

Varieties of Conscious Experience and the Subjective Awareness of One's "True" Self

Review of General Psychology
2019, Vol. 23(1) 89–98
© American Psychological
Association 2019
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1089268019829471
journals.sagepub.com/home/rgp



Matthew Vess¹

Abstract

The subjective awareness of one's true self is considered a fundamental aspect of authenticity. It is theorized to reflect an experienced disconnect between one's conscious awareness and actual experiences. In this brief review, I describe some of the early theorizing on the construct and the research that this theorizing has inspired. I then review an emerging direction of research specifically focused on the relationship between subjective feelings of being disconnected from one's true self and tendencies to become mentally detached from present experience (i.e., mindwandering). This work offers new insights into the nature of subjective true self-awareness; it elucidates for the first time how disruptions to people's ongoing mental connection to present experience relate to the experience of true self-awareness and it invites theorizing about aspects of authenticity in ways that do not require evaluations of a self-concept. I end the review by speculating on how this work might inspire new empirical and theoretical directions in the psychological study of authenticity and feelings of true self-awareness.

Keywords

true self, self-alienation, mindwandering, stream of consciousness, authenticity

A person's subjective experience of knowing who they truly are is, to many, a fundamentally important psychological phenomenon. Booksellers offer hundreds of titles that promise to help people find their true selves. Popular cultural narratives emphasize the importance of being true to one's self and discovering who one really is, even if it requires experimentation with hallucinogenic drugs (Blackmore, 2011) or adventures into drastically unfamiliar environments (Ee & Kahl, 2014). Empirical psychology generally aligns with these lay-beliefs, as a relatively robust and diverse literature on the importance of knowing and being one's true self has developed and continues to grow at a steady rate. This work has its roots in both existential and humanistic traditions, and generally indicates that people's subjective awareness of who they truly are plays an important role in healthy psychological functioning. People who feel connected to and aware of who they truly are tend to experience more positive psychological outcomes than those who do not (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Schlegel & Hicks, 2011; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008). Moreover, the positive link between subjective awareness of who one is and central aspects of well-being introduces important practical and theoretical questions about how such feelings arise and causally influence

psychological outcomes. It is here, perhaps not surprisingly, that the empirical appears to lag behind the hundreds of popular books, blogs, and conventional wisdoms that purport to offer clear, albeit generally untested, pathways to true self-awareness and understanding. Nevertheless, the scientific study of these issues continues to trudge forward, providing new understanding of what makes people feel in touch with who they truly are and what this means for their everyday functioning and behavior.

In this brief review, I provide a general account of emerging research in this area focused on the relationship between people's sense of knowing who they are and aspects of their ongoing stream of conscious thought. This work builds upon classic ideas about consciousness (James, 1890) and a sense of self, investigating how the properties of people's daydreaming and tendencies to mentally detach from present experience (i.e., mindwander) relates to their subjective

¹Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, USA

Corresponding Author:

Matthew Vess, Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences, Texas A&M University, 230 Psychology Building, 4235 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843, USA.
Email: vess@tamu.edu

feelings of knowing and being connected to who they truly are, deep down. The review will be presented in three parts. First, I describe the theoretical and empirical grounding of research on people's feelings of knowing and being connected to who they truly are. This description emphasizes current conceptual models that cast these self-perceptions as a critical part of people's broader feelings of being an authentic person. Next, I introduce the aforementioned work on the relationships between people's sense of knowing themselves and aspects of consciousness, specifically qualitative features of their daydreams (Singer, 1975) and their tendencies to become mentally detached from present experience (Smallwood & Schooler, 2015). The second section of the article highlights new research directions in this area and their conceptual connections to existing theoretical frameworks. Finally, in the third section of the article, I very briefly sketch out how research on subjective conscious experiences potentially advances theoretical understanding of the authenticity construct, and I identify areas of inquiry that may benefit from further development.

The Feeling of Being Connected to and Aware of One's "True" Self

Theory and Research on the Psychology of "True" Self-Awareness

Intellectual theorizing about the psychological implications of people's understanding of who they truly are dates back to at least Aristotle and can be seen in the works of existentialists (e.g., Kierkegaard, Sartre) and enlightenment thinkers (e.g., Locke, Kant, Rousseau) alike. Much of this work discusses the importance of knowing one's authentic self and being guided by it. For example, Heidegger (1927/1962) emphasized the importance of authentic action that avoids being consumed and lost in the "they," which was Heidegger's notion of the socially prescribed contexts and bases for behavior that each individual's existence is necessarily grounded in. In similar fashion, Rousseau (1781/1953) placed a great deal of importance on letting one's "inner" motives be the primary catalysts for one's actions. Denying these central aspects of one's identity and instead being moved by forces outside of one's self, according to Rousseau, ultimately give rise to a variety of negative consequences, including a strong sense of being alienated from one's self and a compromised sense of morality. These types of ideas, particularly the distinction between "inner" aspects of one's self and external forces, also appear quite prominently in classic psychological theorizing on clinical health and optimal living. Psychodynamic and humanistic theorists like Horney (1951) and Rogers (1961) indeed argued that a subjectively experienced sense of authenticity was critical to psychological functioning. These perspectives noted that people who behave in ways that are

consistent with who they truly are and do not succumb to the influence of outside forces (e.g., other people) *feel* authentic and are consequently on the path to becoming a "fully functioning" person (Rogers, 1961). Thus, although important differences among these perspectives exist, the classic views of theorists like Heidegger, Rousseau, and Rogers do share a common view that the subjective experience of knowing one's true self is of critical existential and psychological importance.

Empirical psychology, though joining the discussion much later, makes points similar to these classic perspectives by revealing strong links between people's subjective awareness of their true selves and other aspects of psychological flourishing. Of course, it is worth pointing out that the subjective nature of this "awareness" is central to these lines of empirical inquiry. It may, after all, seem easy to dismiss the idea that people are even capable of having an accurate awareness of their true, inner selves. Nisbett and Wilson's (1977) seminal work on this topic specifically suggests that, rather than being able to accurately introspect about the mental processes theoretically linked to one's core self, people often incorrectly infer their inner beliefs and feelings from lay causal theories that offer consensually validated explanations for behavior. To say, then, that people likely possess accurate insight into their true inner selves is to largely ignore considerable evidence potentially suggesting otherwise. Yet, people's lack of introspective accuracy does not necessarily undermine the merits of studying their subjectively experienced authenticity any more than the difficulty of establishing the existence of God threatens the legitimacy of studying the nature of religious belief. Few would doubt that religious beliefs have observable effects on people's daily affairs, even if they lack objective grounding. Likewise, although people may lack accurate insight into whom they may really be, their subjective feelings of being aware of and connected to who they truly are can have real and significant psychological consequences.

Indeed, empirical frameworks focused on authenticity and people's awareness of their true selves demonstrate that these subjective experiences are meaningful and consequential.¹ Two frameworks, in particular, have positioned subjective feelings of true self-awareness as a central aspect of authenticity and psychological health. Kernis and Goldman (2006) drew from the theoretical groundwork of existential and humanistic perspectives on authenticity to develop a multicomponent conceptualization of the construct. They defined authenticity as "the unobstructed operation of one's true- or core-self in one's daily enterprise" (p. 294), and they positioned awareness of one's true self as the first component in their model. Awareness "refers to possessing, and being motivated to increase, knowledge of and trust in one's motives, feelings, desires, and self-relevant cognitions" (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 294). It reflects an

integrative understanding of who people believe themselves to be, including their perceived strengths, weaknesses, emotions, and divergent characteristics. A second model of authenticity developed by Wood and colleagues (2008) advances a similar component of authenticity, true self-alienation. Like Kernis and Goldman (2006), Wood and colleagues (2008) positioned true self-alienation as the first component of authenticity and defined it as “the subjective experience of not knowing oneself, or feeling out of touch with the true self” (p. 386). They emphasized that true self-alienation is indicative of a subjectively experienced disconnect between conscious awareness and actual experiences, including those that are physiological and emotional. True self-alienation is highest when there is a total mismatch between a person’s actual experiences and what they are consciously attending to or aware of. These two conceptualizations of true self-awareness, though defined in opposite directions, are empirically and theoretically overlapping. They both emphasize a subjective feeling of being connected to and aware of one’s true self and they both are measured via subjective self-report items like “For better or for worse I am aware of who I truly am” (Kernis & Goldman, 2006) and “I feel out of touch with the ‘real me’” (Wood et al., 2008). Not surprisingly, these measures are highly correlated with one another, yield convergent findings (Seto & Hicks, 2016), and can be fruitfully combined into a single measure of perceived true self-knowledge or awareness (Christy, Seto, Schlegel, Vess, & Hicks, 2016).

These frameworks’ clear conceptualizations of perceived true self-awareness and reliable instruments for measuring it have been integral to advancing the scientific study of authenticity and the subjective feeling of knowing who one truly is. There is now a fairly robust literature empirically supporting the classic views noted earlier, that the subjective awareness of one’s true self is fundamentally connected to psychological well-being. Early studies showed (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008), for example, that people who report relatively higher levels of subjective true self-awareness also report greater feelings of self-actualization, vitality, satisfaction with life, positive affect, and self-esteem. Likewise, early studies indicated that high levels of subjective true self-awareness predict lower levels of stress, anxiety, and negative affect. These early findings have been replicated and extended in a number of ways. For instance, people high in subjective true self-awareness report greater daily satisfaction with their lives and are protected from the negative longitudinal effects of daily interpersonal conflicts on well-being (Wickham, Williamson, Beard, Kobayashi, & Hirst, 2016). Higher levels of subjective true self-awareness also relate to greater daily satisfaction of basic psychological needs (Heppner et al., 2008), greater reports of viewing life as meaningful (Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011), and, consistent with Rousseau’s theorizing about the link

between self-alienation and morality, greater levels of honesty in a laboratory context (Gino, Norton, & Ariely, 2010). Overall, there is considerable empirical support for the hypothesized association between a subjective awareness of one’s true self and psychological health.

More recently, research on subjective true self-awareness has begun to make important theoretical inroads on the nature of the experience and the mechanisms that shape it. That is, research has moved beyond expected associations between subjective true self-awareness and psychological well-being to examine the basic psychological processes that influence people’s sense of knowing who they truly are. It is in this area that the subjective nature of these feelings really comes into focus. For example, work on the broader construct of authenticity indicates that the overlap between who a person thinks they are and how they behave has little impact on their sense of feeling authentic (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010). Instead, feelings of being authentic are linked to the expression of certain kinds of characteristics (e.g., extraversion), even if people do not view those traits as indicative of who they are. The implication of these findings is that a person’s sense of being who they truly are may reflect a subjective feeling state catalyzed by certain types of subjective or phenomenological experiences (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018; Sedikides, Slabu, Lenton, & Thomaes, 2017), and not necessarily by any objective congruence between self-perceptions and observable behavior. Indeed, feelings of authenticity are heightened when people behave in normative ways (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2012), experience psychological need satisfaction (Heppner et al., 2008), and experience positive mood states (Lenton, Slabu, Sedikides, & Power, 2013). Research specifically focused on people’s feelings of knowing who they truly are makes similar points in that the feeling of being in touch with one’s true self seems to respond to specific types of experiences. Undermining the belief in free-will, for example, which should arguably affect the phenomenological experience of personal agency, decreases the feeling of knowing who one truly is (Seto & Hicks, 2016). Likewise, experiencing a lack of academic motivation predicts negative longitudinal changes in feelings of true self-awareness (Kim, Christy, Schlegel, Donnellan, & Hicks, 2018). Moreover, although threats to competence do not impact feelings of true self-awareness when accounting for self-esteem, threats to a person’s sense of moral character do (Christy et al., 2016). Thus, when taken together, research indicates that people’s sense of connection to and awareness of their true selves is strongly tethered to psychological health and that these feelings can be shaped by subjective or phenomenological features of specific experiences (cf. Schmader & Sedikides, 2018; Sedikides et al., 2017).

Subjective True Self-Awareness as the Feeling of Owning Phenomenological Experience

The conceptual connection between people's phenomenological experiences and their sense of true self-awareness raises important questions about what aspects of phenomenological experiences are most relevant. Identifying the specific processes that underlie subjective true self-alienation will both advance the conceptual clarity of the construct and potentially better inform the mechanisms that account for the general relationship between true self-awareness and well-being. To some extent, a focus on phenomenology resonates with classic ideas about the links between consciousness and the sense of self (James, 1890). Many psychological theories of "self-hood" (Klein, 2012; Leary & Tangney, 2012; McAdams, 1996; Prebble, Addis, & Tippett, 2013) build on James's specific discussion of the "I-self" and "me-self," which broadly reflects the conceptual distinction between a sense of self as subject (the "I") and a sense of self as object (the "me"). McAdams (1996) suggested that the "I-self" may be best viewed as a process through which people subjectively assume ownership of their phenomenological experiences. He used the term "selfing" to denote this process, arguing that people are "selfing" when they "locate the source of experience as oneself" (McAdams, 1996, p. 302). The "me-self," by comparison, reflects the product of "selfing" in that it develops out of one's subjective experiences. The self-concept, or "me," is therefore produced through a reflective process that works to construct a mental representation of who one is (Prebble et al., 2013), in terms of one's traits, goals, motives, and so forth. There is thus a procedural relationship between subjectively experiencing a sense of self and forming a coherent representation of who that self truly is.

In the context of understanding authenticity and people's subjective feelings of knowing who they truly are, this sort of theorizing may be useful. The feeling of knowing and being connected to who one truly is may result from phenomenological experiences tethered to the "I" or "selfing" process. That is, people's feelings of being disconnected from or unaware of who they truly are may increase when they feel less subjective ownership over their phenomenological experiences. Such a view is generally consistent with conceptualizations of the true self-alienation construct (Wood et al., 2008) and clearly emphasizes the earlier noted distinction between subjective awareness of one's true self and the actual objective accuracy of people's self-knowledge. Accuracy of self-knowledge can be completely orthogonal to people's subjective awareness of who they truly are, especially if the latter feelings arise from a sense of ownership over one's phenomenological experiences. In addition, viewing subjective awareness of one's true self through the lens of "selfing" may be advantageous for understanding why experiences that seem completely

irrelevant to knowledge of the self as an object nevertheless influence people's subjective reports of being aware of who they truly are.

Indeed, although this is not a view explicitly endorsed in extant theorizing, a number of disparate findings can be profitably integrated by conceptualizing subjective true self-awareness as a response to feeling ownership over phenomenological experiences. The most direct support for this idea may come from evidence showing that undermining free-will decreases subjective true self-awareness. Seto and Hicks (2016) randomly assigned participants to conditions of a manipulation that reliably reduces participants' beliefs in free-will and then had them complete the measures of true self-awareness (Kernis & Goldman, 2006) and true self-alienation (Wood et al., 2008) described above. Participants in the low free-will condition reported lower levels of true self-awareness and higher levels of true self-alienation relative to those in the high free-will condition. Because undermining belief in free-will should, theoretically, diminish feelings of ownership over one's experiences, these results provide clear support for the link between the theoretical process of "selfing" and subjective true self-awareness. Work showing that academic amotivation prospectively predicts declines in true self-alienation (Kim et al., 2018) makes a similar point. Academic amotivation reflects a lack of understanding for why one engages in academic pursuits (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As such, and consistent with the "selfing" process, academically amotivated students likely do not experience a sense that their daily activities originate from themselves, thereby fostering the same feelings of true self-alienation that are triggered by the experience of reading information that undermines free-will. It is as if a person's subjective sense of self is, or becomes detached from, their ongoing experiences, leading them to feel alienated from who they truly are and, consequently, vulnerable to broader deficits in health and well-being. Thus, while existing work on the processes that underlie feelings of true self-alienation are largely unintegrated, there is at least some suggestive support for the notion that the phenomenological experience of owning conscious experiences may be important.

The "Stream" of Consciousness and the Experience of True Self-Awareness

More direct support for the idea that feelings of true self-awareness may be stronger when people experience ownership over phenomenological experiences has recently emerged in work on qualitative aspects of people's ongoing stream of consciousness. This work is perhaps most clearly tethered to the idea that subjective true self-awareness originates largely from people's experience of self as subject and builds strongly upon the conceptualization of true self-alienation in the Wood et al.'s (2008) model of authenticity. True self-alienation,

according to Wood and colleagues (2008), reflects a disconnection between one's true self (e.g., actual beliefs, emotions, and physiological states) and the contents of their conscious awareness. As argued above, this "disconnect" may be experienced in ways consistent with a diminished sense of ownership over one's phenomenological (and conscious) experiences, or what McAdams (1996) referred to as "selfing." This suggests that disruptions to one's ongoing stream of consciousness, particularly those that produce a detachment from actual ongoing experiences, may relate to people's experiences of being disconnected from their true selves.

Researchers have begun to test this possibility by integrating research on true self-alienation with research that examines aspects of people's streams of consciousness. The first efforts focused on simple associations between daydreaming and people's feelings of being connected to their true selves. This work drew from Singer's (1975) classic work on qualitative patterns of daydreaming that emphasize important individual differences in the characteristics of people's ongoing inner mental experiences. Daydreaming is, of course, an incredibly common phenomenon (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010) defined by an inward attentional focus that is decoupled from present external stimuli. It occurs when the contents of our ongoing stream of consciousness become completely disconnected from the external sensory inputs that we are receiving from the current environment. Driving down a highway and consciously thinking about whether the alien in the classic film *Predator* is more threatening than the alien in the film *Prometheus* is one example. The contents of consciousness are not connected to the external environment that one is experiencing or interacting with.

Singer's work led to an emphasis on individual variation in three different styles of daydreaming that characterize people's inner mental lives (Huba, Aneshensel, & Singer, 1981). *Positive constructive daydreaming* reflects a pattern of daydreaming that is focused on the future and is generally optimistic in nature. It is generally viewed as adaptive (McMillan, Kaufman, & Singer, 2013) and may reflect volitional exploration of ideas and feelings (Zhiyan & Singer, 1997), as well as planning for future goals (Mooneyham & Schooler, 2013). *Guilty-dysphoric daydreaming* tends to be focused on negative emotions and "anguished fantasies" (McMillan et al., 2013, p. 1). It is generally viewed as maladaptive and linked to depressed or negative affective dispositions (Zhiyan & Singer, 1997). Finally, *poor attentional control* reflects difficulty attending to the ongoing stream of thought, regardless of whether it is focused internally or externally. It is also considered to be maladaptive, as it reflects tendencies to experience cognitive failures that can impair performance on focal tasks. An important aspect of these styles of daydreaming, as suggested by McMillan and colleagues (2013), is that they may differ in their relationship to volitional control. People high in positive constructive daydreaming, due to its positive

tone and role in planning, may intentionally shift their thoughts away from some focal experiences to achieve (or plan to achieve) some other relevant goal. In contrast, guilty-dysphoric daydreaming is a primarily negative experience that may be more broadly indicative of ruminative tendencies that are largely not volitional in nature (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987). Poor attentional control also clearly lacks a volitional component, as it reflects difficulties in controlling one's attentional focus and wandering mind. Theoretically, then, people may be less likely to feel a sense of self-ownership over guilty-dysphoric daydreaming and poor attentional control. The opposite should be true of positive constructive daydreaming. As such, and to the extent that these feelings of ownership over phenomenological experiences reflects a sense of true self-awareness, patterns of daydreaming should correlate to the experience of being connected to one's true self.

Williams and Vess (2016) tested this possibility to better understand how aspects of people's ongoing streams of consciousness relate to their experience of subjective true self-awareness. Participants in both samples completed the Wood et al.'s (2008) measure of true self-alienation and the Short Imaginal Processes Inventory (SIPI; Huba et al., 1981). The SIPI is a self-report measure that reliably assesses individual differences in positive constructive daydreaming, guilty-dysphoric daydreaming, and poor attentional control. Participants respond to items such as "My fantasies usually provide me with pleasant thoughts" (positive constructive), "My daydreams often contain depressing events which upset me" (guilty-dysphoric), and "I am the kind of person whose thoughts often wander" (poor attentional control). The two samples yielded consistent associations between true self-alienation and individual differences in daydreaming styles. At the bivariate level, high levels of positive constructive daydreaming were associated with lower levels of true self-alienation, whereas high levels of guilty-dysphoric daydreaming and poor attentional control were associated with higher levels of true self-alienation. In addition, each pattern of daydreaming independently predicted true self-alienation when all three were entered as simultaneous predictors in a multiple regression model. These relationships were also not consistently accounted for by trait anxiety or self-esteem. Together, these findings indicate that aspects of ongoing streams of consciousness reliably relate to the self-reported subjective experience of being disconnected from one's true self.

The consistent associations between true self-alienation and poor attentional control may be particularly important for evidencing a link between subjective true self-awareness and a sense of ownership over one's phenomenological experiences. After all, while positive constructive and guilty-dysphoric daydreaming likely relate to some sense of volition over one's conscious stream of thought, they are also characterized by strong affective features that

are known to relate to authenticity and true self-awareness (Lenton et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2008). Poor attentional control, on the contrary, directly taps into the experience of not owning or controlling the stream of one's thoughts. Its relationship to true self-awareness may therefore provide a clearer depiction of the theoretical link between subjective true self-awareness and a sense of ownership over phenomenological experience. Research linking subjective true self-awareness to individual differences in mindfulness is also revealing in this regard (Kernis & Goldman, 2006), in that mindfulness reflects "an enhanced attention to and awareness of current experience or present reality" (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 822). Mindful people purposively attend to the contents of present conscious experience and do so in an open and accepting way. Its relationship to a heightened sense of connection to one's true self thus provides additional evidence that subjective feelings of true self-awareness relate to psychological processes indicative of self-ownership over conscious experiences.

Another way to examine this relationship, however, is to focus on propensities for people's conscious stream of thought to wander away or become decoupled from a focal task. Task-unrelated thought, or mindwandering, is akin to daydreaming (McMillan et al., 2013), and reliable laboratory tasks have been developed to capture it (Smallwood & Schooler, 2015). Vess, Leal, Hoeldtke, Schlegel, and Hicks (2016) drew upon these methods in two studies to further assess how feelings of true self-alienation relate to people's ongoing stream of consciousness. In both studies, participants completed a battery of questionnaires that included the Wood et al.'s (2008) measure of true self-alienation. They also completed either the Sustained Attention to Response Task (SART; Robertson, Manly, Andrade, Baddeley, & Yiend, 1997) or the Choice Reaction Time Task (Smallwood et al., 2011). Both of these tasks require participants to monitor an ongoing presentation of various stimuli and to respond to a specific target stimulus. The tasks contain many trials with only a small proportion consisting of targets. For example, in the SART, participants monitor numbers presented one at a time on the screen and only respond when a certain number (e.g., "3") is presented. Only 17 of 245 trials in our study consisted of the target stimulus, making it likely that participants' minds would occasionally wander away from the task. To capture these instances of mindwandering, thought probes were presented intermittently throughout the attention task that asked participants to indicate whether or not their thoughts immediately prior to the probe were related to the task at hand. The results of these studies were convergent with those observed in the studies focused on poor attentional control as an aspect of daydreaming. People who mindwandered more reported that they also felt greater disconnection from who they truly are. Notably, this relationship emerged above and beyond the effects of other relevant variables (e.g.,

self-esteem, negative affect, neuroticism), suggesting that it may be particularly robust.

An obvious, but important, limitation of the studies reviewed above is that they are cross-sectional in nature. They do not inform the direction of these effects. If it is disruptions to people's sense of ownership over phenomenological experiences that drive feelings of true self-awareness, then we might expect to see tendencies to mindwander prospectively predicting feelings of true self-alienation. Recent research has tested this possibility in a week-long longitudinal study that asked participants to report on their feelings of true self-alienation and experiences of mindwandering at three separate time points (Vess, Brooker, Schlegel, & Hicks, 2019). Using a cross-lagged panel design that accounted for "trait" level variation in both true self-alienation and mindwandering (Hamaker, Kuiper, & Grasman, 2015), the results provided evidence consistent with the idea that the frequency of momentary disruptions to one's ongoing stream of consciousness (i.e., mindwandering) prospectively predicts true self-alienation. The more people reported mindwandering at one time point, the more alienated from their true selves they felt at a subsequent time point. In addition, however, there was also a reciprocal relationship such that feelings of true self-alienation also prospectively predicted greater subsequent reports of mindwandering. Thus, while these findings are consistent with the idea that true self-alienation increases in response to phenomenological experiences that do not feel owned by the self, they also illuminate a potential cyclical relationship that exists between the two experiences. When people experience a lack of control over their ongoing stream of consciousness, they feel alienated from who they truly are and, in turn, experience even more difficulty establishing ownership over their inner mental lives.

Subjective True Self-Awareness: New Directions and Lingering Questions

As evidenced by this special issue of *Review of General Psychology*, the scientific study of authenticity and subjective true self-awareness has grown substantially since Kernis and Goldman's (2006) early endeavors to empirically ground existential and humanistic ideas about the phenomenon. At the same time, however, this theoretical and empirical development is far from complete and will likely evolve as new findings continue to emerge. The work reviewed above may be particularly relevant in this regard because it offers evidence to support existing theoretical views on what subjective true self-awareness actually reflects. Specifically, while the broader conceptualization of authenticity as a central aspect of well-being is generally well supported, the more specific conceptualization of subjective true self-awareness as a felt disconnect between conscious awareness and actual experience (Wood et al.,

2008) has been, for the most part, purely theoretical. Research on reports of poor attentional control and heightened tendencies for one's thoughts to become decoupled from present experience addresses this gap. Mindwandering is, by definition, indicative of a disconnection between one's ongoing stream of thought and actual present experience. The work reviewed above (e.g., Vess et al., 2016) shows that these mindwandering experiences reliably covary with reports of true self-alienation. As such, and consistent with the Wood et al.'s (2008) model, subjective reports of feeling alienated from one's true self are, at least to some extent, indicative of having one's conscious awareness decoupled from direct present experience.

Evidence that feelings of true self-alienation reliably covary with tendencies to mindwander may, in addition to supporting previously untested theoretical assumptions, provide a unique generative foundation for future inquiries into the nature of personal authenticity. These findings may specifically help distinguish subjective true self-awareness from other approaches that emphasize objective self-knowledge. Much of the work on subjective true self-awareness and authenticity begins with a discussion of the true self-concept, defined as people's beliefs about the characteristics (e.g., roles, traits) that define who they truly are, deep down. It is therefore viewed as a self-concept or schema that contains knowledge about who one truly is (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002). However, an important and potentially negative implication of viewing subjective true self-awareness purely through the lens of self-concepts is that doing so encourages an exclusive focus on people's objective knowledge of themselves (i.e., the *me*). Although intuitively appealing, it may be problematic to think about subjective true self-awareness in terms of how much knowledge people have about their true selves and how accurate that knowledge is when compared with an objective criterion (e.g., behavior). The problem is that such an approach generally fails to account for the number of studies showing that constructs relevant to objective knowledge or accuracy rarely predict feelings of awareness and connection to one's true self. Indeed, even studies that specifically tap into people's ability to generate knowledge of their true selves find that the amount of knowledge generated has no impact on outcomes tethered to subjective true self-awareness (Schlegel et al., 2011). Overall, this suggests that research on objective self-knowledge (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) is largely distinct from studies on subjective true self-awareness. Instead, research on subjective true self-awareness suggests that it may best be viewed as an experience that derives from the subjective "sense" of self that occurs when one feels ownership over their ongoing stream of consciousness and experience. It may primarily be an aspect of the "I," rather than the "me." More work is certainly needed, but, at the very least, focusing on the phenomenological experiences that are linked to feelings of true self-alienation

may help scholars avoid the temptation to equate abstract knowledge about what an object is with what it feels like to actually experience it.

Moving forward, of course, a number of other theoretical and empirical areas of inquiry also remain to be developed. The most immediate of these may be the need to address the causal role that mindwandering experiences play in feelings of true self-alienation. Convergent lines of inquiry do suggest that mindwandering and true self-alienation are linked, and that the frequency of mindwandering prospectively predicts state changes in feelings of subjective true self-awareness. This evidence is clearly consistent with a causal process. However, the effects of experimental inductions of mindwandering (Vannucci, Pelagatti, & Marchetti, 2017) on true self-alienation are obviously needed to more confidently draw such a conclusion. In addition, the existing studies focused on daydreaming and mindwandering only partially support the theoretical link between feelings of true self-alienation and a diminished sense of ownership over the conscious stream of thought. Recent work on mindwandering indicates that mindwandering experiences can be characterized by volition (Seli, Risko, & Smilek, 2016). While people's minds often unintentionally drift away from present experience, there are times when people intentionally detach their stream of consciousness from stimuli in their immediate environment to focus on something else (e.g., another personal goal). Seli and colleagues (2016) found that, whereas unintentional mindwandering is higher during difficult (vs. easy) attention tasks, the opposite is true of intentional mindwandering. This is important because the difficult task in this research was similar to the tasks employed in Vess et al.'s (2016) study, suggesting that the existing evidence likely reveals a link between true self-alienation and unintentional instances of mindwandering that do not feel "owned." Nevertheless, research that directly assesses links between true self-alienation and the intentionality of mindwandering experiences would more clearly demonstrate the role of volition in these effects.

Efforts to more broadly integrate work on subjective true self-awareness with theory and research in other areas of psychology are also needed, and the insights offered by a focus on mental detachment from present experience provide fruitful directions. In particular, the links between ownership over one's phenomenological experiences and a sense of true self-awareness clearly align with emerging work on the benefits of mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and meditation (Goyal et al., 2014). There are already established links between true self-alienation and mindfulness (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Vess et al., 2016), and research indicates that mindfulness training can reduce the frequency of mindwandering (Mrazek, Franklin, Phillips, Baird, & Schooler, 2013). An important question for future inquiries, then, is whether or not particular types of meditative and mindful practices are more effective than others at fostering a heightened sense of true

self-awareness. Answering this question will require efforts to move beyond the self-report measures of mindfulness that are popular in social psychology (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and instead deeply consider important distinctions between various approaches to meditation and mindfulness (Dahl, Lutz, & Davidson, 2015). For example, practices that increase attention control and diminish self-referential processing (e.g., mantra recitation) may be more effective than practices that hinge on inquiry and examination of the self as object (e.g., analytical meditation).

The links between consciousness, memory, and subjective true self-awareness may also be worth considering. For example, one prominent model of self emphasizes the importance of “selfing,” or the subjective sense of self, for episodic memory processes (Prebble et al., 2013). Episodic memory is thought to rely on autothetic consciousness, which reflects a conscious awareness of one’s self across time (Wheeler, Stuss, & Tulving, 1997). Whereas episodic memory is characterized by a subjective sense of re-experiencing a recalled event, semantic memory reflects basic knowledge of a past event without any subjective reliving of it. Prebble and colleagues (2013) argue that the psychological processes that enable a subjective sense of ownership over one’s experiences are also critical for episodic memory, both at the moment of encoding information and at the moment of recalling it later. This suggests that subjective true self-awareness may play a role in mental time travel by facilitating the encoding and recall of phenomenological aspects of past experience. No published research, to my knowledge, has explored the relationship between aspects of authenticity and mental time travel. However, given that mental time travel underlies important aspects of psychological health (Philippe, Koestner, Beaulieu-Pelletier, Lecours, & Leves, 2012; Vess, Hoeldtke, Leal, Sanders, & Hicks, 2018), exploring this possibility may inform basic understanding of subjective true self-awareness and practical issues surrounding human health and functioning.

In sum, empirical consideration of subjective true self-awareness has revealed important insights about the nature and consequences of people’s subjective sense of being aware of who they truly are. This review offers a perspective suggesting that subjectively experiencing a connection to one’s true self may, at a basic level, reflect the experience of owning the phenomenology of one’s ongoing stream of consciousness and experience. This theorized link between aspects of consciousness and the sense of self is, of course, not a new idea. However, in the context of work on authenticity, it may be important for identifying what it is we are studying and where a more diverse and comprehensive stream of research in this area might profitably flow.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. I offer only a general overview of the research guided by these frameworks. A thorough review of all of the work in this area is beyond the scope of this article.

References

- Bargh, J. A., McKenna, K. Y. A., & Fitzsimons, G. M. (2002). Can you see the real me? Activation and expression of the “true self” on the internet. *Journal of Social Issues, 58*, 33–48. doi:10.1111/1540-4560.00247
- Blackmore, S. (2011, March 22). There is no hiding with LSD: Sue Blackmore. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/mar/22/lsd-acid-trip-self-knowledge>
- Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*, 822–848.
- Christy, A. G., Seto, E., Schlegel, R. J., Vess, M., & Hicks, J. A. (2016). Straying from the righteous path and from ourselves: The interplay between perceptions of morality and self-knowledge. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 42*, 1538–1550. doi:10.1177/0146167216665095
- Dahl, C. J., Lutz, A., & Davidson, R. J. (2015). Reconstructing and deconstructing the self: Cognitive mechanisms in meditation practice. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 19*, 515–523. doi:10.1016/j.tics.2015.07.001
- Ee, A. E. T. Z., & Kahl, C. (2014). My mind and soul suspended on a ticket to self-discovery. Now boarding, koh phi phi. *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences, 144*(Suppl. C), 5–14. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.07.268
- Fleeson, W., & Wilt, J. (2010). The relevance of Big Five trait content in behavior to subjective authenticity: Do high levels of within-person behavioral variability undermine or enable authenticity achievement? *Journal of Personality, 78*, 1353–1382. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6494.2010.00653.x
- Gino, F., Norton, M. I., & Ariely, D. (2010). The counterfeit self: The deceptive costs of faking it. *Psychological Science, 21*, 712–720.
- Goyal, M., Singh, S., Sibinga, E. M. S., Gould, N. F., Rowland-Seymour, A., Sharma, R., . . . Haythornthwaite, J. A. (2014). Meditation programs for psychological stress and well-being: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA Internal Medicine, 174*, 357–368. doi:10.1001/jamainternmed.2013.13018
- Hamaker, E. L., Kuiper, R. M., & Grasman, R. P. P. P. (2015). A critique of the cross-lagged panel model. *Psychological Methods, 20*, 102–116. doi:10.1037/a0038889
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York, NY: Harper & Row. (Original work published 1927)
- Hepner, W. L., Kernis, M. H., Nezlek, J. B., Foster, J., Lakey, C. E., & Goldman, B. M. (2008). Within-person relationships among daily self-esteem, need satisfaction, and authenticity. *Psychological Science, 19*, 1140–1145.

- Horney, K. (1951). *Neurosis and human growth*. London, England: Routledge.
- Huba, G. J., Aneshensel, C. S., & Singer, J. L. (1981). Development of scales for three second-order factors of inner experience. *Multivariate Behavioral Research, 16*, 181–206. doi:10.1207/s15327906mbr1602_4
- James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.
- Kernis, M. H., & Goldman, B. M. (2006). A multicomponent conceptualization of authenticity: Theory and research. In *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 38, pp. 283–357). Academic Press. Retrieved from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0065260106380069>
- Killingsworth, M. A., & Gilbert, D. T. (2010). A wandering mind is an unhappy mind. *Science, 330*, 932. doi:10.1126/science.1192439
- Kim, J., Christy, A. G., Schlegel, R. J., Donnellan, M. B., & Hicks, J. A. (2018). Existential ennui: Examining the reciprocal relationship between self-alienation and academic amotivation. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 9*, 853–862. doi:10.1177/1948550617727587
- Klein, S. B. (2012). The self and its brain. *Social Cognition, 30*, 474–518. doi:10.1521/soco.2012.30.4.474
- Leary, M. R., & Tangney, J. P. (2012). The self as an organizing construct in the behavioral and social sciences. In M. R. Leary & J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity* (2nd ed., pp. 1–18). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Lenton, A. P., Slabu, L., Sedikides, C., & Power, K. (2013). I feel good, therefore I am real: Testing the causal influence of mood on state authenticity. *Cognition and Emotion, 27*, 1202–1224. doi:10.1080/02699931.2013.778818
- McAdams, D. P. (1996). Personality, modernity, and the storied self: A contemporary framework for studying persons. *Psychological Inquiry, 7*, 295–321. doi:10.1207/s15327965pli0704_1
- McMillan, R. L., Kaufman, S. B., & Singer, J. L. (2013). Ode to positive constructive daydreaming. *Frontiers in Psychology, 4*, 626. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00626
- Mooneyham, B. W., & Schooler, J. W. (2013). The costs and benefits of mind-wandering: A review. *Canadian Journal of Experimental Psychology/Revue canadienne de psychologie experimentale, 67*, 11–18. doi:10.1037/a0031569
- Mrazek, M. D., Franklin, M. S., Phillips, D. T., Baird, B., & Schooler, J. W. (2013). Mindfulness training improves working memory capacity and GRE performance while reducing mind wandering. *Psychological Science, 24*, 776–781. doi:10.1177/0956797612459659
- Nisbett, R. E., & Wilson, T. D. (1977). Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes. *Psychological Review, 84*, 231–259.
- Philippe, F. L., Koestner, R., Beaulieu-Pelletier, G., Lecours, S., & Leves, N. (2012). The role of episodic memories in current and future well-being. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 38*, 505–519. doi:10.1177/0146167211429805
- Prebble, S. C., Addis, D. R., & Tippett, L. J. (2013). Autobiographical memory and sense of self. *Psychological Bulletin, 139*, 815–840. doi:10.1037/a0030146
- Pyszczynski, T., & Greenberg, J. (1987). Self-regulatory perseverance and the depressive self-focusing style: A self-awareness theory of reactive depression. *Psychological Bulletin, 102*, 122–138.
- Robertson, I. H., Manly, T., Andrade, J., Baddeley, B. T., & Yiend, J. (1997). “Oops!”: Performance correlates of everyday attentional failures in traumatic brain injured and normal subjects. *Neuropsychologia, 35*(6), 747–758
- Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy*. London, England: Constable.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1953). *The confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (J. M. Cohen, Trans.). London, England: Penguin Books. (Original work published 1781)
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 25*, 54–67. doi:10.1006/ceps.1999.1020
- Schlegel, R. J., & Hicks, J. A. (2011). The true self and psychological health: Emerging evidence and future directions. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 5*, 989–1003.
- Schlegel, R. J., Hicks, J. A., King, L. A., & Arndt, J. (2011). Feeling like you know who you are: Perceived true self-knowledge and meaning in life. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 37*, 745–756. doi:10.1177/0146167211400424
- Schmader, T., & Sedikides, C. (2018). State authenticity as fit to environment: The implications of social identity for fit, authenticity, and self-segregation. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 22*, 228–259. doi:10.1177/1088868317734080
- Sedikides, C., Slabu, L., Lenton, A., & Thomaes, S. (2017). State authenticity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 26*, 521–525. doi:10.1177/0963721417713296
- Seli, P., Risko, E. F., & Smilek, D. (2016). On the necessity of distinguishing between unintentional and intentional mind wandering. *Psychological Science, 27*, 685–691. doi:10.1177/0956797616634068
- Seto, E., & Hicks, J. A. (2016). Disassociating the agent from the self: Undermining belief in free will diminishes true self-knowledge. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 7*, 726–734. doi:10.1177/1948550616653810
- Sherman, R. A., Nave, C. S., & Funder, D. C. (2012). Properties of persons and situations related to overall and distinctive personality-behavior congruence. *Journal of Research in Personality, 46*, 87–101. doi:10.1016/j.jrp.2011.12.006
- Singer, J. L. (1975). Navigating the stream of consciousness: Research in daydreaming and related inner experience. *American Psychologist, 30*, 727–738.
- Smallwood, J., Brown, K. S., Tipper, C., Giesbrecht, B., Franklin, M. S., Mrazek, M. D., . . . Schooler, J. W. (2011). Pupillometric evidence for the decoupling of attention from perceptual input during offline thought. *PLoS one, 6*(3), e18298.
- Smallwood, J., & Schooler, J. W. (2015). The science of mind wandering: Empirically navigating the stream of consciousness. *Annual Review of Psychology, 66*, 487–518. doi:10.1146/annurev-psych-010814-015331
- Vannucci, M., Pelagatti, C., & Marchetti, I. (2017). Manipulating cues in mind wandering: Verbal cues affect the frequency and the temporal focus of mind wandering. *Consciousness and Cognition, 53*, 61–69. doi:10.1016/j.concog.2017.06.004

- Vess, M., Brooker, R. J., Schlegel, R. J., & Hicks, J. A. (2019). Daily mental lapses and the subjective experience of true self-alienation. *Journal of Research in Personality, 78*, 148–152.
- Vess, M., Hoeldtke, R., Leal, S. A., Sanders, C. S., & Hicks, J. A. (2018). The subjective quality of episodic future thought and the experience of meaning in life. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 13*, 419–428. doi:10.1080/17439760.2017.1291851
- Vess, M., Leal, S. A., Hoeldtke, R. T., Schlegel, R. J., & Hicks, J. A. (2016). True self-alienation positively predicts reports of mindwandering. *Consciousness and Cognition, 45*, 89–99. doi:10.1016/j.concog.2016.08.018
- Wheeler, M. A., Stuss, D. T., & Tulving, E. (1997). Toward a theory of episodic memory: The frontal lobes and autoegetic consciousness. *Psychological Bulletin, 121*, 331–354.
- Wickham, R. E., Williamson, R. E., Beard, C. L., Kobayashi, C. L. B., & Hirst, T. W. (2016). Authenticity attenuates the negative effects of interpersonal conflict on daily well-being. *Journal of Research in Personality, 60*(Suppl. C), 56–62. doi:10.1016/j.jrp.2015.11.006
- Williams, H., & Vess, M. (2016). Daydreams and the true self: Daydreaming styles are related to authenticity. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality, 36*, 128–149. doi:10.1177/0276236616646065
- Wood, A. M., Linley, A. P., Maltby, J., Baliousis, M., & Joseph, S. (2008). The authentic personality: A theoretical and empirical conceptualization and the development of the authenticity scale. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 55*, 385–399. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.55.3.385
- Zhiyan, T., & Singer, J. L. (1997). Daydreaming styles, emotionality and the Big Five personality dimensions. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality, 16*, 399–414. doi:10.2190/ATEH-96EV-EXYX-2ADB