What does it mean to be in touch with oneself?

Testing a "social character" model of self-congruence

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Abstract

What does it mean to be in or out of touch with oneself, and how can we understand the inner duality implied by this phrase? We tested a new conception and measure of self-congruence, based on the "social character" that people inhabit in their interpersonal lives. The measure quantifies whether the big five traits of a person's typical social character are consistent with the traits of his/her "unguarded self." Study 1 showed that the non-discrepant character measure predicts subjective well-being (SWB); that it does so independently of the traits (i.e., low neuroticism, high extraversion) comprising the measure; and that the association with SWB is also independent of Goldman and Kernis's (2002) likert-based measure of authenticity. Study 2 replicated these effects and also showed that the new measure is associated with Self-concept differentiation (SCD; Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993), and in fact explains SCD's effects. Study 2 also found that psychological need-satisfaction mediated the link between having a non-discrepant social character and SWB.

"To thine own self be true…"
William Shakespeare

"Just be yourself." Although we all understand this saying intuitively, it is difficult to explain logically. How can we possibly not be ourselves, and who are we being when we are not being ourselves? Or this: "Be true to yourself." This familiar adage is similarly mysterious upon closer examination -- what is the self that the self is being true to when the self is being true to itself? Are there two selves, one false and one true, and the goal is somehow to turn the false one into the true one? Or this: "Get in touch with yourself." Does this mean that the self can somehow lack access to itself? What part of the self is it that engages in a quest for a self that is not itself? Additional questions are raised by the fact that the adages seem to describe a "best" way to be. If we are able to accomplish these mysterious tasks, will we become better and happier people, as the adages imply? These are difficult issues that challenge our theories of mind, identity, and optimal functioning, especially since psychologists have never even agreed on whether there is such a thing as a true self, much less agreed on an operational definition of true self. Still, the concept remains appealing to researchers and lay-people alike.

Conceptualizing and Assessing the Social Character

In this research we took a new approach to the question of how one may be "untrue to oneself" by focusing on a mode of self that may be discrepant from one's deeper characteristics and resources. Specifically we examined the "social character" that we all experience, and project to others, during our daily lives.

By social character, we mean the subjective role that people find themselves playing within their social milieu (Blasi, 2004). This lived self is like a character in a movie, making up its part as it goes along, guided by narrative structures both within the situation and within its own evolving life-story (McAdams, 1998). Social characters are presumably reasonably stable across time and over situations, although stability may also vary across people. Playing one's social character well takes effort and skill, and is something, as many novels, plays, and films depict, that can take some time to mature and develop. The social characters that we inhabit help us manage the impressions others form of us, as we attempt to display ourselves as personalities to be respected, appreciated, and accommodated.

The social character concept is not new, having roots in James' idea of the social self (James, 1890), role-theorists' ideas concerning the masks and presentations that the person adopts (Goffman, 1959), and post-modernists' claims that the self is but a performance, without depth or deeper substance (Gergen, 1991). By focusing on the self as a mask or series of masks, however, these theories have tended to ignore or deny the idea that there could be a true self "underneath" the masks. Still, we suggest that it may be possible to play a social character and yet remain singular and true to a deeper underlying self, as long as the social character is authentic and thus affords "unobstructed operation of one's true or core self in one's daily enterprise" (Goldman & Kernis, 2002, p. 294). In a later section we give more consideration to what this means.

In order to assess the social character we asked participants to think and write about the self-role they project at a party in which there are both strangers and people they know. After completing this description, they then rated the traits of this character.

Of course there are many other settings one might choose in order to assess peoples' self-presentations, each of which might evoke its own social character (for example, James (1890) claimed that a man has as many selves as people he knows). However we selected parties because they are ecologically appropriate to our student population as a relatively common yet consequential environment that would provide a realistic window into the self-roles they voluntarily take on in representing themselves to their social world. Further, parties are unstructured, allowing freedom to create the self of one's choosing (more so than, say, a classroom), yet can also be difficult, arousing insecurity and anxiety because people are unsure how to act, especially given the awareness that others may be judging them. If people *do* sometimes play false or inauthentic characters, it seems that parties would be a prominent setting in which this occurs, especially in an undergraduate sample among whom identities are being consolidated and relational styles are still being explored (Erikson, 1963).

How Social Characters become Incongruent with True Selves

We reasoned that a person's social character can become disconnected from his or her deeper or more genuine self, such that playing that character feels like one is wearing an ill-fitting mask. Why would this occur? Person-centered and humanistic theories suggest that people sometimes warp their social performances in order to conform to perceived "conditions of worth" in the environment (Rogers, 1964). Smiling at an unfunny joke, or giving an undeserved compliment, or withholding one's real thoughts, may all be motivated by the desire to avoid negative evaluations by others. Unfortunately, these conditions of worth, and the behaviors they promote, may not be copacetic to a person's natural inclinations. Over time this can lead to a divided self in

which the inhabited social character becomes increasingly cut off from the person's deeper feelings and valuing processes (Laing, 1965). Reasoning along just such lines, Rogers (1961, 1964) believed that achieving congruence between the conscious self and one's broader, truer personality is the primary goal of person-centered psychotherapy (Rogers, 1961). Greater congruence is achieved, he argued, as individuals learn to recognize and relax their defenses during therapy, becoming more open, spontaneous, and unguarded. In the process they let go of the ill-fitting "mask" they have been wearing, so that their "true" thoughts and feelings can appear within consciousness.

An interesting example can be found in manager Joe Torre's book *The Yankee Years*, when Torre discusses the time just after Alex Rodriguez was traded to the Yankees. Upon his arrival Rodriguez adopted a "cloying, B-grade actor" persona and "slathered on the polish," admitting now that "he tried too hard to make everyone like him." Soon Rodriguez was being referred to by some Yankee teammates as "A-fraud" instead of his better-known nickname, "A-Rod,". "'He was phony,' Mike Borzello, the former Yankees bullpen coach and one of Rodriguez' close friends reported, 'and he knew he was phony. But he didn't know how to be anything else at that time" (Torre & Verducci, 2009, p. 245). From our model's perspective, the pressure Rodriguez felt to live up to his huge contract and the expectations of his teammates (i.e., his conditions of worth) caused him to adopt a social character on the team which was somewhat removed from his more natural sense of self. Indeed, Rodriguez only began achieving acceptance on the team after he "started to realize what it is all about and what people feed off of, and thought, 'Hey, I can really be myself… showing the emotions that I really have'" (p. 245-246) . Recently, the New York Daily News quoted friends and former team-mates as

saying that Rodriguez had heard the A-Fraud nickname, faced up to it, and adjusted. One source said "I'm not sure he'll ever be one of the boys, but he did seem to relax and stop being 'on' all the time after the first year or two… after that, and as new players came in, I think more guys warmed up to him." He has since, apparently, become a mentor to some of the young Latin players.

Conceptualizing and Assessing the "True Self"

In short, the masks people wear can distort who they really are. How is it possible to know or measure "who they really are"? We chose an indirect route by asking our participants to describe who they are in a context in which we presumed their deeper, more spontaneous self was most likely to emerge. Specifically, we asked participants to think about themselves in unguarded moments when they are with loved ones in whose presence they can express what they are really thinking and feeling. This is a context that, for most people, provides sanctuary and relative immunity from the pressures and stresses that can prompt incongruent behavior (Rogers, 1964), allowing them to be more relaxed, open, and spontaneous. An advantage of this approach to true self is that the unguarded self is an idea that participants can be expected to be able to understand and rate, perhaps more easily and less wishfully than they could the more abstract notion of "your real, true self." Of course we do not know if participants' notions of their unguarded selves correspond to anything actually deeper or truer within themselves – again, psychologists themselves have never agreed on whether "true selves" exist, let alone what the composition of such a thing might be. Still, we reasoned that assuming that an "actual" deeper nature does exist, peoples' spontaneous way of being [BEHAVING?] in the presence of loved ones might offer a best approximation of it, as

such behavior would be only minimally obstructed or distorted by anxiety and appearance concerns.

Assessing Discrepancies between the Social Character and the True Self

In order to address the inner duality entailed by the folk expressions listed at the beginning of this article, we compared the social character with the unguarded self. We assumed that the degree of discrepancy between the two profiles might provide an index of psychological duality, of the extent to which people are not being "who they really are." To assess character/unguarded self-discrepancy, we chose to use the five factor model as an assessment system (McCrae & Costa, 1990), as the "big five" traits of extraversion, neuroticism, openness, conscientiousness, and agreeableness provide a well-validated system for classifying individual differences.

Further, using the Big Five as a basis for personality measurement allows us to directly answer Mroczek, Spiro, Aldwin, and Ozer's (1993) challenge that any new personality measure should be tested for incremental validity with respect to the relevant Big Five traits. The key distinction here hinges on McAdams (1996, 2004) argument that personality consists of three different "tiers" of functioning, namely traits, goals, and selves, with each tier constituting a distinct level of analysis, irreducible to the other tiers. Our measures allow for direct examination of the trait level phenomena (i.e., absolute levels of neuroticism) that Mroczek et. al.'s (1993) challenge demands, while simultaneously allowing for computation of the self level phenomena (i.e., discrepancies between unguarded selves, and social characters) in which we are primarily interested. Thus our analysis can demonstrate, in line with McAdam's "three tier" conception, that our new self-level measure of personality predicts well-being in a manner that is

empirically distinguishable from the the Big Five factors' well-known and well-understood associations with happiness (particularly neuroticism and extraversion -- DeNeve & Cooper, 1998).

It is worth briefly comparing our character/unguarded self-discrepancy measure to other self-discrepancy measures, to highlight the differences of the current approach. Rogers used a Q-sort techniques to measure congruence (Rogers, 1961; Rogers & Dymond, 1954), asking people to sort 100 descriptive statements into actual self ("yourself as of now") and then into ideal self ("the self you would like to be") categories. Congruence or consistency (as opposed to incongruence or discrepancy) was defined by the number of descriptors that were sorted as overlapping into both categories. Higgins and colleagues (Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1987; Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986) took a more economical approach, asking participants to freely list 10 traits describing the actual self and 10 traits describing the ideal self. A count of the number of traits that overlapped, appearing on both lists, was considered an index of self-consistency (with non-overlap indicating self-discrepancies). Finally, self-concept differentiation (SCD; Donahue, et. al., 1993; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 2001; Suh, 2002) research uses a trait rating system similar to our own, defining SCD as the degree one displays different trait profiles across a number of different social roles (typically five).

The current research takes an approach that is different, and more economical, than all of the above. It is based on discrepancies in trait ratings that are easier to carry out than Rogers or Higgins trait sorting or listing tasks, and based on ratings of only two roles, specially selected for their theoretical importance, rather than the SCD's longer

land more aimless list of five . Our approach is different than ideal self conception (i.e., a future self that one would like to attain later), focusing instead on the unguarded self (i.e., a relaxed and enjoyable aspect of the existing self), as it is not clear to us that "being oneself" should entail fidelity to an imagined future self that one has not yet been. Our approach is also significantly different from SCD, as we are attempting to assess whether people are being true to a single unguarded self "at the center," of themselves, rather than assessing the overall degree of coherence of a sizable web of potential self roles. In essence, we privilege one self as the "true" one and use it as a benchmark against which other self-roles can be compared, whereas SCD is based on a factor analytic logic that simply seeks broad similarity in conduct across a person's many sundry roles in life In Study 2 we will empirically compare our new measure to SCD.

How should our new measure of self-attuned functioning be validated? In this research we focused on psychological well-being, which offers an excellent criterion variable for identifying states of optimal functioning, at both individual and societal levels (Diener, 1994; Veenhoven, 2004). Indeed, it would be difficult to argue that any particular way of being is optimal if it does not at least correlate with happiness and satisfaction. Our general strategy was to evaluate whether our new candidate self-congruence measure would be uniquely associated with well-being, even controlling for the big five personality traits evidenced by both the social character and the unguarded self.

Notably, Baird, Le, and Lucas (2006) criticized existing measures of within-subject variation such as SCD, arguing that they conflate (irrelevant) trait mean-level information and (theoretically relevant) information concerning within-subject

variability. They recommended controlling for item-level standard deviations in computing measures of within-subject variability. However, because our measure was a simple discrepancy score rather than a measure of variability *per se*, we controlled for trait mean levels instead. This ensures that the discrepancy measure has effects independent of the set of trait scores that go into the measures (i.e., low discrepancy is more than a surrogate for low neuroticism or high extraversion in the social character). For a similar procedure, Sheldon et al. (in press) tested the effects of a variability-based life-balance measure by controlling for all of the constituent scores that went into that measure, finding that balanced time-use had emergent effects on well-being that were more than the sum of the particular life-domains (i.e. sleep-time, work-time, social time) that made it up. In sum, controlling for the big five trait scores of both the social character and the unguarded self (ten scores in all) provided a second opportunity to validate the measure.

As a third means of validating our new measure, we employed the Authenticity Index (AI; Goldman & Kernis, 2002), which itself is known to predict well-being. This self-report inventory assesses four proposed components of authenticity - authentic behavior, self-awareness, unbiased processing of information, and relational orientation - which may be examined separately or together as part of a combined authenticity index. We reasoned that our non-discrepant character measure should be associated with this existing scale, since the measures assess conceptually similar issues. However we also reasoned that our new measure would have associations with SWB that are independent of the AI, because the new measure approaches self-congruence by a more indirect route

that does not rely on participants' lay theories and self-presentations of their own functioning.

Summary and Hypotheses

In sum, this research was founded on a mixed idiographic/nomothetic assessment of the "true self" (as measured by an "unguarded self" – the way people behave among their closest friends and confidants), and a prominent "social character" (the subjective self-role that people inhabit and project to others in their social lives). After participants wrote about their self in an unguarded situation and also the typical character they play in a party attended by friends and strangers, they rated both selves on the Big Five traits. This allowed us to compute a discrepancy score to answer the question of the degree to which people are displaying their most natural traits even in a social situation which might compel superficiality or false performances. We hypothesized that our non-discrepant character measure would predict subjective well-being independently of the ten trait scores that constitute the measure and independently of Goldman and Kernis' (2002) Likert-based measure of personal authenticity, and, in study 2, independently of SCD (Donahue, et. al., 1993).

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants were 135 psychology students at the University of Missouri, 52 men and 83 women, who participated to help satisfy course requirements. Ninety-two percent were Caucasian. Participants were emailed and asked to take an internet survey via an included link.

Measures

Well-being. To assess well-being we administered the 20 item Positive Affect Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Tellegen, & Clark, 1988) and the 5 item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985); alphas = .87, .89, and .84 for positive affect, negative affect, and life-satisfaction, respectively. As in much past research, we created an aggregate SWB score by averaging positive affect and life-satisfaction and subtracting negative affect (alpha = .88; Diener, 1994; Sheldon & Elliott, 1999).

Social Character. Later in the survey, participants read:

> *Everybody has a social character that they project to the world, in their everyday lives. This is both a certain role or character that they play, and a way of being and expressing themselves to others. Peoples' social characters can vary on how confident they are, how likeable they are, how funny they are, and so on. In the box below, we'd like you to give us a brief description of your social character. To help with this, imagine that you are at a party, where there were both people you know well, and people you don't know so well. Overall, what social character do you typically project in such situations? How would you describe that character?*

Participants typed in a wide variety of descriptions of themselves. Participants tended to focus on extraversion in their answers, giving answers that ranged from "I am the type of person who would start dancing around, even if no one else was," to "I'd be the one sitting in the corner awkwardly, watching everyone else mingle." Sometimes this came out in complex ways, such as "The more people, the more quiet and shy I become. However, when there are few people, I become the jokester and I really talk a lot." While extraversion was the predominant trait mentioned, a variety of others came up such as dependability ("A strong, dependable person whom people can count on and trust") and neuroticism ("if 'drama' occurs and I find myself involved, I can tend to get paranoid and easily emotional.").

Social character traits. To assess the big five traits expressed while playing the social character, we asked participants to "rate the extent to which your social character displays these traits," then provided them with the Ten Item Personality Inventory (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2002). The TIPI consists of 10 pairs of words, two pairs for each trait (i.e., for neuroticism, "anxious, easily upset" and "calm, emotionally stable" (R)). Later, character neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness scores were computed by averaging the two ratings for each trait.

Unguarded self traits. At a separate point in the questionnaire, participants were shown the same 10 personality traits described above and were asked to "rate your true self -- those characteristics that you possess but are not always able to express socially for whatever reason. Think about those traits you are only able to express around those people closest to you." These instructions were based on Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimmons' (2002) writing instructions. In this article we use the term "unguarded self" to refer to this self-aspect. Unguarded self neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness were computed by averaging the two ratings for each trait (after appropriate recoding). Alphas for the 10 trait scores ranged from .60 to .73, with two exceptions: the social character and unguarded self agreeableness alphas were .11 and .29, respectively. These low alphas were disappointing, although perhaps some such should have been expected given the hazards of using many two item scales. This problem was remediated in study 2

Social character/Unguarded self discrepancy score. To compute the degree to which these two selves diverge on the big five traits, we summed the absolute values of the five difference scores (i.e., between the two neuroticism scores, the two extraversion

scores, etc.). This score indicates the degree of discrepancy regardless of the direction of the discrepancy (i.e., it ignores whether the character self or the unguarded self is higher on trait X). Again, in order to control for the well-being relevant trait-content of the two selves, we intended to control for the ten trait scores of the social character and the unguarded self. The discrepancy score was reversed so that higher scores indicate less discrepancy and more self-congruence.

The Authenticity Inventory. The 45-item A.I.-3 was used to assess trait authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Example items from the awareness, unbiased processing, authentic behavior, and relational orientation subscales, respectively, are "For better or for worse I am aware of who I truly am," "I'd rather feel good about myself than objectively assess my personal limitations and shortcomings," "I find that my behavior typically expresses my values," and "Openness and honesty in close relationships are extremely important to me." Alpha for the aggregate authenticity inventory score was .89, and alpha for the individual subscales ranged from.74 to .80.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 contains correlations among the primary study variables. As can be seen, the non-discrepant character measure and the four AI subscales were all significantly correlated with one another, and were all correlated positively with SWB. We also conducted within-subject t-tests to compare the big five trait means for the social character versus the unguarded self. One significant difference emerged; interestingly, the unguarded self was higher in neuroticism than the social character ($t(134) = 2.34$, $p < .05$), suggesting that people may smooth over appearances of negative affect in certain

social situations. In general, however, it appears that the social character and the unguarded self tend to converge in their traits. To examine convergence in a different way, we correlated the two sets of trait variables with each other. The five corresponding cross-correlations (i.e., social character neuroticism with unguarded self neuroticism) ranged from .44 to .74 (all *p*s < .01), and none of the off-diagonal correlations were higher than .39. This suggests that there is reasonable convergence across the two methods of measuring the big five, but also considerable room for variation between the two modes of self.

Validation Analyses and Hypothesis Tests

Associations among the five self-congruence measures. In order to evaluate the factor structure of the five self-congruence measures (one new measure and four measures derived from the Goldman and Kernis AI), we conducted a principal components analysis of the five scores. A single component emerged, accounting for 49 % of the variance (eigenvalue = 2.43; all subsequent eigenvalues less than .93). The four AI facets of authentic behavior - awareness, unbiased processing, and relational orientation - loaded .88, .82, .69, and .56 upon this component, respectively, and the non-discrepant character variable loaded .49 upon this component. This suggests that the five measures tap a singular latent trait, with the least direct measure of authenticity, the non-discrepant character variable, loading least strongly upon this factor. Additionally, we regressed the new non-discrepant character variable upon the four subscales of the AI, to see which subscale was the best unique predictor. Only the "authentic behavior" subscale was significant in this analysis -- unbiased processing, relational orientation, and self-awareness were non-significant. This further validates the new discrepancy measure, as

the measure is explicitly intended to assess the degree the social character's behavior diverges from the behavior of one's unguarded self.

Associations between the five self-congruence measures and SWB. We next proceeded to compare the self-congruence measures as predictors of SWB. In this analysis, SWB was regressed upon the non-discrepant character score and also the ten trait control variables (i.e., extroversion,neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness, for both the unguarded self and the social character) at the first step. Then, the four AI sub-scales were entered at the second step. Table 2 contains the results of the first step of this analysis. As can be seen, the new measure of self-congruence was significant at Step 1, even when the ten trait variables were controlled. Thus, this self-level measure of positive functioning accounted for variance independently of these important trait-level variables (McAdams, 1996) and ensures that this measure of within-subject variability is not just a proxy for the trait scores that comprise it (Baird et al, 2006). When the four AI components were entered at the second step (multiple R^2 for the entire equation = .52), the non-discrepant character measure remained significant (β = .24, $p < .01$); the coefficients for the ten trait variables were essentially unchanged; and two of the four AI components (authentic behavior and awareness) were themselves significant. An ancillary analysis including only the aggregate AI at Step 2, rather than the four sub-scales of the AI, revealed that the non-discrepant character and the aggregate AI variables were both significant.

In final set of ancillary analyses, we examined the effects of taking into account the direction (rather than just the absolute magnitude) of the differences between the social character and the unguarded self. Perhaps the problem with discrepancies only

arises when the character is lower on the five traits, or lower on the four "positive" traits (extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) and higher on the "negative" trait (neuroticism)? To test these two possibilities we re-conducted the regression analysis above, entering either a discrepancy score computed by subtracting all five character scores from the unguarded self scores and summing the five results, or by subtracting the four positive character scores from the unguarded self and subtracting unguarded self neuroticism score from the character neuroticism score, and summing the five results. Neither alternative discrepancy score was significant in either analysis and our primary score, based on absolute, not directional differences, remained significant in both cases.

Brief Discussion

Study 1 provided preliminary construct and incremental validation for the new measure of self-congruence, showing that, as expected, the measure is associated with a direct self-report measure of authenticity (especially the authentic behavior subscale), but that it also uniquely predicts SWB beyond the effects of the AI. Furthermore, the non-discrepant character measure was shown to have effects independent of the specific ten trait scores associated with the social character and the unguarded self, suggesting that it is not just a proxy for mean-level trait information (Baird et al., 2006); instead, the measure may represent an emergent self-level quantity that must be considered for a more complete picture of optimal functioning (Sheldon, 2004).

Study 2

In Study 2 we attempted to replicate the Study 1 findings, to demonstrate that the effects are reliable. Thus, we again administered the new character/unguarded self-

discrepancy measure, the Goldman and Kernis (2002) Authenticity Index, and SWB, with the same hypotheses as before. To improve the trait assessment we used six items to assess each big five trait, rather than the two items per trait used in Study 1 (see below).

In addition we also expanded on the earlier findings in two ways. First, we incorporated a 150-item measure of Self-concept differentiation (SCD; Donahue et al., 1993) into the assessment. SCD purports to measure the degree of self-fragmentation or inner disunity a person experiences, and is quantitatively indexed by the degree to which the person manifests very different performances across multiple social roles, on average. Research with the SCD construct has verified poorer SWB in those who evidence highly variable trait profiles across the five role-domains of child, friend, worker, student, and romantic partner (Donahue et al., 1993; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997), although this effect appears to be somewhat smaller in Asian cultures (Suh, 2003). Because they both address inner disunity, we expected our new measure of non-discrepant character to be associated with SCD. Such a finding would offer further construct validation for the new measure.

However, SCD also differs from the new measure in several ways. First, SCD is significantly more complicated to measure and compute, as it involves participants rating their personality in each of five different roles they occupy, then extracting the first within-subject factor across the traits associated with those five roles. Participants are considered to have high SCD if they have a small first common factor (or, equivalently, by a low average correlation between roles). In contrast, our non-discrepant character measure simply consists of the absolute discrepancy between two theoretically meaningful modes of self. Second, SCD lacks the notion that any of the five measured

roles are in anyway more meaningful than any of the others, as it looks only for convergence. In contrast, the non-discrepant character measure makes a somewhat audacious claim one particular self - the unguarded one - is key. SCD and the non-discrepant character measure are likely to be at least somewhat related as a person with widely discrepant selves logically cannot have all those selves be exactly congruent to their unguarded self, yet the relationship need not be a strong one. The non-discrepant character measure would predict that the same amount of Self Concept Differentiation would have a greater detriment to a person's happiness when their social selves were scattered far from their unguarded self, but relatively less detriment when their social selves were centered more closely to it.

In fact, we suggest that our new self-congruence measure may not only account for variance in SWB above and beyond SCD, but may mediate SCD's effect on SWB. In other words, the real problem with SCD may not be variable performances in different roles *per se*, but rather variable performances that feel unnatural or ill-fitting with respect to one's most comfortable mode of being. If this interpretation is correct, then SCD's effects upon SWB should be accounted for by the character/unguarded self discrepancy measure. In other words, behaving more variably across roles is likely to produce selves that diverge from a singular, unguarded self "at the center," explaining why that variability can be problematic. Such a pattern would supply further evidence regarding the psychological importance of the new measure.

As a second innovation, Study 2 attempted to account for the effects of the various congruence measures on SWB, by measuring peoples' current psychological need-satisfaction. Deci and Ryan (1991, 2000) have argued that all humans share certain

evolved psychological needs, namely, for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In other words, all people may need to feel that they are doing what they want to be doing, that they are doing it well, and that they are connecting to important others in the process. Peoples' needs are met both when social contexts support satisfaction (i.e., a teacher supports autonomy by providing choice, competence by providing clear instructions, and relatedness by being caring) and when personality configurations support satisfaction (i.e., a person orients towards autonomy in the environment, or has strong achievement motivation, or has a secure attachment style). Sheldon (2004, 2006) has suggested that psychological needs supply essential mediators for explaining any variable's effects on SWB; psychological needs constrain human diversity, such that varying personality styles or dispositions must all suffice to satisfy the person's needs, at least, if the person is to be happy. This should also occur when a person manages to "be more authentic" in life.

In this specific case, we reasoned that those able to enact unguarded social performances should be better able to meet their own psychological needs. Behaving naturally should remove stresses from people, reducing their feelings of being controlled by social forces, allowing more authentic connections with others, and even freeing up the psychological resources that they had previously devoted to maintaining and monitoring their poses, letting them perform more confidently and effectively. Returning to the Alex Rodriquez example, as Rodriguez relaxed and stopped being "A-fraud" he seemed to overcome his initial hitting slump after joining the Yankees (competence), "more guys warmed up to him" (relatedness), and he realized: "I can really be myself… showing the emotions that I really have" (i.e., autonomous self-expression). Based on

this reasoning, we expected measured psychological need-satisfaction to explain the effects of our new character/unguarded self discrepancy measure on well-being, as well as the effects of SCD and of the Goldman and Kernis (2002) authenticity index.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 173 introductory psychology students at the University of Missouri, 71 men and 102 women, who participated to help fulfill a course requirement. They were predominantly Caucasian. After signing up for the study, participants were emailed a link to an on-line survey.

Measures

We used the same instructions as before to prompt participants to consider and rate their social character and their unguarded selves. As in Study 1, we used the PANAS and to assess SWB and the AI to assess trait authenticity (all alphas over .70); however, we included the 4-item Subjective happiness scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) instead of the 5-item SWLS within the SWB composite. Like the SWLS, the SHS measures a global judgment about one's life as a whole

Also, instead of using the Ten item personality inventory (Gosling et al., 2002) to assess the big five traits of the social character and the unguarded self (two items per trait), we used the 30 adjective markers employed by Sheldon et al. (1997, Study 2), six items for each trait. Participants rated "the extent each adjective describes you in this role" on a 1 (not at all characteristic) to 9 (very characteristic) scale. Example adjectives for neuroticism were "unhappy," "moody," and "cheerful" (R); for extraversion, "extraverted," "talkative," and "shy" (R); for conscientiousness, "organized,"

responsible," and "careless"(R); for openness, "artistic," "open-minded," and "unartistic" (R); and for agreeableness, "considerate," "cooperative," and "self-centered" (R). Five trait scores were computed for both aspects of self; these ten alpha coefficients ranged from .73 to .86, a considerable improvement from Study 1. A discrepancy score was again computed by summing the absolute value of the five difference scores. The measure was then recoded to indicate self-congruence rather than self-discrepancy.

SCD. To assess self-concept differentiation we first asked participants to rate themselves in the five social roles of "Child" (how you experience your role as a son or daughter), "Employee" (how you experience your role in the workplace), "Romantic partner" (how you experience your role in your most recent romantic relationships), "Friend" (how you experience your role in social relations such as with friend and acquaintances), and "Student" (how you experience your role as a student in classes and other academic or learning environments). The same 30 big five adjectives were employed as above, and the same 9-point scale. Each role was presented on a different page.

To compute SCD we first reformatted the adjective rating data so that individual roles were the unit of analysis, rather than participants, so that N became 5. We then split the file by participant. Within-subject correlations between each participant's five roles (i.e., student with child, student with worker, etc; ten correlations in all) were computed on the basis of the 30 adjective ratings made in each role, using the SPSS-X Proximities procedure (SPSS, 1988). *Self-Concept Differentiation* (SCD; Donahue et al, 1993), which represents the degree to which a participant rates different roles in a distinctive manner, is defined as one minus the

average of these ten correlations. However, for the analyses below we coded the measure in a positive manner, as the average correlation between roles. Thus the measure indexes the extent to which people evidence similar traits across roles.

Psychological need-satisfaction. To measure participants' current autonomy, competence, and relatedness need-satisfaction, we used the 18 items employed by Sheldon and Gunz (in press). These 18 items include the nine positively-worded items used by Sheldon et al. (2001) to assess autonomy, competence, and relatedness need-satisfaction within peoples' "most satisfying events" (see also Sheldon & Niemiec, 2006, Sheldon & Tan, 2007). However, the 18 items also include nine negatively worded items (three for each need), to balance out any extreme response biases and to represent the full range of the satisfaction construct, from much dissatisfaction to much satisfaction. Participants were asked to rate their lives in general, using a 1 (no agreement) to 5 (much agreement) scale. Example positive and negative relatedness items were "I feel close and connected with other people who are important to me" and "I feel unappreciated by one or more important people." Example positive and negative competence items were "I am successfully completing difficult tasks and projects" and "I struggle doing something I should be good at." Example positive and negative autonomy items were "My choices are based on my true interests and values" and "I have a lot of pressures I could do without." After re-coding the negatively worded items we averaged the relevant items. Alpha coefficients for autonomy, competence, and relatedness were .73, .66, and .65.

Results

Table 3 presents the correlations between the major study variables (for readability only the aggregate Authenticity Index is included, and not the four sub-scales

of the index). As can be seen, all three of the self-congruence measures (SCD (reversed), non-discrepant character, and Goldman and Kernis's Authenticity Index) were associated with each other, and with SWB. Also, all three congruence measures were associated with the three psychological need-satisfaction variables (with one near-significant exception), and the three needs were each associated with SWB.

To retest the Study 1 hypotheses, we regressed SWB upon non-discrepant character and the ten trait scores at Step 1, and entered the Goldman and Kernis (2002) aggregate authenticity index at Step 2. Table 4 contains the results at the first step. Replicating Study 1, non-discrepant character was a significant positive predictor at the first step, independently of the ten trait scores. At the second step, and again replicating Study 1, non-discrepant character remained significant when the aggregate AI was entered (changing from $\beta = .17$ to $\beta = .14$, $I < .05$), indicating that it captures something the AI does not. The AI was also positive but only marginally significant ($\beta = .11$, $p < .08$), and the ten trait score coefficients were essentially unchanged at this second step. In sum, the non-discrepant character measure was again shown to have influence upon SWB above and beyond the likert-based AI, and beyond the person's particular trait profile.

To test our first new hypothesis, that psychological need-satisfaction mediates the discrepancy measure's effects on well-being, we re-ran the above regression model entering autonomy, competence, and relatedness at the second step, instead of the AI. The non-discrepant character effect was reduced to non-significance ($\beta = .08$, $p = .13$), as expected; competence and relatedness (βs = .17 and .23, ps < .01) were significant and autonomy was not ($\beta = .05$, *ns*). To formally test our hypothesis that the non-discrepant character effects are mediated by psychological need-satisfaction, we first computed an

aggregate need-satisfaction variable by averaging the autonomy, competence, and relatedness variables and then conducted a Sobel test of mediation (Sobel, 1982). This analysis revealed significant mediation of the non-discrepant character effect upon SWB by need-satisfaction ($z = 2.69$, $p < .01$).

To test our second new hypothesis, that the non-discrepant character variable could account for the effects of SCD upon SWB, we conducted a different analysis regressing SWB upon SCD at step 1, then entering the non-discrepant character variable and the ten trait control variables at step 2. Although SCD (reversed) was significant at Step 1 ($\beta = .43$, $p < .01$), its effect was eliminated at step 2 ($\beta = -.12$, *ns*); meanwhile, non-discrepant character was itself significant at step 2 ($\beta = .19$, $p < .01$), along with the two neuroticism measures (both *p*s < .05). A Sobel test of mediation was significant at $p = .05$ ($z = 1.93$, $p = .053$).

Brief Discussion

Study 2 replicated several Study 1 findings: That our new non-discrepant character variable is associated with a likert-based measure of authenticity, the AI; that the new measure predicted participants' SWB; and that the new measure's associations with SWB were not reducible to the AI's effects, supporting the incremental validity of the new measure. Once again, these effects were also independent of the ten trait scores constituting the measure, indicating that the new measure is more than a proxy for these better known personality characteristics (Baird et al., 2006).

In addition, Study 2 showed that the non-discrepant character measure was negatively associated with Self-concept differentiation (Donahue et al., 1993), an existing measure of self-fragmentation or disunity. This supplies further validation for the new

measure. However, consistent with our proposal that it is more problematic to behave in ways that diverge from an unguarded, natural self than merely to behave in divergent ways across role-domains, the non-discrepant character measure accounted for the association of SCD with SWB. In other words, when the portion of SCD that represents divergence from a "true self" was removed, then the rest of SCD no longer had effects. Finally, Study 2 showed that the self-congruence effects were mediated by psychological need-satisfaction. This suggests that behaving inauthentically or discrepantly from one's natural self is problematic because one may thus fail to meet one's psychological needs. As in the Alex Rodriguez example, the "phony" A-Rod felt pressured, was performing poorly on the field, and felt disconnected from his Yankee teammates; whereas the later A-Rod had found a more spontaneous way to be, which presumably helped him to break out of his professional and interpersonal doldrums.

General Discussion

In these studies we attempted to develop a fresh perspective on the meaning of "being true to oneself," building on the idea that each of a typical "social character" or two that we commonly live in, and project to others. After asking participants to reflect and write about the character that they play at a party (a common setting for undergraduates, and one we argue is diagnostic of much of their social life in general), we asked them to rate the big five personality traits of that social character. Later in the questionnaire we also asked them to think about and rate the traits of the person they are when in unguarded moments with loved ones. A new measure of self-congruence was computed based on the overall difference between these two profiles. This measure draws on the logic of self-discrepancy and humanistic theories of non-optimal functioning, with

their emphasis on the kinds of ”false” modes of self-presentation in which people can become entrapped.

Validational analyses showed that the new measure was significantly correlated with an existing likert-based measure of personal authenticity, the AI (Goldman & Kernis, 2002), in both studies. In addition, the measure was correlated with SCD, measured in the second study. Thus, it seems there is a commonality among the tendency to play a social character that diverges from one’s unguarded self, and to behave divergently across the various roles one occupies more generally in life, and the tendencies to behave authentically, to be self-aware, to be unbiased, and to be relationally oriented (the four subscales of the AI). Supporting the incremental validity of our new measure, however, comparative analyses showed that the non-discrepant character measure predicted SWB independently of both the AI and SCD, and indeed, accounted for the effects of SCD on SWB. This suggests that the new measure taps an important psychological quality that has gone unaddressed by these previous measures.

This conclusion is further bolstered by the finding that the non-discrepant character measure’s effects were not reducible to the effects of the ten trait scores that went into the measure, including neuroticism or extraversion, the two trait dispositions most relevant to SWB (Fortunato & Goldblatt, 2002; Mroczek et al., 1993). Controlling for these traits, within both the character and unguarded self, assures that the character/unguarded self-discrepancy variable is not merely a proxy for how anxious or outgoing people feel in either role, or for trait mean level information in general (Baird et al., 2006). Thus, it appears that this emergent self-systemic variable supplies information independent of the trait level of personality (McAdams, 1996).

Many psychologists have supposed authenticity or self-congruence to be a good thing, but it remains somewhat unclear exactly why this is. We propose that a waking day consists of a string of consequential judgments over what to do, to say, and to believe. A person in tune with their 'true personality' has a map and a captain. They can identify that which is important to them and that which isn't, and can steer a decisive course in doing so. However, when people start feeling performance pressure in their social lives they may find themselves thrown off balance, having to compensate and bolster themselves against confusion and uncertainty (as did Alex Rodriguez in his first years with the Yankees). They may also find themselves engaged in behavior that does not come naturally to them -- talking when they would rather observe, biting their tongue when they are dying to speak, or pretending to care about something that doesn't matter. Unfortunately, such conflicts and inhibitions can deplete our precious supply of deliberative attention (Bargh, 1999), making it more difficult to enact the creative and flexible functioning required for satisfaction and well-being.

This research thus suggests that the "social character" approach is a fruitful lens for understanding the self and self-processes. The concept of a social character helps to integrate phenomenological, social-constructivist, humanistic, and organismic approaches to the self. It emphasizes that although we occupy subjective characters, constructed to help navigate the social topography of our worlds, these characters can become a source of some suffering if they fail to properly represent the substrate on which they are built – if they become "phony." Although there are likely multiple processes here that are separable and worthy of independent inquiry, they are also all happening at once, under the (more-or-less effective) orchestration of the phenomenological self (Blasi, 2004).

Thus, the social character assessment approach may prove useful to a widespread array of theorists.

Two further issues are worthy of brief consideration. First, Sheldon et al. (1997) also researched roles, traits, authenticity, and SCD, finding that rated authenticity, as summed across the child, friend, worker, student, and romantic partner roles, predicted SWB above and beyond both trait and SCD effects. Although superficially similar, the current study goes beyond this earlier work by a) introducing a new role concept, the "social character," which allows examination of a context in which self-presentation is paramount and social pressures can be great; b) introducing a new conception of true or ideal self, the "unguarded" self that one is when comfortable with loved ones, even specifying a new way that the traits of this self can be measured, which is a considerable advance over simply rating "does this role feel authentic"; and c) introducing a new type of discrepancy measure that addresses these two self-modes, showing that it accounts for the effects of SCD, rather than just supplementing SCD's effects (as was found by Sheldon et al., 1997). Furthermore, whereas Sheldon et al. (1997) used likert ratings to assess authenticity, in the current work we showed that the new discrepancy measure supplies variance above and beyond a likert measure of authenticity, in this case, the Authenticity Index (Goldman & Kernis, 2002). This research, in short, makes significant new advances into describing the potential structure and workings of the long elusive "true self".

A second further issue concerns cross-cultural generalizability. It may be that the current research is biased towards individualism, with its notion that we should try to "express who we really are" within social situations. In collectivist societies, perhaps it is

more important to carefully tailor one's self-presentation to the context; in such cultures those who express their "true" thoughts and feelings may face embarrassment and ostracism. Indeed, Suh (2002) found that self-concept differentiation (i.e. fragmentation) had smaller negative effects upon SWB in Korean compared to U.S. samples (although the negative effects were still significant). Still, we would expect to find similar negative associations of character/unguarded self discrepancy with SWB in other societies as well. This is based in part on the idea that there are universal psychological needs, a claim that is reasonably well supported by cross-cultural research in the self-determination theory tradition (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, 2004). In the current research, low character/unguarded self discrepancy predicted higher need-satisfaction, which in turn predicted higher SWB. Thus, if discrepant performances also predict reduced need-satisfaction in other cultures, then our findings should emerge anywhere. Collectivists, then, may value the ability to marshal their behavior to play socially appropriate roles, and feel awkward projecting non socially-sanctioned selves, yet may still find their task more rewarding and themselves happier when playing roles that more closely match their natural personality inclinations. However this may be a big "if," and research is needed to confirm this expectation.

There are some other important limitations of this study, which also suggest fruitful avenues for future research. Primarily, our concept of the "social character," while intended to describe the typical or dominant social self people project, was assessed only in the context of a "party where there are some people you know and also some strangers." Although we reasoned that this context is, for most undergraduates, one in which their social performance matters and in which they may sometimes produce

inauthentic behavior, it will be important to assess the social character in other contexts as well. We would expect that no matter what the context, if people feel compelled to act in a way that is discrepant from who they are at their most unguarded, then they will evidence less subjective well-being. This does not mean that we should *always* be "relaxed and comfortable" -- such a demeanor might be quite inappropriate during a lecture or a negotiation. What it does mean, however, is that we should ideally be able to either seek settings that allow for the unobstructed operation of our core self (Goldman & Kernis, 2002), or at least be able to find a suitable character to play in those situations that reasonably reflects who we are. To the extent we play a character that is too different from our unguarded self, problems may ensue. Additional study limitations include the reliance upon exclusively self-report methodology, the reliance upon an undergraduate sample, and the cross-sectional study design, which does not allow for the evaluation of dynamic processes and change.

To return to the questions and adages which began this article, what does it mean to be ourselves, to be in touch with ourselves, and to be true to ourselves? Our data suggest that to be true to our self we should find characters to play that are similar in their essential nature to the self that we are in our most spontaneous, unguarded moments. We may never know if "true selves" actually exist, but if they do this may be our best means of estimating what they look like. From this perspective, the wisdom of the adages which began this article is clear: If we are to function at our highest level and master the art of living, then an inwardly accurate sense of self is one of the best guides we can find. When we fail to reach such a fortuitous state, injunctions to "just be yourself" or to "just be true to yourself" may serve as helpful reminders of the best guide we may have.

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Table 1

Study 1: Correlations among Primary Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. SWB	1.0						
2. Non-Discrepant Character	.34	1.0					
3. Aggregate Authenticity Index	.68	.32	1.0				
4. Authentic behavior subscale	.62	.32	.87	1.0			
5. Unbiased processing subscale	.46	.27	.71	.51	1.0		
6. Awareness subscale	.62	.21	.82	.66	.46	1.0	
7. Relational Orientation subscale	.35	.15	.61	.43	.11	.36	1.0

Note. All correlations significant at the .05 level or better except that between unbiased processing and relational orientation.

Table 2

Study 1: Results of regression analysis (standardized coefficients)

	SWB
Non-discrepant Character	.35 **
Unguarded self Neuroticism	-.13
Character self Neuroticism	-.12
Unguarded self Extraversion	.00
Character self Extraversion	-.01
Unguarded self Agreeableness	-.03
Character Agreeableness	.25 **
Unguarded self Openness	-.04
Character Openness	.07
Unguarded self Conscientiousness	.29 **
Character Conscientiousness	.12

Note. + = $p < .10$; * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$.

Table 3

Study 2: Correlations among Primary Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. SWB	1.0						
2. Non-Discrepant Character	.18	1.0					
3. Low SCD	.40	.21	1.0				
4. Aggregate Authenticity Index	.48	.21	.58	1.0			
5. Autonomy Satisfaction	.59	.17	.30	.48	1.0		
6. Competence Satisfaction	.55	.12	.35	.45	.56	1.0	
7. Relatedness Satisfaction	.60	.29	.42	.44	.51	.47	1.0

Note. Correlations > .18 significant at the .01 level; correlations > .14 significant at the .05 level.

Table 4

Study 2: Results of regression analysis (standardized coefficients)

	SWB
Non-discrepant Character	.17 **
Unguarded self Neuroticism	-.41 **
Character self Neuroticism	-.44 **
Unguarded self Extraversion	- .06
Character self Extraversion	.00
Unguarded self Agreeableness	-.03
Character Agreeableness	.01
Unguarded self Openness	.05
Character Openness	-.02
Unguarded self Con scientiousness	.09
Character Conscientiousness	-.05

Note. + = $p < .10$; * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$.