

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### **Structural equation models of self-discrepancy theory: tripartite relationships of domain-specific, perspective-specific self-discrepancies to psychological maladjustment and life satisfaction with self-esteem as mediator**

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Structural Equation Models of Self-discrepancy Theory:  
Tripartite Relationships of Domain-specific, Perspective-specific  
Self-discrepancies to Psychological Maladjustment and Life Satisfaction  
With Self-esteem as Mediator

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was two-folded. First, it was to construct the domain-specific and perspective-specific models of self-discrepancy to explore the tripartite relationships of self-discrepancy to psychological maladjustment and life satisfaction of adolescents. Second, it was to evaluate the mediating role of self-esteem through which self-discrepancy would affect psychological maladjustment and life satisfaction.

The study included 1043 subjects from grades 9 to 12. They were group administered a questionnaire that measured multi-perspective, multi-domain self-concept discrepancies, depression, loneliness, life satisfaction, and self-esteem.

Self-discrepancy existed in the processes of actual versus ideal (AI) and actual versus ought (AO) self-comparisons. Discrepancy was evaluated in accordance with the four domains and perspectives of the self proposed by Cheung and Lau (2001). Psychological maladjustment was assessed by the variables of depression and loneliness.

Structural equation modeling was used to test a mediational model derived from self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) and prior research. The present research focused only on the dejection-related emotions of depression and loneliness. Path models indicated that self-discrepancy was predictive of self-esteem, loneliness, and life satisfaction. Mediational analyses revealed the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationships of self-discrepancy to psychological maladjustment and life satisfaction. Both forms of domain-specific and perspective-specific self-discrepancies affected loneliness and life satisfaction directly or indirectly through the mediation of self-esteem. As predicted, self-esteem served as a significant mediator in all the structural models. Higgins's hypothesis concerning the unique link between AI self-discrepancy and depression (dejection-related emotion) was not supported. Rather, a new pattern of relationship was noted. In both models of domain-specific (AI appearance) and perspective-specific self-discrepancies (AO upward comparison, AI upward comparison, AI downward comparison, and AI reflected school appraisal), self-discrepancy operated through self-esteem to influence depression, which consequently affected life satisfaction. Similarly, Higgins's notion of the unique association between AI self-discrepancy and loneliness was not observed. Surprisingly, loneliness not only served as a strong predictor of depression, it also functioned as a significant mediator in the association between AI self-discrepancy of the social domain and life satisfaction.

In all, the study provided partial extension of self-discrepancy theory. It contributed to self-discrepancy research in several directions. First of all, the study incorporated the theory of self-discrepancy into the self-concept model of Cheung and Lau (2001). It took an instrumental approach to self-discrepancy by developing different models of domain-specific and perspective-specific self-discrepancies. Second, it provided extension of the theory by investigating the tripartite relationships of self-discrepancy to psychological maladjustment and life satisfaction. Third, the mediational analysis of self-esteem provided implications for educators and counselors to explore interventionist and self-enhancement strategies to help adolescents in resisting emotional distress induced by self-discrepancy and in enhancing life satisfaction. In all, the attempt to examine the differentiated nature of self-discrepancy offered a new appraisal of self-discrepancy theory and implications for self-discrepancy research.

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