Self and Well-Being

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Abstract

Considerable research has been devoted to the self. This paper aims to emphasize the processes and mechanisms that promote individuals' well-being. With this purpose, it reviews research on various features of the self in relation to well-being. Specifically, it presents studies on self-complexity, authenticity, perceived control, self-discrepancy, satisfaction of basic psychological needs and self-enhancing bias. The findings show that self-complexity leads to greater well-being when the self-aspects are authentic and individuals have high perceived self-aspect control. In addition, reduced actual/ideal self-discrepancy, satisfaction of basic psychological needs (autonomy, relatedness and competence) and self-awareness predicts greater well-being. The studies also show short-term benefits but long term costs of self-enhancing bias on well-being.

Keywords*:* Self, Well-being

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, psychologists have shown great interest on the self-concept. Accordingly, many studies have been conducted on various features of the self in relation to well-being (Harrington & Loffredo, 2011; Linville, 1987; Lynch, La Guardia & Ryan, 2009; McDonnell et al., 2005; Milyavskaya & Koestner, 2011; Neff & Suizzo, 2006; Robins & Beer, 2001; Ryan, LaGuardia, & Rawsthorne, 2005). This paper revises the findings of these research in an attempt to emphasize the underlying processes and mechanisms in the relation between self and well-being. With this purpose, studies on self-complexity, self-discrepancy, satisfaction of basic psychological needs and self-enhancing bias are discussed in the following sections.

2. The Influence of Authenticity and Perceived Control in the Relation Between Self-Complexity and Well-Being

The relation between self-complexity and well-being has been widely studied by researchers (Linville, 1987; McDonnell et al., 2005; Ryan et al., 2005). Self-complexity refers to the number and independence of self-aspects (Linville, 1987). These self-aspects are related to social roles, relationships, behaviors or situations (McDonnell et al., 2005). Highly complex individuals report multiple and independent self-aspects whereas less complex individuals report fewer and less distinct self-aspects. Linville (1987) suggested that negative thoughts or feelings activate the associated self-aspects and then spread to other self-aspects. Thus, individuals with greater self-complexity would be affected less from negative events owing to high number of self-aspects and fewer associations among them. Accordingly, Linville (1987) found that individuals with greater self-complexity experienced fewer depressive and physical symptoms when faced with stressful events (buffering hypothesis). On the other side, self-complexity might also create role conflict and multiple demands, which results in fragmented self and thus, chronic low-level of stress.

In their study, Ryan et al. (2005) proposed that it might not be the complexity itself that hinders well-being rather the presence of *inauthentic* self-aspects. Because Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000, as cited in Ryan et al., 2005) proposes that acting in accord with authentic self (representing true self) increases individual's motivation, quality of experience and well-being. In contrast, acting in accord with *inauthentic* self leads to internal conflict, poor motivation and lower well-being. Based on this theory, Ryan et al. (2005) expected that well-being would be negatively related with self-complexity but positively related with authenticity of self-aspects. In their first study, it was found that authenticity of self-aspects was moderately and positively related with well-being. In other words, authenticity of self-aspects was associated with lower levels of physical and depressive symptoms, anxiety, stress and greater subjective vitality (being physically and mentally alive). However, self-complexity was not associated with mental health related outcomes. In their second study, it was found that well-being was negatively related with self-complexity and positively related with authenticity of self-aspects (Ryan et al., 2005).

There was also a significant interaction effect that is, individuals with low complexity and low authenticity showed the most physical symptoms while individuals with high complexity and high authenticity showed the least physical symptoms. It indicates that authenticity ameliorates the negative impact on physical symptoms for those individuals with high complexity. Overall, the study highlights the point that "the quality of self-aspects, whether they represent the true self or not" is important for well-being. In this respect, it contributes to literature by expanding Linville's (1987) findings on self-complexity. Based on the findings of Ryan et al.'s study (2005), it is important that people represent their true selves in multiple roles and demands, otherwise they might become confused about how to behave in different life contexts and might not function appropriately.

In addition to authenticity, *perceived control* was suggested as a moderator in the relation between self-complexity and well-being (McDonnell et al., 2005). Because previous research has shown that control have positive consequences for one's well-being and health such as promoting self-efficacy, developing intrinsic motivation, decreasing anxiety and depression (Averill, 1973, Bandura, 1986, Beck, 1976, Ryan & Deci, 2000 as cited in McDonnell et al., 2005). In their self-aspect control hypothesis, researchers expected that having several and low-control self-aspects would lead to poor functioning. As expected, individuals who had greater self-complexity and lower perceived self-aspect control displayed adverse outcomes (more physical symptoms, depression, negative events and lower self-esteem). Furthermore, greater self-complexity was found to be associated with less perceived control, more negative feelings about own self-aspects and poorer well-being. Overall, the study provides no evidence for buffering hypothesis (Linville, 1987) yet provides strong evidence for self-aspect control hypothesis, which suggests that perceptions of control over one's multiple selves moderates self-complexity and well-being relation.

Authenticity is defined as "the acting and expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with experienced values, desires and emotions" (Neff & Suizzo, 2006, p. 441). From this definition, authenticity can be considered as an important personality trait that emerges in interaction between people (Neff & Suizzo, 2006). Thus, it is important to investigate how socio-cultural factors shape individual's authenticity. In their study, Neff and Suizzo (2006) examined the impacts of *power inequality, culture* and *gender* on authenticity within romantic relationship. They expected that perceived power inequality (in decision making) would influence authentic self-expression negatively. Individuals who perceived a lack of power in their relationship would express themselves less authentically and this lack of authenticity would be associated with less relational well-being (lower self-esteem and more depression). It was also expected that the direct relation between perceived power inequality and well-being would be stronger for Mexican Americans than European Americans depending on models of cultural differences.

The results showed that European Americans, individuals who were equal or dominant in their relations, and women reported more authenticity separately while Mexican Americans, individuals who were subordinates, and men reported less authenticity. Considering relational well-being, being subordinate predicted negative outcomes (for European Americans only) and equality predicted positive outcomes. Authenticity accounted for a large variance in well-being; mediated power and well-being link. It indicates that lack of power leads to avoidance from potential repercussions from the dominant partner, and it inhibits individual's capacity to communicate freely or reflect his/her underlying thoughts and behaviors, which in turn influences well-being. Contrary to expectations, egalitarian relationships were common in two cultures, not supporting a male dominance and female subordination among Mexican-Americans. In addition, authenticity explained almost *twice* as much variance in well-being for Mexican-Americans than for European-Americans, supporting the view that authenticity is not an individualistic value rather a *universal* value. The study suggests considering authenticity as a universal value and provides clear evidence for communalities across cultures.

3. *The Influence of Self-Discrepancies and Satisfaction of Basic Needs on Well-Being*

In Self-Discrepancy Theory, Higgens (1987, 1989a as cited in Fiske & Taylor, 1991) proposed that people think about themselves in terms of their *actual self* (they currently are), *ideal self* (how they would like to be) and *ought self* (what they think they should be). He also proposed that the discrepancies among these selves might result in dejection-related emotions (e.g. sadness, disappointment and depression) or agitation-related emotions (e.g. anxiety, nervousness and guilt) unless they remained resolved. In this respect, it becomes important to identify factors that may reduce the discrepancies. In one study, researchers examined "how discrepancies between actual and ideal self concepts influenced well-being and how *autonomy supportive partner* affected the discrepancies" (Lynch et al., 2009).

Based on Self-Determination Theory, it was expected that autonomy supportive partner would reduce self-discrepancies, because this partner would provide an uncontrolling, initiative context in which individual would effectively pursue his/her ideal self. As expected, it was found that self-discrepancies were negatively associated with well-being (satisfaction, vitality and positive-negative affect) and perceived autonomy support was positively associated with smaller discrepancies. The mediational analyses showed that autonomy supportive partners predicted greater well-being through reduced actual/ideal self-discrepancies. This study highlights two important points. The first point is that reducing actual/ideal discrepancies is crucial for well-being. Thus, ideal selves should be more realistic and be integrated more fully to self-concepts. The more distant ideal selves are from reality, the more discrepancy there would be. The second point is that autonomy supportive style reduces this discrepancy through creating a free, uncontrolled context to pursue one's ideal self. It has implications in child development as well. Parents should provide an autonomy supportive context for their children. In addition, they should provide opportunities for decision-making, initiative-taking and avoid behavioral control. The study did not reveal moderating role of culture when the analyses were done across cultures (China, Russia, US). Autonomy supportive partner was related to lower actual/ideal discrepancies in all cultures, indicating the universality of need for autonomy.

Self-Determination Theory suggests that basic needs (autonomy, relatedness and competence) activate growth and integration; and satisfaction of these needs is important for greater well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000, as cited in Lynch et al., 2009). Similarly, autonomy and relatedness are proposed to be distinct but complementary needs for optimal functioning (Imamoğlu, 1998). In a very recent study, researchers examined relations between satisfaction of basic psychological needs, motivation and well-being across important life domains (Milyavskaya & Koestner, 2011). It was expected that if SDT was universal, then it would be applied to multiple contexts that is, need satisfaction would predict well-being at different contexts such as family, friends, romantic relationship, work, school and activities/leisure. It was also expected that autonomous motivation would mediate this relation. The results revealed that need satisfaction predicted both autonomous motivation and well-being (high subjective vitality and positive affects). Autonomous motivation partially mediated the relation between need satisfaction and well-being. The findings indicate that satisfaction of autonomy, relatedness and competence at various domains influences individuals' well-being. In this relation, *autonomous motivation,* which originates from the self, plays an important role.

4. The Influence of Self-Enhancing Bias on Well-Being

In general, people have a motive to elevate the positivity of their self-concepts (Taylor & Brown, 1988). According to Taylor and Brown (1988), a positive view of the self promotes positive affectivity (e.g. happiness), the capacity for productive and creative work and the ability to care about others. Positive self perception may be especially important in threatening situations such as catastropic events or illnesses. It helps individual to feel better about themselves, and provides motivation to overcome negative situation and pursue future goals. However, it may also have some drawbacks such as pursuing careers that are inappropriate to individuals, persevering at tasks that are uncontrollable, failing to make necessary preperations and ignoring important source of information (Taylor & Brown, 1988).

In literature, there are mixed findings about positive and negative consequences of positive illusions about the self. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to examine *under which conditions positive illusions are adaptive*, rather than creating two opposing claims (Robins & Beer, 2001). With this purpose, Robins and Beer (2001) examined short-term benefits and long-term costs of positive illusions about the self. In the first study, they examined the correlates of self-enhancing bias, measured by self-peer and perceived peer evaluations of task performance. They found that individuals who overestimated their performance in the task tended to be narcissistic and ego-involved, showed more self-serving bias and experienced increased positive affect after the task. In their second study, researchers examined longitudinally whether the promoting effect of self-enhancing bias remained when these students entered college. Surprisingly, self-enhancers showed decrease in well-being and in academic performance, indicating a decrease in promoting effect of self-enhancing bias. The findings provide evidence for *short-term benefits* but *long term costs* of self-enhancing bias. It indicates that unrealistic view of self may lead to positive consequences for well-being but these outcomes may not remain in the long term. This study contributes to the literature by showing "*the contexts*" under which distortion of reality may be adaptive or maladaptive.

5. *The Influences of Insight, Self-Reflection and Rumination on Well-Being*

Recently, the effects of insight, self-reflection and rumination on well-being was explored by Harrington and Loffredo (2011). Researchers defined *insight* as having internal self-awareness of one's feelings, thoughts and motivation, *self-reflection* as a philosophical love of self-exploration, and *rumination* as a repetitive self-focus on one's past. They examined their influences on subjective well-being (life satisfaction) and psychological well-being (self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth). As a result, it was found that insight was positively associated with all dimensions of psychological well-being and life satisfaction. In contrast, rumination was negatively associated with autonomy, mastery and self-acceptance dimensions of well-being. Finally, self-reflection was merely associated with personal growth. The results indicate that self-awaneness has positive but rumination has negative consequences for well-being.

6. Conclusion

This paper provides empirical evidence in an attempt to explain the relation between self and well-being. In this review, self-complexity, authenticity, self-discrepancies, satisfaction of basic psychological needs and self-enhancing bias were examined as influencing factors. Overall, there are mixed findings with respect to self-complexity, yet authenticity of self-aspects and high perceived control of self aspects have positive influences on well-being. Actual/ideal self discrepancies also influence well-being negatively, however, autonomy supportive partners decrease this discrepancy and thus predicts greater well-being. Furthermore, satisfaction of basic needs leads to greater well-being directly and indirectly through autonomous motivation. Finally, self-enhancing bias promotes well-being in short term, but promoting effect does not remain in long term. This paper reviews universally common processes and mechanisms that promotes individuals' well-being. Thus, it contributes to literature by enlightening necessary conditions for healthy individuals and societies.

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