The True Self and Psychological Health: Emerging Evidence and Future Directions

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Abstract

A variety of philosophical and psychological perspectives converge to suggest that a happy and meaningful life is the product of living in accord with one's true self. This idea similarly appears throughout literature, film, and folk wisdom. The current paper examines both theoretical and lay conceptions of the true self and reviews the empirical evidence that supports its role in psychological health, with a particular emphasis on current research that demonstrates that both the accessibility and ease of thinking about one's true self-concept is associated with the experiences of meaning and satisfaction. The merits of different approaches to defining the true self, measurement issues, and directions for future research are discussed.

> He recognizes that it rests within himself to choose; that the only question which matters is, "Am I living in a way that is deeply satisfying to me, and which truly expresses me?" Carl Rogers, On Becoming a Person, 1961 (119)

Theorists and laypeople have long pondered the question of what constitutes a life well lived. As suggested in the quote above, the answer is often rooted in the idea that happiness is achieved, in part, by living in accord with one's true self. This idea appears throughout the history of psychology (e.g., Harter, 2002; Horney, 1950; James, 1890; Miller, 1979; Rogers, 1959), philosophy (e.g., Macquarrie, 1972, May, 1969; Kierkegaard, 1983; Sartre, 1943/1956), literature (e.g., *The Awakening, Catcher in the Rye, A Lesson before Dying*), and film (e.g., *Good Will Hunting, Jerry McGuire, Mr. Holland's Opus*). In this paper, we examine theoretical perspectives on the nature of the true self and offer a means of operationalizing this construct that lends itself to empirical scrutiny in both correlational and experimental designs. We also review the recent research on the link between the true self and psychological functioning and suggest a number of unanswered questions for future research.

What is the True Self?

Theoretical perspectives

The true self is an important construct in a variety of historical theoretical traditions (Horney, 1950; Jung, 1953; Miller, 1979; Rogers, 1959; Winnicott, 1960). Within these classic perspectives, the true self is typically viewed as a set of innate, immutable characteristics that the individual needs to 'discover' in order to live a fulfilling life. According to these perspectives, each person possesses certain attributes and demonstrates authenticity when they behave in accord with those attributes (e.g., an assertive person acting assertively). Though they do not typically use the term the 'true self', similar ideas can be

seen in cotemporary trait theories that emphasize the consistency of traits across the life-span (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1994) and the role of genetics in determining those traits (Bouchard, 2004). While this conceptualization may be intuitively appealing, the idea of a single immutable true self seems to conflict with the wealth of theoretical (e.g., Baumiester, 1995; Cooley, 1902; James, 1890; Sullivan, 1953) and empirical (e.g., Andersen & Chen, 2002; Darley & Fazio, 1980; Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Murray, Holmes, & & Griffin, 1996) evidence that points to the pervasive environmental influences on the self.

More contemporarily, the most prominent theory to address the true self (self-determination theory (SDT)) does not require the existence of a single immutable true self. Rather, SDT diverges from the historical theories by suggesting that the true self is any self aspect that feels autonomous, internally caused, personally meaningful, and self-determined (deCharms, 1968; Deci, 1980; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991; Ryan, 1993). According to SDT, any person can feel authentic when they act assertively, for example, regardless of his or her underlying 'true' nature, as long as that assertive behavior *feels* autonomous.

While the self-determination approach to the true self is elegant and theoretically rich, most people's lay theories about the true self seem to correspond more to historical theories. Indeed, theorists have argued that the idea of a true self is a manifestation of the ubiquitous folk theory of 'essences' (i.e., the idea that every person and object has a unique set of immutable attributes that make it what it is; Gergen, 1991; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Consistent with this essentialist perspective, our own data suggests that people tend to believe that the true self is discovered 'within' (Schlegel, Vess, & Arndt, forthcoming) and tend to agree with statements that the true self is 'something very basic about them' and that 'it can't really be changed' even after writing about a significant change they have observed in either themselves or a close friend (Schlegel & Bench, forthcoming). Similarly, work by Johnson, Robinson, and Mitchell (2004) suggests that people believe chronic mental states (i.e., the primary constituents of the true self, as will be reviewed in the next section), are significantly more stable and less controllable than behaviors.

We believe both approaches to defining the true self offer interesting, albeit potentially divergent, directions for research on the construct. While the SDT approach may more accurately relate to *feelings* of self-expression, the essentialist approach more closely corresponds to what people *believe*. For researchers interested in the 'psychological reality' of the true self and the consequences of the true self-concept in everyday life, it is important to understand what people believe about the true self in order to facilitate the development of methods that are consistent with those beliefs. Thus, we next review what is known about lay theories of the true self.

Lay theories

Extant research on lay theories of the true self has consistently led to one prevailing idea: the true self is a private entity that may or may not be reflected in one's behavior. For example, people judge information about private thoughts and feelings as more informative about what a person is 'really like' than information about behaviors (Andersen, 1984; Andersen, Lazowski, & Donisi, 1986; Andersen & Ross, 1984; Andersen & Williams, 1985). Similarly, when asked to spontaneously generate questions that they believe would help them discover the true self of another person, people generate questions about mental states far more frequently than questions about behavior (Johnson et al., 2004). From a developmental perspective, children as young as five distinguish between the internal (e.g., thoughts, feelings) and external (e.g., behaviors) aspects of their selves (Bennett, Mitchell,

& Murray, 2009; Burton & Mitchell, 2003) and by adolescence believe that only they (and their close friends) know their true self (Harter, 2002; Rosenberg, 1979). Similarly, Sedikides and Skowronski (1995) found that people often report self-reflection as a primary determinant of self-knowledge, further suggesting people believe it is important to look 'inside the box' in order to understand themselves (see also Schoeneman, 1981).

Further highlighting the importance of the distinction between private realities and outward behavior, Andersen and Ross (1984) suggest that the differences in attributions for these two types of self-relevant information may explain the subjective feeling of possessing a true self. As they observe, it is relatively easy for people to identify external causes of their behavior (e.g., social role constraints, norms, self-presentation), whereas thoughts and emotions feel as though they bubble up from somewhere 'inside' us. As Andersen and Ross suggest, this internal attribution of private mental experiences may be the foundation of the experience of possessing a true self (see also Johnson et al., 2004).

Measuring the true self

While SDT offers one approach to measuring the true self (e.g., assessing feelings of autonomy), measuring an essentialist true self is an inherently challenging task because it presents a classic criterion problem: if the true self is not necessarily expressed in people's behavior – how can we accurately assess it? In our own research, we choose to let people define their own true selves. That is, we rely on a person's own idiosyncratic beliefs about who they believe they 'really are'. We have termed this avowed true self the 'true self-concept'. In a typical study, we ask participants to freely generate or to pick words from a list that they believe describe their true self. To do this, we provide them with a specific definition of the true self that capitalizes on the lay theory distinction between who people believe they really are inside versus how they typically behave. Though the exact wording of these directions varies between studies, the following is a typical example of the instructions we use,

> Your true self is composed of the characteristics, roles or attributes that define *who you really are* – even if those characteristics are different than how you sometimes act in your daily life (originally adapted from Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimmons, 2002).

Although we cannot determine the accuracy of self-knowledge with this approach (if it is possible for such a thing to be determined), this basic methodology has given us a window through which to observe the psychological importance of the true self-concept. Specifically, we combine this self-report approach with social cognitive methodologies (e.g., whether one's true-self concept is cognitively accessible or easy to describe) to observe the effects of the true self on psychological health. Further, this basic methodology allows us to better isolate effects of the true self over and above the self more generally, by comparing the influence of true self-concept to the influence of another self-concept: one based on one's behavior (i.e., the 'actual' self; Bargh et al., 2002). The actual self is specifically defined to participants as "the characteristics, roles or attributes that define who are in your daily life – even if those characteristics are different than who you really are."

Using this basic paradigm we have examined several specific questions regarding the relationship between the true self and the experience of meaning and decision satisfaction. Before reviewing our own research, however, we briefly review other empirical approaches to studying the true self's role in psychological health.

The True Self and Well–being

The importance of the true self has primarily been observed by correlating true self-relevant variables with well-being outcomes. Most frequently, this work has demonstrated the relationship between self-reported expression of the true self (i.e., authentic behavior) and well-being. For example, a daily diary study by Heppner et al. (2008) revealed that daily reports of felt authenticity (measured by responses to the 'I felt in touch with my ''true self'' today' and 'I wore a number of social masks today') predicted increased self-esteem and positive affect as well as decreased negative affect over and above the influences of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Other studies using similar measures of authenticity (Bettencourt & Sheldon, 2001; Harter, 2002; Harter, Marold, Whitesell, & Cobbs, 1996; Kernis & Goldman, 2004, 2006; Lakey, Kernis, Heppner, & Lance, 2008; Ryan, LaGuardia, & Rawsthorne, 2005; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997; Wood, Linley, Malby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008) have yielded similar patterns with a wide variety of well-being indicators ranging from positive mood to physical symptoms. Similarly, self-reported authenticity within the context of romantic relationships is an important correlate of relationship quality and durability as well as global well-being (Argyle & Henderson, 1984; Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006; Harter, Marold, & Whitesell, 1992; Harter, Waters, Whitesell, & Kastelic, 1998; Hendrick, 1981; Leak & Cooney, 2001; Lopez & Rice, 2006; Neff & Harter, 2002a,b; Neff & Suzio, 2006).

Importantly, however, most of the studies examining the relationship between authenticity and well-being focus exclusively on correlating self-reported subjective feelings of authenticity with self-reported well-being. While these studies are important and the consistency of the findings from these studies is impressive, using exclusive correlational designs makes it impossible to determine whether the true self actively contributes to well-being or is simply associated with it. Indeed, such findings could potentially be explained by shared method variance or semantic similarity.

Additionally, the role of the true self in these findings is challenged by recent work that suggests that people are mostly unaware of when their behaviors match their traits. Specifically, Fleeson and Wilt (2010) found that feelings of authenticity are borne from acting highly extraverted, agreeable, conscientious, emotionally stable, and intellectual, regardless of one's self-reported traits (similar findings using retrospective self-reports are found in Sheldon et al., 1997). These findings run counter to a preliminary study by Fleeson and Wilt that suggested that people believe authenticity comes from acting in ways that are consistent with one's traits (i.e., introverts acting introverted). This suggests that the antecedents of the subjective feeling of authenticity captured in the typical measures may not actually be expressions of the true self.

Fortunately, several experimental studies examining the importance of the true self to psychological functioning help to mitigate some of these limitations. For example, Andersen and Williams (1985) demonstrated that asking people to simply *think* about their true self produced positive outcomes. Specifically, they asked participants to reflect on positive aspects of their true self (i.e., private thoughts and cognitions) or positive aspects of their public behavior. Those participants who thought about their true selves reported a much greater increase in self-esteem than their counterparts who were asked to think about their positive public behaviors. Interestingly, this effect disappeared when these reflections were made public (by recoding them on a tape recorder ostensibly for others to listen to) rather than kept private (by simply thinking about them), further highlighting the important role of private experiences to people's well-being. A related line of studies conducted by Arndt, Schimel and colleagues (Arndt, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszcynski, 2002;

Schimel, Arndt, Pyszcynski, & Greenberg, 2001; Schimel, Arndt, Banko, & Cook, 2004) similarly suggests that manipulations that activate the true self (in their terms the 'intrinsic self') decreases a variety of expressions of defensiveness. For example, having participants visualize somebody who accepts them non-contingently (i.e., 'for who they really are') leads to less downward social comparison, distancing from a negative other, self-handicapping, and conformity. Similarly, hundreds of studies have shown that self-affirmation (Steele, 1988) can lead to less psychological defense in response to threats (e.g., Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Tesser, 2000). Although these studies are not necessarily framed in terms of the true self *per se*, the manipulations ask the individuals to think about their core values, beliefs, or attributes, clearly making important aspects associated with the individuals' true self-concept salient.

Our own research builds off this seminal work, using social cognitive methods as a way of measuring and manipulating true self relevant constructs (e.g., true self-knowledge). In particular, we have focused on how the true self may serve as a guide to decision-making and thus imbue life with meaning and satisfaction.

The True Self and the Feeling of Meaning

Theorists have defined meaning in life as the feeling that one has satisfying goals or purposes (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Emmons, 2003; Frankl, 1963/1984; Klinger, 1977; Ryff & Singer, 1998), significance and coherence (Hicks & King, 2009b; King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006) or, simply, as a life that makes sense to the individual (Baumeister, 1991; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). As an empirical construct, meaning in life is typically operationalized as a subjective judgment that is measured by derstand my life's meaning' (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) or 'my personal experience is purposeful and meaningful' (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964).

People can derive meaning from a seemingly unlimited about of sources such as their religious faith (e.g., Hicks & King, 2008), personal relationships (e.g., Lambert et al., 2010; Stillman et al., 2009), or current affective states (Hicks & King, 2009a), to name a just a few. However, within each of these potential domains, people make choices between options that are not necessarily any more *objectively* meaningful than the others. For example, imagine someone trying to choose whether to go to law or business school. Clearly, this is a major life decision. People devote huge amounts of time and effort into their careers and want to believe that their time is well spent. However, it is not clear which of these two choices will ultimately give the person a greater sense of meaning or satisfaction in their lives. Neither seems to be explicitly more or less valued by society, suggesting there is no universal agreement about which is actually a better or more meaningful choice, so how does one make such a choice? We believe that people use their true selves to help them make this inherently ambiguous choice. Like Carl Rogers and others, we have argued that it is the choice that is more consistent with one's true self that leads to a greater feeling of meaning and satisfaction.

Why would the true self be linked to the personal experience of meaning and satisfaction? One provocative idea is that the people use the self to fill in the void left by the diminishing influence of societal standards in our lives (Baumeister, 1991; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). Historically, it was relatively easy for people to find fulfillment in their lives because the society in which they lived provided them with widely agreed upon value bases that offered clear guidance to the 'correct' path one should take in life. As these culturally shared sources of meaning become less prevalent (e.g., Baumeister, 1991; Becker, 1971; Frankl, 1959; Fromm, 1941/1969), people are left

with greater responsibility to decide for themselves the answers to the fundamental ques-tions of what is right and wrong, what is good and bad, and what is worthwhile or not. As such, some theorists believe we are now more prone to look inward for these types of answers.

In this way, the true self may provide each person with a unique 'life philosophy' that can be used to help make decisions about which relationships, behaviors, and goals are valuable, as well as the relative importance of these to each other, thus imbuing life activ-ities and pursuits with meaning and value. Consistent with this perspective, in a qualita-tive study by Bellah et al. (1985), people were asked to justify their life decisions. The researchers found that many of their participants could not do so without reference to the self, leading these researchers to conclude that ''each self constitutes it own moral universe'' (76). This mindset can be observed in the oft-made statement 'that's just who I am'.

According to this perspective, choices and actions are judged in terms of their relation-ship to the true self: those acts that are congruent with one's true self are deemed valu-able. Similar points are made by scholars of eudaimonic well-being who argue that that meaning in life can be separated from other forms of well-being (i.e., hedonic function-ing) precisely because of its association with authentic self-expression (Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1984). Supporting this notion, Debats, Drost, and Hansen (1995) found that when they asked participants to write short essays about a time when they felt their lives were meaningful, as well as a time when they felt their lives were meaningless, content analysis of the narratives revealed that the meaningful essays often included a sense of contact with the self, whereas the meaningless essays often included a sense of alienation from the self. For example, one participant wrote ''life has more meaning to me in those moments that I am close to my feelings and I don't cling to expectations and duties anymore'' (368).

McGregor and Little (1998) provide compelling evidence that there is something unique about the relationship between the true self and one's activities that influences levels of perceived meaning. Specifically, they used Personal Projects Analysis (Little, 1983) to elicit lists of participants' activities, goals, and/or concerns that they either thought about often or were currently engaged in. Participants then picked the 10 per-sonal projects that best encapsulated their daily lives and rated those projects on a variety of dimensions (e.g., importance, enjoyment, fun, self-identity) that were combined to create an average score for each participant on five factors: self-benefit, efficacy, fun, integrity, and support. McGregor and Little (1998) found that the extent to which one's personal projects were rated as fun, supported, and efficacious positively correlated with a person's level of happiness. However, and importantly, it was one's scores on integrity (i.e., the extent to which person projects reflected core aspects of the self) that predicted their experience of meaning in life. These ideas are similarly supported by the work of Sheldon and colleagues (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001) that suggests that when people pursue goals that are concordant with the self, they are more likely to both attain those goals and experience greater well-being.

Cognitive Accessibility, Metacognitive Ease, and the True Self-Concept

As previously mentioned, in our own research, we have extended these ideas by taking a different methodological approach to studying the true self than what is typically observed in the literature. Specifically, we have used methodologies that move away from the

exclusive use of self-reports and instead focus on the cognitive accessibility or metacognitive ease (e.g., Schwarz, 1998) associated with one's true self-concept.

Cognitive accessibility

Previous research has shown that making an important source of meaning accessible influences subsequent judgments of meaning in life (e.g., Hicks & King, 2008, 2009b; Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010; King et al., 2006). For instance, King et al. (2006) showed that priming words related to positive emotions increased levels of meaning in life. As such, we hypothesized that if the true self concept is associated with the subjective feeling of meaning, then the relative cognitive accessibility of one's true self-concept might also predict the individuals' global judgment of how meaningful his/her life is. Using the basic methodology previously described, we asked participants to provide words that best described both their true and actual selves (Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2009). Across five studies, we then either utilized reaction times on a Me/Not Me task to measure cognitive accessibility or priming techniques to manipulate the cognitive accessibility of one's true self-concept (e.g., Bargh & Chartrand, 2000). For the reaction time studies, we operationalized both true and actual self-concept accessibility as the residuals of the specific self-concept reaction times predicted from reaction times for control words (i.e., words not selected for either self-concept). This approach allowed us to control for individual differences in general speed of responding (Robinson, 2007). We predicted participants who were particularly fast to respond 'me' to words they listed as part of the true self-concept would report greater meaning in life that participants who were relatively slower to respond to their true self words, whereas speed of responding to actual self words would have no influence on meaning. For the priming studies, we predicted that participants primed with true self words would report greater meaning in life than participants primed with actual self words.

Results were consistent with predictions for both measured and manipulated true self-concept accessibility and suggested that the more accessible one's true self-concept, the greater one's perception that his or her life was meaningful. In contrast, actual self-concept accessibility had no relationship with meaning in life, suggesting that the *true* self has a unique relationship with the experience of meaning. Interestingly, these effects also appear to be independent of the valence of the true self-concept. Across the studies, we controlled for either the social desirability of the self-concepts, the self-reported liking of the self-concepts, or self-esteem. Additionally, one study demonstrated that even priming exclusively negative aspects of the true self (i.e., characteristics that either they or others disliked) elicited the same meaning bolstering effect.

These studies suggest that independent of any overt behavior or even the clarity of one's self-concept, the simple cognitive accessibility of one's true self-concept predicts global judgments of meaning. It is worth noting that this may imply that the true self is as inexorably linked to the experience of meaning as other better known meaning sources that generate the same accessibility effects (e.g., relationships and happiness, Hicks et al., 2010; religious beliefs, Hicks & King, 2008).

Metacognitive ease

We have also utilized metacognitive ease as a means of examining the potential role of perceived true self-knowledge in the meaning making process (Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2011; Schlegel, Hicks, Davis et al., forthcoming). In these studies, we rely on the

metacognitive experience of ease/difficulty (Schwarz, 1998; Schwarz & Clore, 1996) in a true self description task as a means of measuring or manipulating perceived true self-knowledge. This is based on the idea that people use the metacognitive experience of ease (or difficulty) of their thoughts as a cue to how much they know about that topic (Schwarz, 2004). Thus, experiencing true self-description as easy (versus difficult) should influence the perception of possessing true self-knowledge. This method allowed us to not only an easy means of manipulating a true self relevant variable, but also allowed us to address some of the limitations described earlier that are common to this type of research (e.g., semantic similarity).

In these studies we asked participants to generate lists of words that described their true and/or actual selves. We then either measured perceived true self-knowledge by asking participants how easy it was to complete the task or manipulated perceived true self-knowledge by explicitly making the task easy or difficult by asking participants to generate either a few (easy) or many (difficult) words (adapted from Schwarz, Bless, Strack, Klumpp, Rittenauer-Schatka & Simons, 1991).

In the first set of studies using this approach (Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2011), we examined the potential effect of perceived true self-knowledge self on global judgments of meaning in life. Consistent with the findings for true self-concept accessibility, we found that perceived true self knowledge (operationalized as the experience of metacognitive ease during a true self description task), positively predicted judgments of meaning in life. Conversely, perceived actual self-knowledge was unrelated to meaning in life judgments. Importantly, this pattern was consistent across three variations of the ease operationalization: independent coding of narratives (Study 1), self-reported ease (Study 2), and manipulated ease (Study 3). Additionally, the pattern was observed after controlling for the potentially related constructs of positive affect, negative affect, and self-esteem. These findings build on those for cognitive accessibility to suggest the perception of true self-knowledge contributes to a global sense of meaning in one's life.

In the second set of studies (Schlegel, Hicks, Davis, Smith, and Hirsch, forthcoming), we used the same approach to examine the potential influence of perceived true self-knowledge specifically on decision satisfaction. Recall that part of the argument for the relationship between the true self and meaning in life relies on the notion that people use the true self as a guide to a variety of life decisions. Of course, to use the true self-concept as a guide to decision-making, one must have at least some level of knowledge of his/her true self. This idea is consistent with previous research that suggests general self-knowledge reduces the experience of conflict between options when making decisions (e.g., Lieberman & Eisenberger, 2005; Nakao, Osumi, Ohira, Kasuya, Shinoda & Yamada, 2009; Nakao et al., 2010). In our studies, we examined the relation of true self-knowledge, specifically, with the experience of decision satisfaction with previously made real life decisions as well as simulated career decisions made in a lab. Though we did not directly assess meaning *per se*, it stands to reason that satisfying decisions are those that are perceived as having some significance and meaning to the individual.

Participants were either asked to reflect on major decisions they had recently made in their lives (e.g., the decision to attend this university, the choice of their current major) or to complete a simulated career choice task in which they were asked to quickly choose which career they would prefer from a number of paired choices (e.g., doctor and painter; adapted from Nakao et al., 2010). Consistent with our hypotheses, across five studies, perceived true self-knowledge was related to self-reported satisfaction with both real life and simulated decisions, whereas perceived actual self-knowledge was

unrelated to decision satisfaction. These findings suggest that perceived true self-knowledge serves as important information about one's confidence both in one's previous decisions and in one's ability to make future decisions.

Future Directions

The research reviewed in this paper represents only a small kernel of information about the potential relationship between the true self and healthy human functioning. We conclude this review with suggestions for future research in hopes of stimulating research on this elusive construct.

Research to date has exclusively examined the direct, positive relationships between the true self and well-being. However, it is possible that the true self can also negatively influence individuals' psychological health. For example, too much true self expression could actually have negative personal consequences, particularly in the form of social repercussions. There are valid reasons why people do not always express their true selves such as strong social norms (e.g., Sheldon et al., 1997; Turner, 1976) or the need to employ impression management strategies (e.g., Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 1980; Snyder, 1987). Future research needs to explore the potential boundaries of authentic expression.

The valance of the true self concept could also moderate the effects of true self-concept accessibility or perceived true self-knowledge on perceptions of meaning. We attempted to address this issue in our own work by controlling for the objective likeability of the words people generated, the self-reported liking of the true self, and by priming people exclusively with self-generated negative true self-content. It is likely, however, that our approach only captures relatively mild negativity in self-descriptors. Anecdotally, the negative words listed by participants tend to be characteristics such as 'jealous' or 'judgmental'. Would these effects hold for people who think their true nature is extremely violent or deceitful, for example? Moreover, it is possible that even though participants know that these traits are negatively perceived by society, the traits themselves are not perceived very negatively by the individual. Thus, we do not know if the true self continues to be beneficial to people who have truly negative views of who they really are. In line with self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 1984, 1987, 1990), it would be interesting to show that manipulations aimed to make the true self-concept more accessible and/or fluent increase levels of meaning even for people who possess patently negative self-concepts.

It is also possible that the true self effects that have been observed interact with each other. For example, the relationship between true self-concept accessibility and meaning in life may depend on one's level of true self-knowledge or perceived authenticity. It might not be as beneficial for your true self-concept to be highly accessible if you feel that you do not know it well or are never able to express it. Indeed, increasing the accessibility of one's true self-concept may even lead to negative emotional outcomes for individuals who are have a difficult time thinking of their true self or whose behavior is chronically inauthentic. Or perhaps difficulty in thinking about one's core values would similarly attenuate (or reverse) the positive benefits of affirming one's self (see earlier discussion)? In a related vein, it is possible that people with highly accessible true self-concepts are more likely to use true self-knowledge when making judgments of meaning or satisfaction. Research has shown that the accessibility of an attitude moderates the extent to which that attitude will be activated in a relevant context (Fazio, 1990; Fazio, Sanbonmatsu, Powell, & Kardes, 1986). As such, it is possible that people who have

accessible true self-concepts, for example, are more easily able to use self-knowledge when making judgments about meaning or decision satisfaction.

Individual differences in beliefs about the true self may also moderate the positive effects of the true self. For example, people or cultures likely vary in the degree to which they believe in the true self (e.g., is it something 'real'). Beliefs that threaten the perceived validity of the true self may then attenuate the effects of true self-knowledge on well-being. There are a variety of ways that researchers could investigate this issue. For example, recent research demonstrates that the belief that the true self is discovered positively predicts belief in the true self as 'real' and the lack of discovery beliefs actually attenuates the relationship between true self-knowledge and meaning in life (Schlegel, Vess et al., forthcoming). This suggests that the positive effects of the true self may be limited to individuals who think of it in certain ways. That is, this effect might be explained by an increase in perceived legitimacy of the true self among those who believe it is discovered (i.e., if it is discovered within, it must really be in there). Beliefs about the nature of the true self have the potential for a variety of other downstream consequences as well. As just one example, beliefs about discovery and immutability of the true self may influence motivation and perceived ability to change one's self. Individuals who believe the true self is discovered, for example, may be more willing to accept their negative characteristics because of a perceived inability to change them.

Finally, research should examine how the true self differs from the ideal self. Indeed, our initial suspicion was that the true self was an illusory concept based on the part of the self a person liked the best. However, our data so far suggest that the true self is not necessarily the same as an ideal self. Although participants report liking their true self more than their actual self, the actual content of their true self-concept is either less (Schlegel et al., 2009; Study 1) or equivalent in socially desirability (Study 2). Further, priming exclusively negative attributes of the true self-concept still elicits an increase in meaning in life (Study 5). This suggests that the true self can actually be somewhat negative and still have positive consequences (though see our earlier discussion of the potential problems with truly negative true selves). Presumably, unlike the true self, the ideal self unlikely contains such negative characteristics. Moreover, we have also used the ideal self as a control condition and found that perceived knowledge of the ideal self was unrelated to decision satisfaction (Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2011; Schlegel, Hicks, Davis, et al., forthcoming; Schlegel, Vess et al., forthcoming). That is, the feeling that you know who you ideally want to be was not predictive of decision satisfaction, whereas the feeling that you know who you really are was a strong predictor. Clearly, more research is needed, however, to distinguish the true self-concept from other potentially related self-concepts.

Concluding Comments

Much of the previous research on the true self has focused solely on subjective feelings of true self-expression (i.e., authenticity, autonomy). While this research provides important support to the notions that people cherish this aspect of the self and that true self-expression is linked to healthy human functioning, it may not optimally capture the function and importance of the essential and literal true self that appears in people's lay theories of the self. By developing a basic understanding of the characteristics and function of the true self-concept, we believe researchers can begin to examine more nuanced questions linking true self to positive psychological functioning.

Short Biographies

Rebecca J. Schlegel is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at Texas A&M University. She received her BS in 2004 from Kansas State University and her PhD in 2009 from the University of Missouri, Columbia. Her research interests are primarily concerned with the influence of self and identity on well-being. To date, she has explored these issues in relation to both the true self and rural identity. More information can be found at http://personalitylab.tamu.edu/lab-members/dr-rebecca-j-schlegel/.

Joshua A. Hicks earned his BA from San Francisco State University, MS from Villanova University, and PhD from the University of Missouri. He is currently an assistant professor in the psychology department at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. His research focuses on classic and applied questions related to social and personality psychology. Although the specific question has varied, these lines of investigation are unified by their aim to understand the dynamic interplay of individual differences, situational factors, and cognitive processes in important outcomes such as the experience of meaning in life, positive emotions, psychological well-being, intuition, the link between substance use and behavior, judgment and decision-making processes, and personality development.

Endnote

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