

## Chapter 14

# Examining the True Self as a Wellspring of Meaning

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As can be seen throughout this volume, people derive meaning from a wide variety of sources: relationships, work, culture, goals, religion, and so forth. However, within each of these potential meaning sources, people make choices between options that are not necessarily any more *inherently* meaningful than the others. For example, when picking a spouse, potential suitors do not come with a predetermined amount of meaning-making potential. Neither do specific careers or goals. For instance, while one person might find a career as a teacher meaningful, someone else might find that choice relatively meaningless. What imbues these types of idiosyncratic choices with meaning? Along with Carl Rogers (1961) and others (e.g., Horney 1945; Laing 1960; Waterman 1993), we believe that people use their beliefs about who they really are (i.e., their true self-concepts) as an indicator of the potential meaning or value of any given choice. More specifically, choices that are consistent with the true self-concept are deemed valuable for that very reason. Because people have different true self-concepts, this perspective helps explain why a given profession, for example, is meaningful to some people but not others. In this way, we believe people can use their true self-concepts as the foundation for unique “life philosophies” that inform which choices are worthwhile as well as the relative importance of those choices to each other (i.e., a person who chooses to focus on their family vs. their work and vice versa).

The argument that the true self imbues one’s decisions and life with a sense of meaning does not assume that a true self literally exists; rather, it assumes that people place importance on the *idea* of a true self. Indeed, the supposition that people literally possess a single “true self” is tenuous at best (e.g., Baumeister 1995) and is challenged by a wealth of theoretical (e.g., Cooley 1902; James 1890; Sullivan 1953) and empirical (e.g., Andersen and Chen 2002; Darley and Fazio 1980; Drigotas et al. 1999; Murray et al. 1996) perspectives that point to the pervasive

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influence of environment on the self-concept. Why then is this potentially illusory self-concept able to confer meaning? After all, there is no evidence of literal true self existence. Why do people place such importance on it? In this chapter, we will first review the previous research on the relation between the true self and meaning and then explore several potential explanations that might help us understand why the true self is such a treasured domain of the self.

## **The True Self as a Source of Meaning**

As mentioned at the outset, along with our colleagues, we have argued that the true self can provide each person with a unique “life philosophy” that imbues life activities and pursuits with meaning and value (Schlegel and Hicks 2011; Schlegel et al. 2009). Consistent with this idea, Bellah et al. (1985) found that when people were asked to justify their life decisions, most could not do so without referencing the self. This led these researchers to conclude that “each self constitutes its own moral universe” (p. 76). Baumeister (1991) has similarly argued that the self “exports” value to other life activities. This argument is also supported indirectly by research on self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2001), authenticity (Kernis and Goldman 2006), and personal expressiveness (Waterman 1993), all of which suggest a link between the true self and meaning.

In our own work, we have attempted to directly examine the meaning-making function of the true self by assessing the relationship between true self-relevant constructs and global judgments of meaning (Schlegel et al. 2009, 2011) and decision satisfaction (Schlegel et al. 2013). We review each of these approaches below.

### ***True Self-Concept Accessibility and Global Judgments of Meaning***

In our first attempt (Schlegel et al. 2009) to examine the importance of the true self to meaning in life, we looked at the relationship between cognitive accessibility of the true self-concept and global judgments of meaning. We reasoned that if the true self is an important contributor to meaning, then the extent to which it’s readily available in one’s mind (i.e., its cognitive accessibility) should positively predict judgments of meaning in life. This hypothesis was based on previous research that found that the cognitive accessibility of other meaning sources, such as religion and personal relationships, positively predicts global meaning judgments (e.g., Hicks and King 2006, 2009a, b; King et al. 2006; see also, Hicks et al. 2010).

To meet this aim, we conducted five studies that either measured or manipulated true self-concept accessibility and then measured global meaning by asking participants to indicate their agreement with statements such as, “I understand my life’s meaning” (from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire; Steger et al. 2006). To assess self-concept accessibility, we asked participants to provide words that they felt best

described both their true self-concept and a control self-concept (i.e., their “everyday self,” defined as how they behave in daily life). These words were then used as stimuli in either a reaction time task that measured individual differences in self-concept accessibility (Studies 1, 2, and 4) or a priming task (Studies 3 and 5) that manipulated self-concept accessibility. The results of each study revealed that true self-concept accessibility positively predicted meaning in life judgments, whereas accessibility of the everyday self-concept had no influence on meaning in life judgments. This pattern supports the idea that the true self has a unique relationship with the experience of meaning over and above the self-concept more generally. Providing even stronger evidence for the unique role of the true self-concept, we also controlled for potentially related predictors of meaning such as positive affect, authenticity, self-esteem, and the valence of the self-concepts in these studies.

### *Perceived True Self-Knowledge and Global Judgments*

While the findings for true self-concept accessibility were encouraging, those studies required the use of relatively nonconscious measures and manipulation that are difficult for the participant to control (i.e., very quick reaction times or subliminal priming). While that approach has the appeal of decreasing the chance of response bias, we also wanted to examine how other true self processes might influence meaning, particularly processes that participants are more aware of. Thus, we examined how perceived true self-knowledge might mirror the observed effects of true self-concept accessibility (Schlegel et al. 2011).

People likely experience ebbs and flows in their confidence in their own true self-knowledge. We tried to capitalize on the tenuous nature of this confidence by using the metacognitive experience of ease/difficulty (Schwarz 1998; Schwarz and Clore 1996) in a true self description task as a means of measuring and manipulating perceived true self-knowledge. This methodology was based on the idea that people use the metacognitive experience of ease (or difficulty) as a cue to how much they know about a topic (Schwarz 2004). Thus, experiencing true self description as easy (vs. difficult) should influence the perception of possessing (or not possessing) true self-knowledge. People who experience true self description as easy should feel confident in their level of true self-knowledge, whereas those who experience it as difficult should question their level of true self-knowledge.

Across three studies, we asked participants to describe their true and/or everyday selves (the everyday self was used as a control self-concept for comparison) and either measured perceived self-knowledge (by coding the description for detail or asking participants how easy the task was to complete) or manipulated perceived self-knowledge (by explicitly making the task easy or difficult by asking participants to generate either a few (8) or many words (15); adapted from Schwarz et al. 1991). Consistent with the findings for true self-concept accessibility, we found that perceived true self-knowledge positively predicted global judgments of meaning in life and that perceived everyday self-knowledge was unrelated to these judgments.

These studies also controlled for positive and negative affect as well as self-esteem, further supporting the unique, strong influence of the true self-concept on judgments of meaning.

### ***Perceived True Self-Knowledge and Decision Satisfaction***

Encouraged by the findings for global judgments, we endeavored to look more specifically at what we believed was ultimately driving our effects: the use of the true self as a “guide” to decision-making (Schlegel et al. 2011). Recall that the foundation for our argument that people use their true selves to create meaning is that the true self-concept helps create a “life philosophy” that guides decision-making. Thus, we reasoned that people must be confident in their true self-knowledge in order to also feel confident in their decisions. To test this idea, we again utilized metacognitive ease as a means of measuring and manipulating perceived self-knowledge and asked participants to either reflect on major decisions they had recently made in their lives (e.g., the university they chose to attend, the choice of their current major) or to complete a simulated career choice task in which they quickly chose which career they would prefer from a number of paired choices (adapted from Nakoa et al. 2010). Consistent with predictions, perceived true self-knowledge was related to satisfaction with both real life and hypothetical decisions, whereas perceived everyday self-knowledge was unrelated to decision satisfaction.

These findings suggest that perceived true self-knowledge is an important contributor to feelings of confidence both in one’s past decisions and in one’s ability to make future decisions. Each of which could have important implications for one’s ability to find meaning in his or her life. This is particularly true, considering that the decisions one makes (e.g., relationships, career, goals) are the “stuff” that meaning is made of.

In sum, the findings from all three of these lines of inquiry support the role of the true self-concept in judgments of meaning. But the question remains: why is the true self able to influence people’s perceptions of meaning? In other words, why are people so attracted to the idea of a true self and why does it exert such influence in people’s lives? The remainder of this chapter explores several possible explanations for the mass appeal of the true self.

### **Why Is the True Self Meaningful?**

We now return to the question of why the true self is able to serve as a wellspring of feelings of meaning. As we noted earlier, we cannot observe it directly, we cannot be certain if we know it accurately, and we cannot know for sure if it even exists at all! We offer a number of potential explanations for why this potentially illusory self-concept is such a treasured aspect of the self. The specific explanations we put

forward are derived from three broader possibilities: (1) the true self fulfills other important psychological needs that, in turn, elevate its place in our lives, (2) there are certain beliefs about the nature of the true self that enhance its perceived importance, and (3) there are certain conditions that enhance (and attenuate) the attraction of the true self. We believe that each of these broader approaches to the question has the potential to shed light on the question: why the true self is perceived as meaningful.

### *Other Needs the True Self May Fulfill*

#### **Self-Consistency**

Humans have a strong desire for self-consistency (Aronson 1968, 1969; Festinger 1957; Heine et al. 2006; Lecky 1945; McAdams 1985; Swann 1983). For example, the Meaning Maintenance Model suggests that “people seek to establish that the person they were 10 years ago is related to the person they are now, that they are somehow the same person despite enacting different roles in life” (Heine et al. 2006, p. 90). This desire for self-consistency is at odds with our awareness of our own self-presentational behaviors (Goffman 1959; Leary 1995; Schlenker 1980) and with the idea that we all possess multiple (and potentially conflicting) self-concepts (Higgins 1987; Markus 1983; Markus and Sentis 1982; Mischel and Shoda 1995). However, in the ever-changing landscape of one’s life, the true self may afford a sense of self-stability.

The true self seems to be immune to the problem of shifts in behavior because people recognize that behavior is not necessarily diagnostic of the true self (e.g., Andersen 1987). Thus, instability in behavior can be overlooked when considering the contents of one’s true self. Even when behavior fluctuates over time and between contexts, any specific behavior can be dismissed as not reflecting the person’s true self. For example, a person who believes that her true self is extraverted but acts quiet at a particular party can reinterpret this potential threat to consistency as an example of simply not behaving like her true self. Even if the contents of a person’s true self-concept change over time, the prevalent idea that the true self is discovered over time suggests that it isn’t the person who has changed, only their awareness of whom they really are. When such changes in self-concept occur, people can reflect back on the past to search for supportive evidence that this was actually who they have always been, they just didn’t realize it. Indeed, stories related to discovering the true self may be important tools in developing a coherent life story, something that is considered an important developmental milestone (Habermas and Bluck 2000; McAdams 2003; McLean 2008; McLean et al. 2007).

Thus, the true self may be an important vehicle people use to find evidence that, at the core, they are the same despite the variety of social masks they might wear. Perhaps it is this very need for coherence in the self that drives us to believe we have a true self, a part of us that endures through everything else.

## Individuality

Another possibility is that the true self is treasured because it is what makes us feel unique as a person. Indeed, Lakoff and Johnson (1999) argue that the true self is a reflection of the folk theory of “essences” – the idea that each person has something inside them that makes them uniquely them.

Consistent with this proposition, the private nature of the true self may amplify this perceived uniqueness. Because we are simply more aware of our own internal lives compared to the internal lives of others (Johnson et al. 2004), we tend to judge private experiences as more unique than behaviors. Consistent with this, people believe that their thoughts and feelings are more unusual than their behaviors (Andersen 1984, 1987; Andersen et al. 1986; Johnson 1987; Nisbett and Wilson 1977). For example, Andersen et al. (1986) found that participants judged religious thoughts and feelings as more unique than religious behaviors, even though the content of the items was otherwise identical (e.g., feeling like praying vs. praying). As Johnson et al. (2004) note, humans are nearly always engaged in some sort of thought, but are not always engaged in behavior. In their words, humans are “thinkers and feelers more than they are doers” (p. 629). Considering that such private mental activities are thought to originate from the true self (e.g., Andersen 1984, 1987), it makes sense that the true self might provide us with that feeling that we are unique. Given how much our society values uniqueness and individuality, this may help explain why people are invested in their true selves.

## Self-Enhancement

A third possibility is that the true self is used for self-enhancement. Just as people take credit for their successes while avoiding blame for their failures (e.g., Miller and Ross 1975), people may use the true self to emphasize their favorite characteristics and minimize their less desired characteristics. Supportive of this notion, people report that they like their true self more than their “everyday self” (i.e., their behavior around most others; Schlegel et al. 2009) or their “false self” (Harter 2002). This may be explained by the fact that the true self allows for some leeway in deciding which of your behaviors reflect the true self and which do not. Self-enhancement biases would suggest that people will see their positive behaviors as indicative of who they “really are” are, while dismissing their less desirable behaviors as products of situations. This possibility extends even to private thoughts that are never expressed in behavior. For example, a participant in Harter and Monsour’s (1992) study said, “I really think of myself as friendly and open armed to people, but the way the other girls act, they force me to become an introvert, even though I know I’m really not” (p. 253). Thus, the true self may be uniquely suited to serve as an important defense against behavior that threatens positive self-regard.

## ***Beliefs About the True Self***

A second possibility is that there are certain beliefs surrounding the nature of the true self that make it so appealing. In particular, we focus on the belief that the true self is “discovered.”

As Waterman (1984) contends, identity development is typically characterized by one of two metaphors: discovery or creation. The true self is more strongly linked to the metaphor of discovery. This is important because the discovery metaphor itself may serve as an important existential function because it allows people to believe that life is not arbitrary. The implication of the discovery metaphor is that we are already inherently somebody and just have to *find* that somebody within ourselves. By contrast, when identity development is characterized as a process of creation, the self is thought of as a choice among endless possibilities. Having to make a choice among these endless possibilities has the potential to feel overwhelming and arbitrary, thus arousing existential anxiety, or what Waterman calls “existential dread” (p. 335). In this way, the discovery metaphor may underlie the true self’s relationship with meaning.

Guided by these ideas, Schlegel et al. (2012) found evidence for the importance of the discovery metaphor to the role of the true self in meaning judgments. Specifically, individual differences in discovery beliefs interacted with true self-knowledge to predict global judgments of meaning. The nature of the interaction suggested that true self-knowledge is a strong predictor of meaning for individuals with relatively strong discovery beliefs, whereas this relationship is attenuated among individuals with relatively weak discovery beliefs. Creation beliefs had no influence on the relationship between true self-knowledge and meaning in life.

This makes sense in light of the argument that a *discovered* true self is existentially comforting because it can serve as a “legitimate” moral guide to a variety of other decisions, thus making these decisions also feel less arbitrary. Once a person has figured out who they are, other decisions can then be judged in terms of whether or not they are expressions of this true nature. In this way, a discovered self serves as a defense against people’s concerns over the capricious nature of existence.

Undoubtedly, there are a variety of other beliefs about the true self that one could examine. However, there is little to no research on the folk conception of the true self. We hope that future research will examine what other beliefs might be associated with the true self and the implications of those beliefs.

## ***Limiting Conditions***

The final class of proposed explanations are conditions which might limit the ability of the true self to influence meaning. By identifying the factors that influence when the true self is not related to meaning, we might better be able to understand why the true self relates to meaning in our own research. In other words, these limiting conditions may highlight other underlying factors that explain the perceived importance of the true self.

## Historical Context

Although notions of the true self and self-discovery are important psychological concepts today, it is likely that they have not always been, nor will they necessarily continue to be. Indeed, the distinction between one's inner (or true) self and one's behavior seems to have only emerged in modern history (Baumeister 1987, 1991; Becker 1971; Bellah et al. 1985; Frankl 1959; Fromm 1941/1969). Prior to the sixteenth century, the self was synonymous with that which could be observed (Baumeister 1987). The reason for this shift is not entirely clear; however, Baumeister notes that this shift was first spurred by concerns about recognizing deception in others. The recognition that people could hide parts of the self from others might have led people to believe that parts of your own self can be hidden from you. The dissemination of psychological theories that emphasized the role of a hidden self to the masses also likely played a role. For example, Turner (1976) notes that Freud's greatest impact may have been that he persuaded people that a person's true nature could be found in their hidden drives and impulses. Similarly, Baumeister (1987) argues that Freud's continuing influence is evident in the widely held belief that possessing *complete* self-knowledge is impossible.

These shared beliefs about the self may underlie its relationship with meaning. On the other hand, and consistent with the proposed functional arguments, these shared beliefs may be the product (rather than the cause) of the true self emerging as an important psychological concept. For example, scholars have long commented on the erosion of culturally embraced structured sources of meaning that has left the individual with the primary responsibility of fashioning a meaningful life (e.g., Becker 1971; Frankl 1959; Fromm 1941/1969; Chap. 1 by Crescioni and Baumeister, this volume). Whereas past societies provided their members with widely agreed upon value bases, such as religion or tradition that offered clear direction for how one should live a valuable life, in modern society, people are confronted with more responsibility to decide for themselves the answers to the fundamental questions of what is right and wrong, what is good and bad, and what is worthwhile or not (e.g., Baumeister 1991). In Frankl's (1959) words, people are increasingly faced with an "existential vacuum." This historical shift may have spurred the need for people to find a more individualized moral guide such as the true self.

## Culture

Just as the emphasis on the true self may be unique to a certain point in history, the true self may be a uniquely Western phenomenon. Cross-cultural researchers have identified several important differences in beliefs about the self between the Eastern and Western cultures. These broad differences raise the question of how the true self translates across cultures.

One possibility is that the true self is not equally valued (or even recognized) across cultures. For example, privacy, independence, self-reliance, and individuality tend to be more important values in Western cultures, whereas Eastern cultures tend



to place greater value on relationships and interdependence (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Markus et al. 1997; Suh 2002; Tesser and Campbell 1983). Consistent with these differential values, Westerners tend to think of the self as something that exists within the person, while Easterners tend to think of the self as existing entirely within relationships and contexts (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Considering that the true self is closely tied to internal processes and attributes, it is reasonable to suspect that these types of differences lead to variability in the perceived value of an idea like the “true self.”

On the other hand, cultural differences in the true self may simply be manifested in the content of true self-descriptors rather than in the perceived value of the concept. Consistent with this, the Japanese language contains similar metaphors about containment and a “real” self (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). Thus, the true self may be similarly valued across cultures but “look different.” While the predominant view in Western cultures focuses on which of one’s multiple self-concepts is “true” (Bellah et al. 1985; Gergen 1991), Kanagawa et al. (2001) posit that other cultures allow for multiple true selves (i.e., a true self for each situation; see also Kashima et al. 2004). Some research that accounts for this distinction has found that the general concept of authenticity is important across cultures (Cross et al. 2003; English and Chen 2007; Kashima et al. 2004; Neff and Suzio 2006). Clearly, examining these complex issues is a promising direction for future research both in general and in specifically examining what underlies the meaning-making function of the true self.

## Developmental Concerns

A final potential limiting condition is age. The vast majority of the empirical studies reviewed have relied on college students or younger adolescents, and as Harter (1999; Harter and Monsour 1992) has argued, the resolution of identity conflicts and the recognition that one has multiple selves that are equally true may be an important milestone of development. As such, the true self may be less linked to meaning across the life span. Nonetheless, there is also evidence that at least some true self concerns continue through the life span. Even Harter (2002) notes that after people recognize that multiple selves may be true, they continue to be concerned about authenticity. Consistent with this, authentic self-expressions predict decreased depression and increased meaning in life in older adults (Krause 2007). Clearly, development concerns are another promising area for future research.

## Conclusions

Even if the true self is an illusory concept, it constitutes an important part of most people’s self-concepts. In this chapter, we have focused on how the of the true self informs meaning judgments and the potential underlying factors that might explain this relationship. Though it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a way to prove

whether or not the true self is “real,” we believe examining the psychological “reality” that surrounds it is both interesting and important. In this way, the true self is similar to other concepts, such as free will (Vohs and Schooler 2008; Wegner 2002), that are potentially not “real” but serve important psychological functions. We hope that future research explores this psychological reality by examining the ways in which the true self enriches people’s lives and the reasons that underlie this enrichment.

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