

## **Wanting to Be Better but Thinking You Can't: Implicit Theories of Personality Moderate the Impact of Self-Discrepancies on Self-Esteem**

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*Two studies examined the role of implicit theories of personality in the relation between actual–ideal self-discrepancies and self-esteem. Replicating previous work, we found that those with greater actual–ideal self-discrepancies reported lower self-esteem. Moreover, we hypothesized that this outcome would be especially stronger for those possessing an entity theory of personality (i.e., believing that personality is relatively fixed and unchangeable) than for those possessing an incremental theory of personality (i.e., believing that personality is relatively flexible and malleable). Both studies supported this prediction, using either a nomothetic measure of actual–ideal self-discrepancy (Study 1) or an idiographic measure of actual–ideal self-discrepancy (Study 2). In other words, the relation between self-discrepancy and self-evaluation was stronger for entity theorists than for incremental theorists. Implications of these findings for topics ranging from emotional regulation to educational settings are discussed.*

Most, if not all, of us have things we would like to change or improve about ourselves. For instance, we might want to be more outgoing in social situations, or be more assertive in our relationships with close others, or even be more optimistic about our lives in general. Thus, we are often dismayed when our current self does not meet our ideals. Indeed, a number of prominent theories about the self in social psychology acknowledge that having actual selves that fall short of our goals and standards has important consequences, including self-awareness theory (e.g., Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998), cybernetic theory of self-regulation (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1998), and regulatory focus theory (e.g., Higgins, 1987, 1997). Each of these theories posits that when faced with a discrepancy between one's current self and a goal self, one will (through various mechanisms) respond in ways to reduce the experience of this discrepancy (e.g., goal-directed behaviors, reductions in self-awareness). Moreover, the experience of these discrepancies impacts feelings of self-worth, leading to more negative self-directed

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affect as the gap between one's current self and one's ideals grows larger (Moretti & Higgins, 1990). However, do all people experience the same degree of negativity when they fall short of their goals? Might one's beliefs about the nature of personality and its ability to change moderate the relation between greater discrepancies and the resulting negative affect? In the current work, we examine whether implicit theories of personality serve this moderating role.

A great deal of research has shown that when prompted, most people can identify specific attributes associated with their "ideal self," a self that can be very different from their "actual self" or their "ought self" (Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986). And, the larger the difference between one's actual self and one's ideal self, the lower one's feelings of self-worth (Moretti & Higgins, 1990). Although one can experience self-discrepancies between one's actual and ought selves, the impact of actual-ideal self-discrepancies on self-esteem should be especially pronounced because successfully achieving one's ideals leads to cheerfulness, whereas failing to achieve one's ideals leads to dejection (Higgins, 1997). Thus, relative to actual-ought self-discrepancies (where one experiences quiescence or agitation following success or failure, respectively), discrepancies between one's actual and ideal selves should be especially impactful on self-esteem (Moretti & Higgins, 1990).

Yet to be explored, however, are other beliefs that may moderate the impact of actual-ideal discrepancies on self-worth. Believing that it is possible for one to change and thus achieve one's ideal self should allow one to continue to feel positive toward the self (even in the face of self-discrepancy), mitigating the impact of actual-ideal self-discrepancies on self-esteem. The current research explored this possibility by examining the beliefs that people hold about the malleability of personality and how these beliefs moderate the impact of actual-ideal self-discrepancies on self-esteem.

Two belief frameworks by which people can view the nature of personality have been identified by Dweck and Leggett (1988). Specifically, *entity theorists* believe that personality is fixed and cannot be altered, whereas *incremental theorists* believe that personality is relatively malleable and can change across time. Interestingly, the differential impact of holding these theories on self-esteem tends to be revealed following failure (Dweck, 2000). In response to an achievement or social failure, entity theorists tend to blame an unchangeable attribute of themselves, which leads to relatively strong negative affect directed toward oneself (i.e., lower self-esteem). Incremental theorists, on the other hand, tend to view failure as an opportunity to learn and to improve themselves, and thus, failure has less of an impact on feelings of self-worth because they believe that change can occur. These findings suggest that when one's current self falls short of one's ideals, incremental theorists may experience greater well-being (relative to entity theorists) because their theory about the nature of personality suggests that reducing actual-ideal self-discrepancies is quite possible.

## The Current Research

The current work examined whether implicit theories of personality moderate the relation between actual-ideal self-discrepancies and self-esteem. First, we expected to observe that those with greater actual-ideal self-discrepancies would, overall, report lower self-esteem (replicating Moretti & Higgins, 1990). But, more important, we expected that this correspondence between actual-ideal self-discrepancies and self-esteem would be stronger for those holding entity theories of personality

(relative to incremental theories of personality). Two studies examined this prediction. The first study did so by using a 3-item measure of implicit theories of personality (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997) and a nomothetic measure of actual–ideal self-discrepancies (Tangney, Niedenthal, Covert, & Barlow, 1998). Study 2, on the other hand, used an 8-item measure of implicit theories of personality (Dweck, 2000) and Higgins et al.'s (1986) Selves Questionnaire, which provides an idiographic measure of actual–ideal self-discrepancies. We predicted identical outcomes using the different and converging measures of implicit theories and of self-discrepancies.

## Study 1

Study 1 examined the role of implicit personality theories in the relation between actual–ideal self-discrepancies (as assessed by a nomothetic measure) and self-esteem.

### *Method*

#### ***Participants***

Ninety-two undergraduates at Michigan State University participated in the study for partial fulfillment of a research requirement.

#### ***Procedure and Materials***

*Implicit theory beliefs.* Participants first responded to a 3-item measure of entity beliefs used by Chui et al. (1997). The scale consisted of the following items: “The kind of person someone is is something basic about them and it can’t be changed very much”; “People can do things differently, but the important parts of who they are can’t really be changed”; and “Everyone is a certain kind of person and there is not much that they can do to really change that.” Participants rated their agreement with each item on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), and the scale revealed good reliability, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .81$ . The sum of the responses to these three items was computed, and a mean split ( $M = 10.22$ ,  $SD = 2.98$ ) was used to classify participants as incremental theorists (below the mean,  $n = 47$ ) or as entity theorists (above the mean,  $n = 45$ ).<sup>1</sup>

*Self-esteem.* Participants then completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale by indicating their agreement with 10 statements (e.g., “I take a positive attitude toward myself,” “At times I think I am no good at all”), on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Items were summed such that larger scores indicated greater self-esteem. The scale revealed good reliability, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .89$ .

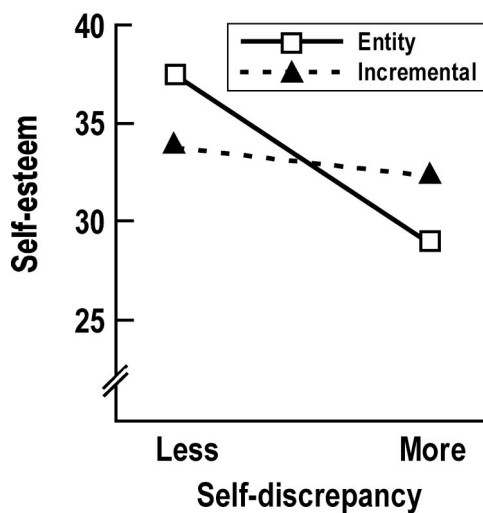
*Self-discrepancy.* Similar to Tangney et al. (1998), a nomothetic measure of discrepancies between one’s actual self and one’s ideal self was used. Specifically, participants were provided with 20 traits (10 positive and 10 negative) previously identified as important to college student participants in research conducted by Showers (1992). For each trait, participants indicated the point at which they believed they actually fall on the trait (i.e., their actual self) and the point at which they would like to fall on the trait (i.e., their ideal self) along a scale ranging from 0 (*much less than average*) to 100 (*much more than average*). For each of the positive traits, the actual self score was subtracted from the ideal self score, and the sum of these 10 differences was computed. For each of the negative traits, the ideal self score was subtracted from the actual self score, and the sum of these 10 differences was

computed. Finally, an overall self-discrepancy score was computed by adding the two sums (i.e., the positive trait sum and the negative trait sum) for each participant, with larger, positive values reflecting greater self-discrepancies between one's actual and ideal selves.

### Results and Discussion

It was expected that participants with larger actual–ideal discrepancies would have lower self-esteem overall. However, we expected this effect would be moderated by one's implicit theory of personality. Specifically, those with greater self-discrepancies would have lower self-esteem when holding entity beliefs about personality than when holding incremental beliefs about personality. To test these predictions, a multiple regression analysis with self-discrepancy scores, implicit theories of personality (contrast coded), and their interaction was conducted on self-esteem scores. The analysis revealed a significant effect for self-discrepancy,  $\beta = -.43$ ,  $t(88) = -4.78$ ,  $p < .001$ , replicating Moretti and Higgins (1990). That is, those with greater actual–ideal self-discrepancies reported lower self-esteem. Also, there was a significant effect for implicit theory,  $\beta = .56$ ,  $t(88) = 3.17$ ,  $p < .01$ , indicating that entity theorists had greater self-esteem overall. Most important, these effects were qualified by the predicted interaction between self-discrepancy and implicit theories of personality,  $\beta = -.59$ ,  $t(88) = -3.35$ ,  $p < .01$ . Nonstandardized regression weights using a range of  $\pm 1$  SD for actual–ideal self-discrepancy were used to graph this interaction.

As shown in Figure 1, the relation between actual–ideal discrepancies and self-esteem varied as a function of implicit theories of personality. Analyses of the slopes for each of the regression lines were also conducted. As predicted, the slope for entity theorists was significant,  $\beta = -.72$ ,  $t(44) = -6.80$ ,  $p < .001$ , revealing that participants who held entity beliefs about personality reported significantly lower self-esteem as the discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves increased. On the other hand, the slope for incremental theorists was nonsignificant,  $\beta = -.13$ ,  $t(46) < 1$ .



**FIGURE 1** Interaction between actual–ideal discrepancy and implicit theories of personality predicting self-esteem in Study 1.

Thus, the critical prediction that implicit theories of personality would moderate the relation between greater self-discrepancies and lower self-esteem was supported and the nature of that interaction (i.e., stronger self-discrepancies predicting reduced feelings of self-worth for entity theorists) was exactly as anticipated.

Although the results of Study 1 supported our predictions, there remained a couple of issues regarding the measurement of both self-discrepancies and implicit theories of personality. First, there have been differences in the literature as to how to measure self-discrepancies. For example, Tangney et al. (1998) used a nomothetic measure (i.e., an experimenter-provided attribute list) to assess self-discrepancies, similar to that which was used in the current Study 1. They counterbalanced their nomothetic measure with Higgins et al.'s (1986) Selves Questionnaire, which is an idiographic measure whereby participants generate their own attributes. Higgins (1987) has emphasized the importance of using idiographic measures of self-discrepancy so that participants can generate attributes that are distinctly important and accessible to themselves. In fact, contrary to the findings of Study 1, Moretti and Higgins (1990) failed to find a significant relation between actual–ideal self-discrepancy and self-esteem when using a nomothetic measure of self-discrepancy. Taking this into consideration, we thought it would be prudent to use Higgins et al.'s Selves Questionnaire in Study 2 to demonstrate that the results of Study 1 were not the result of a particular measure of self-discrepancy.

A related issue involves whether individuals who do not believe that personality is changeable (i.e., entity theorists) would have naturally developed ideal selves. Because of the nomothetic nature of the self-discrepancy measure in Study 1, participants may have been inadvertently influenced to spontaneously generate ratings related to an ideal self-image even though such an ideal self might not be truly resident in their self-concept. By using Higgins et al.'s Selves Questionnaire, participants will have the opportunity to provide attributes based on their own construction of their ideal self.

A second issue involves the measurement of implicit theories of personality. Study 1 used a 3-item measure of implicit theories of personality that only had entity-oriented items. In contrast, an 8-item measure of implicit theories of personality (Dweck, 2000) includes both entity-oriented and incremental-oriented items. Although both measures have been used in the literature, we thought it was sensible to use the more inclusive 8-item measure in Study 2 in order to assess participants' endorsements of both entity and incremental beliefs of personality.

## **Study 2**

The purpose of Study 2 was to examine the moderating role of implicit theory beliefs in the relation between greater actual–ideal self-discrepancies and lower self-esteem using alternative measures of actual–ideal self-discrepancies and implicit theories of personality as discussed above. As in Study 1, we anticipated that those with greater self-discrepancies would report less self-worth, and that this relation would be especially strong for those endorsing entity theories of personality.

### *Method*

#### ***Participants***

In this study, 171 undergraduates at Michigan State University participated for partial fulfillment of a research requirement.

### **Procedure**

This study replicated Study 1, with the following exceptions. Participants responded to an 8-item measure of implicit theories of personality, which included both entity and incremental theory of personality items. In addition, Higgins et al.'s Selves Questionnaire was used as the measure of actual–ideal self-discrepancies.

### **Measures**

*Implicit theory beliefs.* Participants responded to an 8-item measure of implicit theories of personality (Dweck, 2000), which included both entity-related items (e.g., “The kind of person someone is is something basic about them and it can’t be changed very much,” “People can do things differently, but the important parts of who they are can’t really be changed”) and incremental-related items (e.g., “No matter who you are, you can significantly change your basic characteristics,” “You can change even your most basic qualities”). Each statement was assessed on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Items were coded such that larger scores indicated greater incremental beliefs (reliability for this scale was good, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .86$ ). Participants’ scores were averaged and split at the median (3.19), with 86 above the median (incremental theorists) and 85 below the median (entity theorists).

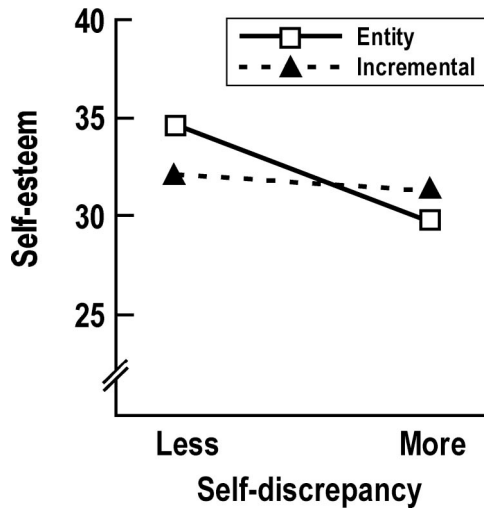
*Self-esteem.* As in Study 1, participants completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .90$ ).

*Self-discrepancy.* Higgins et al.’s (1986) Selves Questionnaire was used to assess actual–ideal discrepancies. Participants were first asked to list up to 10 attributes that they believed they actually possessed (i.e., their actual self). They were then asked to list up to 10 attributes that they would like to possess (i.e., their ideal self). Two independent judges rated the number of matches (i.e., attributes that were similar across both selves) and mismatches (i.e., attributes that were opposites across both selves or attributes listed for one’s actual self but not for one’s ideal self) for each participant. Next, a self-discrepancy score was computed by subtracting the total number of traits that matched from the total number of traits that were mismatched. Interjudge agreement was good,  $r = .87$ ,  $p < .01$ , thus the mean of the judges’ self-discrepancy scores was used as the measure of self-discrepancy (with larger scores indicating greater self-discrepancy).

### **Results**

To examine whether entity theorists generated traits for their ideal self that resulted in actual–ideal discrepancy scores similar to those of incremental theorists, a *t*-test was conducted comparing the self-discrepancy scores between these two groups of participants. No significant difference in the amount of actual–ideal self-discrepancies between entity ( $M = -0.88$ ,  $SD = 2.03$ ) and incremental theorists ( $M = -1.04$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ) was found,  $t(168) = 0.56$ , *ns*. Thus, the two groups did not differ in the extent to which they had self-discrepancies.

Therefore, we can now evaluate our two predictions. First, we expected to observe that those with greater self-discrepancies would report poorer well-being (replicating Study 1 and Moretti & Higgins, 1990). Second, we expected this relation to be stronger for those reporting an entity theory of personality.



**FIGURE 2** Interaction between actual–ideal discrepancy and implicit theories of personality predicting self-esteem in Study 2.

To test these predictions, a multiple regression analysis with self-discrepancy scores, implicit theories of personality, and their interaction was conducted on self-esteem. As expected, a significant effect of self-discrepancy was found,  $\beta = -.41$ ,  $t(169) = -4.27$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that those with greater self-discrepancies had lower self-esteem, which replicates the findings of Moretti and Higgins (1990) and the current Study 1. Moreover, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction with implicit theory beliefs,  $\beta = .21$ ,  $t(169) = 2.20$ ,  $p < .05$ . As shown in Figure 2, the predicted pattern of this interaction was observed and it replicated the findings of Study 1. Specifically, the relation between greater actual–ideal discrepancies and lower self-esteem was stronger for those holding entity beliefs than incremental beliefs. As expected, the slope for entity theorists was significant,  $\beta = -1.06$ ,  $t(81) = -4.18$ ,  $p < .001$ , revealing that participants who held entity theories about the nature of personality reported significantly lower self-esteem as the discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves increased. The slope for incremental theorists was nonsignificant,  $\beta = -.21$ ,  $t(84) < 1$ .

## General Discussion

The current two studies supported the prediction that the relation between actual–ideal self-discrepancies and self-esteem depends on the belief one holds about the malleability of personality. Using a nomothetic measure of actual–ideal self-discrepancies, Study 1 demonstrated that those with larger self-discrepancies had lower self-esteem when holding entity theories about personality than when holding incremental theories about personality. Study 2 replicated this finding using an idiographic measure of actual–ideal self-discrepancy and a different measure of implicit theories of personality that included both entity-focused and incremental-focused items.

Although the two studies used different measures of both self-discrepancy and implicit theories of personality, the results were identical. Specifically, those with

greater actual–ideal discrepancies reported lower self-esteem (replicating Moretti & Higgins, 1990). More important, the current work identified for whom this relation was stronger. Specifically, self-esteem suffered more strongly when one experienced actual–ideal self-discrepancies and held the theory that personality is relatively fixed and unchangeable. In other words, it is easier on one’s sense of self-worth to believe that one’s current self does not match one’s ideals when one’s theory of personality supports the belief that change is possible. On the other hand, wanting to be better but thinking change is unlikely can be a much more disappointing prospect.

It is interesting to note that the pattern of the interactions observed in both studies suggests that entity theorists suffered relatively more than incremental theorists when reporting stronger self-discrepancies, yet also experienced relatively greater self-esteem when their self-discrepancies were minimal. This pattern suggests two consequences for entity theorists: wanting to be better but thinking one cannot is relatively aversive, yet being ideal is especially wonderful. Although the former phenomenon was the motivation for the current research, the latter outcome is quite sensible too. That is, if one’s actual self is very close to one’s ideals and one believes that change is unlikely to occur, then the future looks especially favorable (relative to those who believe change is more likely). We would, however, caution that one cannot conclude from these findings that entity theorists are happier than incremental theorists when self-discrepancies are “low” because of the continuous nature of the self-discrepancy measure (i.e., there is no low self-discrepancy condition in our study). Instead, the significant interactions found in the current work demonstrate that the relation between self-discrepancy and self-evaluation is stronger for entity theorists than for incremental theorists, and this will have meaningful implications in both positive (low self-discrepancy) and negative (high self-discrepancy) situations.

In the current work, we focused on the link between actual–ideal self-discrepancy and self-esteem because the affect associated with striving to meet one’s ideals (i.e., cheerfulness vs. dejection) seemed much more relevant to self-esteem than the affect associated with striving to meet one’s obligations (i.e., quiescence vs. agitation). Indeed, this supposition has been confirmed empirically (Moretti & Higgins, 1990). That being said, based on the regulatory focus model (Higgins, 1997), we suspect that actual–ought discrepancies should be related to particular emotional and motivational outcomes (e.g., emotions and behaviors related to security and vigilance) and that such consequences would be especially strong for those holding entity theories of personality. Indeed, future work should address whether parallel results obtain for actual–ought discrepancies.

Not only does the current work shed light on how self-discrepancies impact self-directed affect, but these data have interesting implications for implicit theory research as well. For instance, these studies suggest that implicit theories may play an important role in the experience of affect and in emotional regulation. In fact, entity theorists may, all things being equal, be more susceptible to self-relevant feedback and affective volatility. Although we have learned more about how implicit theories influence social information processing (e.g., Chui et al., 1997; Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998; McConnell, 2001), there appear to be implications for implicit theories in understanding affective information processing as well. The current work, in particular, suggests an interesting intersection between implicit theories, self-concept representation, and the experience of affect. Given the known links between self-concept representation and affective variability (e.g., Linville, 1985; Renaud &



McConnell, 2002; for a review see McConnell & Strain, in press), more work is needed to flesh out how implicit theories help shape self-relevant affect.

Finally, in addition to advancing our theoretical understanding of the self, the current work may have important applied implications. For example, much of the early emphasis and development of implicit theories research resulted from thinking about its consequences for educational settings (for a review see Dweck, 2000). Indeed, one can view many educational situations (e.g., taking tests, doing homework) as often providing examples of actual–ideal self-discrepancies (e.g., “I want to excel at math but I just failed the test”). Not only will holding entity theories lead such students to eschew challenging situations that might promote skill development (e.g., Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986; Elliot & Thrash, 2001), the current work suggests that their self-esteem will suffer as well.

In sum, the current work demonstrates that beliefs (in this case, about the nature of personality) affect how discrepancies between actual and goal selves impact self-worth. Those with greater actual–ideal self-discrepancies had lower self-esteem, and this relation was most strongly revealed by those believing that personality is relatively unchangeable. When facing life’s inevitable setbacks and failures, the current work suggests that holding a theory about personality that acknowledges change and development may well provide the best means by which to realize it and to do so with one’s sense of self-worth intact.

## Note

1. Analyses treating implicit theory as a continuous variable (using interaction regression analyses) yield similar results to those to be reported in both studies. In order to simplify the presentation of the results (and to maintain fidelity with work in the existent literature, e.g., Levy et al., 1998), we present the data based on an entity versus incremental theory dichotomization.

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