp, 2017; McDaniel & Grice, 2008; Renaud & McConnell, 2007). Additionally, the proliferation of on-line communities and social media platforms has enhanced access to social comparison and exposure to representations of “ideals”. There are currently, for example, 2.41 billion active users on Facebook and over 1 billion active monthly Instagram users (Statista, 2019). Discrepancies between actual and ideal self-perceptions may reasonably be expected to widen as our societies become more immersed within such social media applications. These discrepancies would be expected due to the frequency with which social media messages contain idealized portrayals of either selves (for example, Kim & Lee, 2011) or others (e.g., Ferguson, Muñoz, Garza, & Galindo, 2014).

The current study explores how discrepancies between actual and ideal self-perceptions relate to several important psychological adjustment variables (i.e., life satisfaction, self-esteem, perceived stress). A second major emphasis of this paper focuses on the role of societal values in explaining the relationship between actual-ideal discrepancy and psychological outcomes. Although other researchers have addressed the question of self-ideal discrepancy and outcomes (e.g., Renaud & McConnell, 2007), considering the influence of whether one’s ideal is in accord with that of society’s values is a new contribution. Here, we explore the following: how do discrepancies between 1) who you are, 2) what you value, and 3) what society values relate to important life outcomes such as stress, happiness, and self-image?

THEORETICAL SPECIFICATIONS OF SELF: SELF-DISCREPANCY THEORY

Higgins (1987) differentiated among three self-concepts: actual-, ought-, and ideal-selves. These can be considered collectively within the framework of self-discrepancy theory. One’s actual self-concept consists of who one is in the present. The other two are presented as guides – pathways along which the self-concept may evolve. The ought self consists of expectations or obligations we believe we ought to fulfill, and contains elements of morality, duty or responsibility. The ideal self-concept, in contrast, reflects what one desires (e.g., entails what someone hopes, wishes, or aspires to be). Higgins (1987) suggests that people try to make their actual self-concept match their ideal or ought self-concept.

Discrepancies between one’s ideal and actual self-concept are predicted to result in feelings of lower self-worth, depression, or disappointment, whereas discrepancy between one’s ought and actual self-concept are expected to result in social anxiety or apprehension (Higgins, 1987; Moretti & Higgins, 1990; Strauman & Higgins, 1987). Self-discrepancy theory also postulates that the consequence of discrepancy between different self-concepts may vary substantially across individuals – some may experience more emotional turmoil (i.e., discrepancy between actual and ideal causes sadness/frustration) while others experience more motivational turmoil (i.e., discrepancy between actual and ideal leads someone to believe they need to change). The theory further posits that the magnitude of the turmoil should coincide with the magnitude of the discrepancy (Higgins, 1987).

CONSEQUENCES OF ACTUAL VERSUS IDEAL SELF DISCREPANCIES

Higgins’ (1987) initial investigation presented actual-ideal discrepancies broadly as being most strongly related to depression. Researchers have since expanded upon this early specification (e.g., Bizman, Yinon, & Krotman, 2001; Hong, Triyono, & Ong, 2013; McDaniel & Grice, 2008; Wasylikiw, Fabrigar, Rainboth, Reid, & Steen, 2010). Empirically, discrepancies between actual and ideal self-concepts have now been shown to be related to psychological adjustment across a wide variety of forms (e.g., Barnett & Womack, 2015; Davidai & Gilovich, 2018; McDaniel & Grice, 2008; Ogilvie, 1987; Petrocelli & Smith, 2005; Reich, Kessel, & Bernieri, 2013; Renaud & McConnell, 2007; Thomson, 2016; Wasylikiw et al., 2010). Barnett et al. (2017), for example, recently studied discrepancies between ideal and actual selves and found that sadness, joviality, self-assurance, and surprise were all significantly associated with discrepancies.

Discrepancies between ideal and actual self-concepts have also been shown to have implications for anxiety and self-esteem (McDaniel & Grice, 2008; Renaud & McConnell, 2007). Moretti and Higgins (1990), however, reported that the relationship between actual and ideal discrepancies and self-esteem was not present when actual ratings were held constant using a nomothetic measure (across person), although the relationship was noted when using an idiographic measure (within person). Renaud and McConnell (2007) used both nomothetic as well as idiographic measures, finding a negative association between one’s actual-ideal personality-based discrepancy and self-esteem,

but also noting that this effect was much stronger when people believed that traits were fixed (as opposed to malleable).

In sum, both theory and empirical evidence point to the importance of congruence between our self-concept and that of our ideal. The current study builds on the existing literature by considering several indicators of psychological adjustment, including life satisfaction, self-esteem, and perceived stress and their association with ideal versus actual personality. It is expected that a match between one's actual and ideal personality is positively related to each of these psychological adjustment indicators. The first set of predictions, therefore, focuses simply on whether each outcome is associated with self-ideal compatibility.

Hypothesis 1: Self-ideal congruence is positively associated with life satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: Self-ideal congruence is positively associated with self-esteem.

Hypothesis 3: Self-ideal congruence is negatively associated with stress.

THE ROLE OF SOCIETAL VALUES

In addition to examining how internal comparisons (e.g., actual-versus ideal-concepts) relate to psychological adjustment, individuals also live embedded within social contexts, and it may therefore be fruitful to consider these contexts in discussions of "ideals" and psychological adjustment¹. For example, research suggests that U.S. individuals particularly value sociability within others (e.g., Lynn & Martin, 1995). Would non-sociable U.S. individuals be expected to have lower levels of psychological adjustment (than, for example, individuals from other cultures that place less value on sociability)? Using the Big Five personality model, Lynch, La Guardia, and Ryan (2009) studied societal values as a mediator between actual/ideal personality discrepancy and relational well-being (satisfaction, vitality, and positive and negative affect within interpersonal relationships). They found that larger ideal/actual discrepancies in extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, and openness were related to a lower relational well-being in the U.S. as compared with China. While our study examines a similar issue to that of Lynch et al. (2009), our focus is placed on an individual's personal experience of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and perceived stress as opposed to relational well-being.

The value society places on certain aspects of selves (such as, for example, sociability) may affect what is broadly deemed desirable, thereby affecting an individual's self-appraisal of an ideal self

(e.g., Allik, Mõttus, & Realo, 2010; Valentova, Štěrbová, Bártová & Varella, 2016). We propose here, that after considering one's ideal, larger negative discrepancies between someone's actual self and societal ideal are even more strongly associated with maladjustment. In other words, a large negative difference between one's level of extraversion and the societal ideal is even more important/impactful if extraversion is personally valued (an ideal). Thus, the following predictions are made²:

Hypothesis 4: When conscientiousness is personally valued, falling below the societal ideal is associated with poorer psychological adjustment.

Hypothesis 5: When agreeableness is personally valued, falling below the societal ideal is associated with poorer psychological adjustment.

Hypothesis 6: When emotional stability is personally valued, falling below the societal ideal is associated with poorer psychological adjustment.

Hypothesis 7: When openness is personally valued, falling below the societal ideal is associated with poorer psychological adjustment.

Hypothesis 8: When extraversion is personally valued, falling below the societal ideal is associated with poorer psychological adjustment.

METHOD

Participants

G*Power (version 3.1.9.2) was used to determine the required sample size to detect an effect with 80% power. Two hundred and eighty-nine individuals (48.8% male; 53.2% female) were solicited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) with a goal of obtaining a representative sample of U.S. adults. This data pool has been characterized as exhibiting greater demographic diversity than standard internet or student samples (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Further, Hauser and Schwarz (2016) found that MTurk participant respondents exhibited less carelessness or inattention than an undergraduate student sample.

The sample was comprised of a variety of ethnic backgrounds: Caucasian (77.5%), Asian (7.0%), African American (6.7%), Hispanic (5.6%), and other (3.2%). The mean age of participants was 34.51 ($SD = 12.28$). Our participants were all located in the U.S. and each paid \$1.00 USD for completing the survey. As a second data collection procedure, 30 graduate students raised in the U.S. provided ratings of the degree to which society values certain personality dimensions.

Table 1

Ideal Self Definitions and Descriptives

	Self-Rated Ideal			Societal Values		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Ideal Personality Rating						
Neuroticism - Emotionally reactive, these individuals respond to events that may not affect others. Their reactions tend to be more intense than normal marked by experiencing negative feeling such as anxiety, anger, or depression.	286	1.58	0.89	30	2.20	1.16
Disagreeableness - Skeptic, suspicious, and unyielding. They may be valuable when tough or absolute objective decisions are needed. Unconcerned with others' well-being, they may place their own self-interest or a group's interest above getting along with others.	286	1.88	1.08	30	2.60	1.30
Closed - A preference for the plain, straightforward, and obvious over the complex, ambiguous, and subtle. They may regard the arts and sciences as endeavors of no practical use. They prefer familiarity over novelty, and consistency to change.	284	2.13	1.09	30	2.87	0.97
Unconscientious - Seldom stuffy or boring. These free spirits fail to stay within the lines and experience short lived pleasures, though they may be criticized as being, disorganized, unreliable, and lacking ambition.	285	2.35	1.16	30	2.77	1.17
Conscientious - Trouble avoidant and high achievement is done through purposeful planning and persistence. Regarded as intelligent and reliable, they may also be compulsive perfectionists and workaholics.	285	3.16	1.03	30	3.43	1.04
Extraversion - Full of energy and action-oriented. They enjoy being with people. In groups, they talk, assert themselves, and draw attention to themselves.	284	3.17	1.11	30	4.03	0.72
Introversion - Quiet, and deliberate. They need less stimulation. Their independence and reserve nature is sometimes mistaken as unfriendliness. However, they may be quite pleasant when approached.	286	3.28	1.11	30	2.42	1.04
Agreeableness - Getting along with others is important. They are considerate, generous, and helpful. They may compromise their own interests for others' and believe people are honest, decent, and trustworthy.	285	3.55	1.07	30	3.50	0.90
Emotional Stability - Not easily upset and less emotionally reactive. They tend to be calm, emotionally stable, and free from persistent negative feelings.	284	3.88	0.99	30	3.07	1.08
Openness - Intellectually curious. They appreciate art, and beauty. They may be more aware of their feelings and think and act in individualistic and nonconforming ways.	282	3.89	1.01	30	3.47	0.97

Materials

There are many ways to define psychological adjustment. Here, we focus on one positively-valenced index (life satisfaction), one negatively-valenced index (life stress), and one introspective-reflective index (self-esteem). The order of presentation of the substantive scales was randomized across respondents, while five demographic items were assessed last.

Actual personality Participants completed a 50-item version of

the International Personality Item Pool's (IPIP) NEO, which is an assessment of five personality dimensions (extraversion, emotional stability, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness; Goldberg et al., 2006). An example item is "Panic easily" (reverse scored on the emotional stability scale). The 5-point response scale ranged from very inaccurate to very accurate. Current sample coefficient alphas were .90 (extraversion), .90 (emotional Stability), .79 (openness to

Table 2*Study Descriptives (Excluding Ideal Self [Table 1])*

	N	M	SD
Actual Personality Rating			
Conscientiousness	288	3.84	0.71
Agreeableness	288	3.77	0.62
Neuroticism	288	2.36	0.81
Openness	288	3.79	0.66
Extraversion	288	2.99	0.81
Life Satisfaction	288	4.51	1.53
Self-esteem	288	3.94	0.78
Perceived Stress	288	2.56	0.75

experience), .83 (agreeableness), and .90 (conscientiousness).

Ideal personality Each participant was asked to rate “to what extent would you like to be characterized” by a description of a Five Factor Model (FFM) personality characteristic along a 5-point scale ranging from not at all to extremely. These items were created by the researchers for the purpose of this study. The pole labels (e.g., “conscientious” or “unconscientious”) were not presented to the respondents as some labels convey evaluatively positive or negative connotations. The descriptions (along with the FFM dimension they were intended to describe) are provided in Table 1.

Self-esteem Self-esteem was measured using Rosenberg’s (1965) self-esteem scale, which consists of 10 items measured along a 5-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree ($\alpha = .91$). An example item is, “I take a positive attitude toward myself”.

Life satisfaction Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin’s (1985) 5-item satisfaction with life scale was used to measure global cognitive judgement of life satisfaction. A 7-point response scale was used ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree ($\alpha = .93$). An example item is “I am satisfied with my life”.

Perceived stress Perceived stress was measured using a scale by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983). This 10-item scale uses a 5-point scale ranging from never to very often. An example item is, “In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?” All items referenced the same one-month time frame. Coefficient alpha was .91.

Societal value of personality traits Thirty graduate students raised in the U.S. were each asked to rate “to what extent you believe people in our current American society would prefer to be characterized by

the statement provided”, and ratings were given along a 5-point scale ranging from not at all to extremely. The personality descriptions were identical to those used to rate one’s ideal self (Table 1). The personality pole labels (e.g., unconscientious) were again not presented because these may have had evaluative connotations.

RESULTS

After removing the extreme outliers (under 5 minutes [$n = 7$] and over 100 minutes [$n = 1$]), administration times ranged from 5’36” to 42’49”, with an average administration time of 15 minutes and 20 seconds ($SD = 7’43$ ”). The measures were also investigated for associations reasonably attributed to common method (co)variance³. Descriptive statistics are presented in Tables 1 and 2. The response patterns indicated that conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability, openness, and introversion were, on average, considered personal ideals (relative to their opposing poles). The same pattern of means was observed for societal values of personality traits, apart from extraversion.

Hypothesis Testing

The first group of hypotheses focused on the discrepancies between someone’s ideal self and actual self and their associations with life satisfaction (H1), self-esteem (H2), and perceived stress (H3). Because respondents were asked to rate how much they valued both ends of each personality dimension continuum (e.g., how much they would like to be characterized as, for example, “extraverted” and “introverted”), a two-step process was used to

Table 3

Pearson's Correlations Among All Study Variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.	16.	17.
Actual Personality																	
1. Conscientious																	
2. Agreeableness	.49																
3. Neuroticism	-.48	-.52															
4. Openness	.31	.22	-.21														
5. Extraversion	.48	.25	-.45	.33													
Ideal Personality																	
6. Conscientious	.12	.01	-.02	-.04	.02												
7. Unconscientiousness	-.23	-.13	-.00	.11	.07	.01											
8. Agreeableness	.19	.42	-.16	.08	.11	.08	-.02										
9. Disagreeableness	-.26	-.41	.13	-.06	-.04	.04	.22	-.32									
10. Emotional Stability	.13	.29	-.20	.00	-.04	.16	.07	.25	-.20								
11. Neuroticism	-.15	-.28	.20	-.14	.05	.03	.24	-.12	.40	-.24							
12. Openness	.09	.06	-.15	.54	.08	.09	.20	.14	-.03	.08	-.06						
13. Closedness	.00	-.13	.06	-.35	-.06	.14	.03	.06	.13	-.08	.23	-.25					
14. Extraversion	.06	.13	-.15	.09	.32	.10	.20	.22	-.05	.09	.08	.10	-.06				
15. Introversion	-.14	-.15	.09	-.09	-.42	.24	-.01	-.17	.13	.09	.04	.08	.20	-.28			
16. Life Satisfaction	.45	.36	-.58	.14	.43	.00	.01	.15	-.08	.09	.03	.10	.05	.16	-.08		
17. Self-esteem	.56	.46	-.76	.27	.52	-.05	-.05	.16	-.16	.11	-.16	.10	-.04	.14	-.14	.62	
18. Perceived Stress	-.45	-.48	.75	-.15	-.35	.06	.03	-.14	.22	-.15	.22	-.07	.09	-.08	.17	-.49	-.63

Note. N's range from 281 to 288. Correlations of $|\geq .12|$ or more are $p < .05$, correlations of $|\geq .16|$ or more are significant are $p < .01$.

Table 4

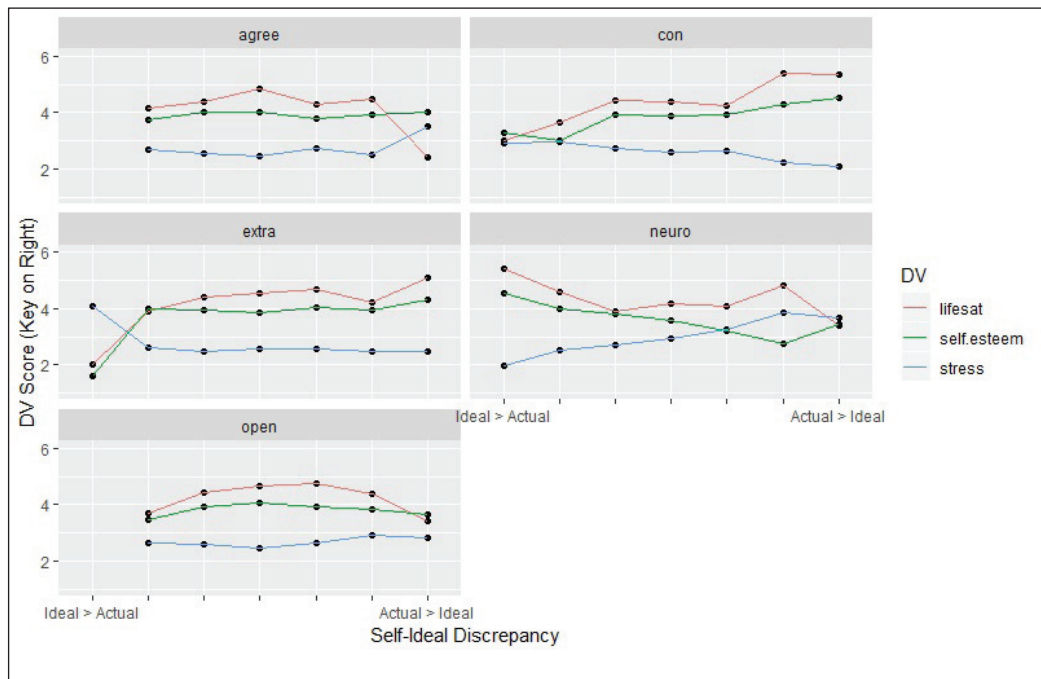
Pearson's Correlations between the Actual-Ideal Dimension Discrepancies and Psychological Adjustment Outcomes

Discrepancy between actual & ideal ratings	Life Satisfaction	Self-esteem	Perceived Stress
Conscientiousness	.21**	.25**	-.22**
Agreeableness	-.01	-.04	.06
Neuroticism	-.29**	-.46**	.51**
Openness	.04	.01	.07
Extraversion	.05	.08	.01

Note. N's range from 279-285. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Figure 1

Ideal-self discrepancies (x-axis) and average outcome variable score.



compute discrepancy ratings. First, an ideal personality dimension score was computed by subtracting value rating for extraversion from the value rating for introversion. For all participants, the lower end of each personality dimension (e.g., introverted, closed) was subtracted from the upper end of the continuum (e.g., extraverted, open). Following this step, respondents' ideal ratings were then subtracted from his or her actual personality scale score. As such, a positive discrepancy score indicates that a person is "higher" on that dimension than his or her ideal (e.g., more extraverted [if valued] or more introverted [also, if personally valued]).

Pearson's product-moment correlations among study variables, actual and ideal discrepancies, and psychological adjustment outcomes are presented in Tables 3 and 4. In partial support of H1, a positive correlation between actual-ideal conscientiousness and life satisfaction, $r = .21, p < .001$, was observed, suggesting that there is a positive association between the degree one's level of conscientiousness exceeds his/her ideal and life satisfaction. A negative correlation between actual-ideal neuroticism and life satisfaction was observed as well, $r = -.29, p < .001$, suggesting

that if one is more neurotic than he or she would like, this discrepancy is negatively associated with satisfaction with life.

A similar pattern of results was revealed for H2, which predicted that discrepancies between actual and ideal personality traits would be related to self-esteem. Again, actual-ideal conscientiousness discrepancies were positively associated with self-esteem ($r = .25, p < .001$), and negatively related with neuroticism ($r = -.46, p < .001$). Thus, if someone was more conscientious than his/her desired ideal, greater self-esteem was reported. On the other hand, greater (more positive) differences between one's actual and ideal level of neuroticism were associated with lower reported self-esteem.

Lastly, greater discrepancies between actual-ideal conscientiousness were negatively associated with perceived stress, $r = -.22, p < .001$, and reporting being more neurotic than one would like was positively associated with stress, $r = .51, p < .001$, again, demonstrating partial support for H3 – consistently across the conscientiousness and neuroticism dimensions. Figure 1 presents these associations in categorized

Table 5*Pearson's Correlations between the Actual-Societal Ratings Discrepancy, Considering Desired Pole*

Actual-Ideal Discrepancy accounting for Preference	Life Satisfaction	Self-esteem	Perceived Stress
Conscientious	.48**	.57**	-.46**
Agreeableness	.31**	.40**	-.43**
Neuroticism	-.53**	-.73**	.74**
Openness	.14*	.25**	-.13*
Extraversion	.34**	.37**	-.24**

Note. N's range from 278-288. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. An example of preference would be if a person valued extraversion more than introversion, the societal rating of extraversion was subtracted from actual extraversion. On the other hand, if a person valued introversion more, the societal rating of introversion was subtracted from a person's actual extraversion score.

arrays to facilitate graphical interpretation. The strongest (linear) associations between self-ideal discrepancy are clearly evident with conscientiousness and neuroticism, whereas openness appears to exhibit a curvilinear relationship with outcomes. Actual versus ideal discrepancies across personality dimensions of agreeableness, openness, and extraversion did not exhibit strong relationships with any of the psychological adjustment variables.

The next group of predictions (H4-H8) further explored the above relationships in light of societal values, which, arguably, might be expected to impact one's preferred or ideal standing on a trait. Recall that a mean rating for each end of all five trait continua was gathered to gauge average societal value (e.g., emotional stability, $M = 3.07$ [$SD = 1.08$]; neuroticism, $M = 2.20$ [$SD = 1.16$]; see Table 1). Here, we accounted for which end/pole of a trait continuum was preferred or valued (i.e., participants' ideal). For instance, if a person's ideal trait standing was closer to the extraversion end of the continuum, the societal rating of extraversion was subtracted from his or her actual extraversion score⁴. On the other hand, if a person valued introversion more, the societal rating of introversion was subtracted from a person's actual extraversion score. The discrepancy scores for this group of predictions represent an individual's actual score on a trait minus the societal rating of an individual's preferred pole (e.g., extraversion above introversion). Thus, a positive score indicates a person exceeds the societal average rating of their preferred end of the trait continuum. Stated another way, a positive value

meant someone exceeded society's rating of a given pole, the pole that a person preferred. In instances in which someone equally valued both poles, the mean societal rating was computed (e.g., mean introversion and extraversion societal ratings), and then subtracted from a person's actual extraversion score.

Next, Pearson's product-moment correlations between these discrepancies (actual score-societal rating of preferred pole) were explored (see Table 5). Results were generally supportive of the hypotheses across personality dimensions (e.g., extending the H1 through H3 findings beyond conscientiousness and neuroticism), such that discrepancies between actual-societal conscientiousness ($r = .48$, $p < .001$), agreeableness ($r = .31$, $p < .001$), openness ($r = .14$, $p < .05$), and extraversion ($r = .34$, $p < .001$) were positively related to life satisfaction and negatively related to neuroticism ($r = -.53$, $p < .001$). The pattern of findings was similar for the adjustment outcome of self-esteem: discrepancies between actual-societal conscientiousness ($r = .57$, $p < .001$), agreeableness ($r = .40$, $p < .001$), openness ($r = .25$, $p < .001$), and extraversion ($r = .37$, $p < .001$) were positively related to self-esteem and neuroticism was negatively related to neuroticism ($r = -.73$, $p < .001$).

As would be expected, the opposite pattern of correlations was observed for the stress outcome, such that the discrepancies between actual-societal conscientiousness ($r = -.46$, $p < .001$), agreeableness ($r = -.43$, $p < .001$), openness ($r = -.13$, $p = .037$), and extraversion ($r = -.24$, $p < .001$) were negatively associated with reported stress, and neuroticism was positively related

to stress ($r = .74, p < .001$). Generally, the strong associations noted between actual and ideal incongruence on adjustment (for conscientiousness and neuroticism) were found to extend to all five dimensions when the influence of societal ideals was taken into consideration.

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to explore personality discrepancies between who we are, what we desire to be, and what we value as a society and how such discrepancies relate to psychological well-being. Our findings suggest that differences between one's actual self-concept and one's ideal self-concept were related to psychological adjustment, specifically regarding conscientiousness and neuroticism. This research supports that of others (McDaniel & Grice, 2008; Reich et al., 2013; Renaud & McConnell, 2007; Wasylkiw et al., 2010) who found that actual-ideal discrepancies affected aspects of a person's well-being. Neurotic self-concept discrepancies (e.g., having more neurotic tendencies than desired) was related to poorer psychological adjustment. Somewhat unexpectedly, the results did not suggest that adjustment was related to discrepancies for the other big five personality dimensions (openness, extraversion, or agreeableness).

However, Markus and Nurius (1986) suggest that one's possible or ideal self may be influenced by one's environment. The second group of hypotheses specifically incorporated societal ideals of both ends of each personality dimension continuum to further our understanding of how such comparisons relate to psychological adjustment. Here, in addition to conscientiousness and neuroticism, the other personality dimensions were positively related to life satisfaction and self-esteem as the discrepancies scores moved from an actual level that fell short of society's ideal to an actual level that exceeded it. For example, if a neurotic person valued emotional stability (a personal ideal), and stability is valued by society, he or she experienced poorer psychological adjustment. This supports research by Markus and Nurius (1986) and Wheeler, DeMaree, and Petty (2007) and suggests that the influence of societal values is a strong influence on the relationship between who we are, who we would like to be, and how well adjusted we claim to be.

Implications

The results here suggest that 1) the direction of actual-ideal discrepancies in both conscientiousness and neuroticism are related to psychological adjustment regardless of cultural immersion, and

2) societal ideals strongly influence these relationships, and those of the other personality dimensions and adjustment. Higgins (1987) indicates that people are motivated to minimize actual-ideal discrepancies. This may be particularly true with negative self-concepts. Take neuroticism as an example. This may relate to one's overall health as these individuals would experience more perceived stress, have lower self-esteem, and less life satisfaction. Poor psychological adjustment may ultimately relate to other life outcomes as research has found that low self-esteem affects, for example, job satisfaction (Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998) and stress affects job performance (LePine, Podsakoff, & LePine, 2005). The need to minimize this discrepancy may lead people to 1) actually become more like their ideal self or 2) to believe they are more like their ideal self than they are in reality (e.g., believe they are more emotionally stable than they really are). In addition to implications regarding a match between self and ideal self-concept, there are also important implications regarding the influence of societal values. The more consistent a person's self-assessment is with that of society's value of a trait, for example, the higher his or her psychological adjustment. Thus, society's values do influence adjustment outcomes related to judgements about our self-concept.

Limitations and Future Directions

First, one of the challenges of examining the relationships here was in the measurement of ideal and societal personality (two ratings were collected from each respondent – one for the negative end of each personality dimension and one from the positive end). Future research would benefit from the exploration of personal and societal ideals measured using the same method as actual personality. Additional studies should also explicitly incorporate measures to assess the number and type of social comparisons people are making on a regular basis. The second limitation is the context itself, which may limit generalizability. For example, those experiencing a different culture may value these traits more or less than what was presented in the current study of American respondents. Future studies may enhance these findings by further exploring environmental factors that may affect the actual-ideal self-concept such as different cultures or by evaluating change in the actual-ideal discrepancy over time.

Conclusion

Overall the research presented supports the notion that differences in actual and ideal self-concept relate to psychological adjustment, particularly with regard to conscientiousness and

neuroticism. However, taking into environmental factors, such as societal ratings, into consideration seems to further affect this relationship for all personality dimensions. By using established personality traits to evaluate self-concept, this research furthers our understanding of specific trait discrepancies that may relate to psychological adjustment. ■

Notes

1 The consideration of “ought” selves went into the choice to pursue societal ideals. Although these are not the same concepts, the intent of our focus is consistent with the concept of external obligations informing a desired state of being.

2 For the sake of brevity, we present all of our adjustment indicators within one set of hypotheses (because the effects are predicted to be consistent across satisfaction and self-esteem [and inversely mirrored by stress]).

3 We retained fifteen scales across eight measures for common method variance evaluation. The excluded items from these analyses were characterized by either single-item scales or ipsative response formats (whereas items representing the fifteen retained scales shared a graded response format).

15 factor model ($\chi^2_{9,347}=18,653.63, p < .05; RMSEA = .06$)

One factor model (with 136 items instead of 139 ($\chi^2_{9,044}=26,001.97, p < .05; RMSEA = .08$))

$\Delta \chi^2_{303}=7,348.34, p < .05.$

4 Note that societal ratings are a constant – the average of 30 graduate student ratings.

Citation

Stachowski, A., Young Illies, M., & Kulas, J. (2020). 'Personality and Well-being: The Role of Discrepancy in Individual and Societal Comparison.' *European Journal of Applied Positive Psychology*, 4, 4, 1-12. Retrieved from: <http://www.nationalwellbeingservice.org/volumes/volume-4-2020/volume-4-article-4/>

Biographies

Alicia Stachowski received her Ph.D. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from George Mason University and is an associate professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin – Stout.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3595-6339>

Marcy Young Illies received her Ph.D. in Industrial Organizational Psychology from the University of Nebraska Omaha. She currently teaches graduate and undergraduate classes in the Psychology department at Saint Cloud State University in St. Cloud, Minnesota, USA.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5360-3134>

John Kulas is professor of Industrial and Organizational Psychology at Montclair State University. His primary areas of study revolve around issues of measurement and methodology within organizational contexts.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4780-421X>

References

- Allik, J., Möttus, R. & Realo, A.** (2010). Does national character reflect mean personality traits when both are measured by the same instrument? *Journal of Research in Personality*, 44: 62-69. doi: 10.1016/j.jrp.2009.10.008
- Barnett, M. D., Moore, J. M. & Harp, A. R.** (2017). Who we are and how we feel: Self-discrepancy theory and specific affective states. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 111: 232-237. doi: 10.1016/j.paid.2017.02.024
- Barnett, M. D., & Womack, P. M.** (2015). Fearing, not loving, the reflection: Narcissism, self-esteem, and self-discrepancy theory. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 74: 280-284. doi: 10.1016/j.paid.2014.10.032
- Bizman, A., Yinon, Y., & Krotman, S.** (2001). Group-based emotional distress: An extension of self-discrepancy theory. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27: 1291-1300. doi: 10.1177/01461672012710005
- Buhrmester, M., Kwang, T., & Gosling, S. D.** (2011). Amazon's Mechanical Turk: A new source of inexpensive, yet high-quality, data? *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6: 3-5. doi: 10.1177/1745691610393980
- Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., & Mermelstein, R.** (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 24: 385-396. doi: 10.2307/2136404
- Davidai, S., & Gilovich, T.** (2018). The ideal road not taken: The self-discrepancies involved in people's most enduring regrets. *Emotion*, 18: 439-452. doi: 10.1037/emo0000326
- Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S.** (1985). The satisfaction with life scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 49: 71-75. doi: 10.1207/s15327752jpa4901_13
- Ferguson, C. J., Muñoz, M. E., Garza, A., & Galindo, M.** (2014). Concurrent and prospective analyses of peer, television and social media influences on body dissatisfaction, eating disorder symptoms and life satisfaction in adolescent girls. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 43: 1-14. doi: 10.1007/s10964-012-9898-9
- Goldberg, L. R., Johnson, J. A., Eber, H. W., Hogan, R., Ashton, M. C., Cloninger, C. R., & Gough, H. G.** (2006). The international personality item pool and the future of public-domain personality measures. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 40: 84-96. doi: 10.1016/j.jrp.2005.08.007
- Hauser, D. J., & Schwarz, N.** (2016). Attentive Turkers: MTurk participants perform better on online attention checks than subject pool participants. *Behavior Research Methods*, 48: 400-407. doi: 10.3758/s13428-015-0578-z
- Higgins, E. T.** (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review*, 94: 319-340.
- Hong, R. Y., Triyono, W., & Ong, P. S.** (2013). When being discrepant from one's ideal or ought selves hurts: The moderating role of neuroticism. *European Journal of Personality*, 27: 256-270. doi: 10.1002/per.1888
- Judge, T. A., Locke, E. A., Durham, C. C., & Kluger, A. N.** (1998). Dispositional effects on job satisfaction: The role of core evaluations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 83: 17-34. doi: 10.1002/per.1888
- Kim, J., & Lee, J-E. R.** (2011). The Facebook paths to happiness: Effects of the number of Facebook friends and self-presentation on subjective well-being. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 14: 359-364. doi: doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2010.0374
- LePine, J. A., Podskaoff, N. P., & LePine, M.A.** (2005). A meta-analytic test of the challenge stressor-hindrance stressor framework: An explanation for inconsistent relationships among stressors and performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 48, 764-775. doi: 10.5465/amj.2005.18803921
- Lynch, M. F., La Guardia, J. G., & Ryan, R. M.** (2009). On being yourself in different cultures: ideal and actual self-concept, autonomy and well-being in China, Russia, and the United States. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4: 290-304. doi: 10.1080/17439760902933765
- Lynn, R., & Martin, T.** (1995). National differences for thirty-seven nations in extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism and economic, demographic and other correlates. *Person, Individual, Differences*, 19: 403-406. doi: 10.1016/0191-8869(95)00054-A
- Markus, H. & Nurius, P.** (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, 41: 954-969.
- McDaniel, B. L., & Grice, J. W.** (2008). Predicting psychological well-being from self-discrepancies: A comparison of idiographic and nomothetic measures. *Self and Identity*, 7: 243-261. doi: 10.1080/15298860701438364
- Moretti, M. M., & Higgins, E. T.** (1990) Relating self-discrepancy to self-esteem: The contribution of discrepancy beyond actual-self ratings. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 26: 108-123. doi: 10.1016/0022-1031(90)90071-5
- Ogilvie, D. M.** (1987). The undesired self: A neglected variable in personality research. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52: 379-385. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.52.2.379
- Petrocelli, J. V., & Smith E. R.** (2005). Who I am, who we are, and why: Link s between emotions and causal attributions for self- and group discrepancies. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31: 1628-1642. doi: 10.1177/0146167205277390

- Reich, W. A., Kessel, E. M., & Bernieri, F. J.** (2013). Life satisfaction and the self: Structure, content, and function. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 14: 293-308. doi: 10.1007/s10902-012-9332-8
- Renaud, J. M., & McConnell, A. R.** (2007). Wanting to be better but thinking you can't: Implicit theories of personality moderate the impact of self-discrepancies on self-esteem. *Self and Identity*, 6: 41-50. doi: 10.1080/15298860600764597
- Rosenberg, M.** (1965). *Society and the Adolescent Self-image*. Princeton, NJ: University Press.
- Statista.** (2019, August, 9). *Number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide as of 2nd quarter 2019 (in millions)*. Retrieved from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>
- Strauman, T. J., & Higgins, E. T.** (1987). *Vulnerability to Specific Kinds of Chronic Emotional Problems as a Function of Self-discrepancies*. Unpublished manuscript, New York University.
- Thomson, W.** (2016). Depression, neuroticism, and the discrepancy between actual and ideal self-perception. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 88: 219-224. doi: 10.1016/j.paid.2015.09.003
- Valentova, J. V., Štěrbová, Z., Bártová, K., & Varella, M. A. C.** (2016). Personality of ideal and actual romantic partners among heterosexual and non-heterosexual men and women: A cross-cultural study. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 101: 160-166. doi: 10.1016/j.paid.2016.05.048
- Wasylikiw, L. Fabrigar, L. R., Rainboth, S., Reid, A., & Steen, C.** (2010). Neuroticism and the of the self: Exploring neuroticism as a moderator of the impact of ideal self-discrepancies on emotion. *Journal of Personality*, 78: 471-492. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6494.2010.00623.x
- Wheeler, S. C., DeMaree, K. G., & Petty R. E.** (2007). Understanding the role of the self in prime-to-behavior effects: The active-self account. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 11: 234-261. doi: 10.1177/1088868307302223