



## Changing of escaping the self - Self-awareness review, Part 2



When we become self-aware we see who we are and what we would like to be. What do we do? Do we change who we are? Or do we escape self-awareness by watching TV—or worst, by drinking alcohol, doing drugs, or committing suicide?

### Past ideas about self-evaluation

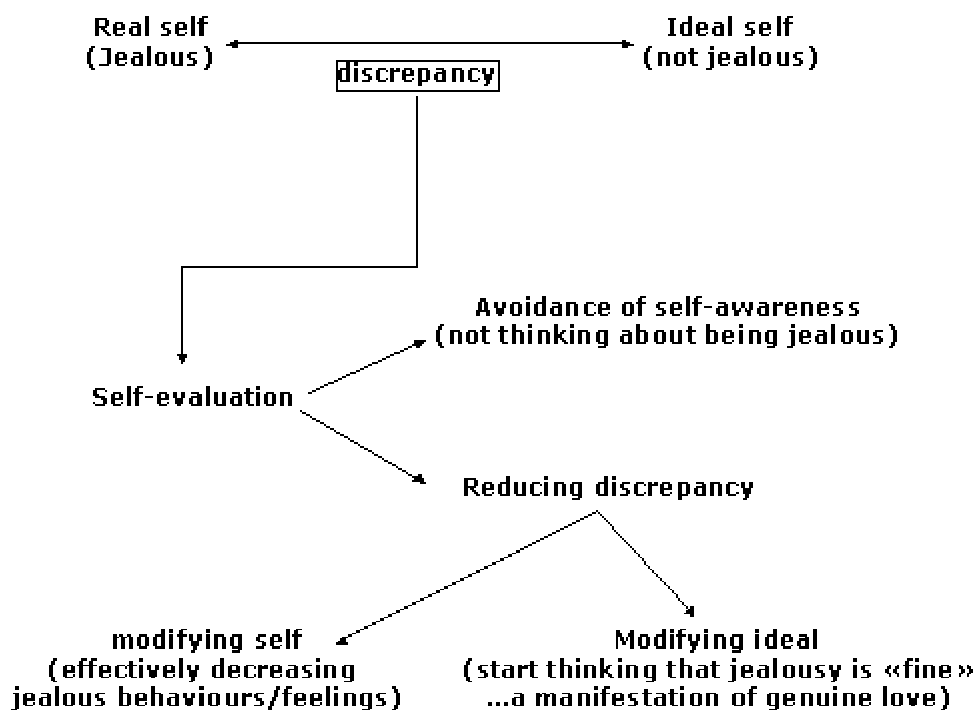
Self-awareness represents the capacity to become the object of our own attention and to observe our personal characteristics. Early research conducted in the 70's indicated that when we become self-aware we automatically compare what we perceive about ourselves (the "real" self) with what we ultimately would want to become (personal standards, or the "ideal" self).

**We are comparing  
who we are with  
who we would like  
to become**

Let me use a simple example to illustrate this self-evaluation process. If you stand in front of a mirror (thus you are self-aware), chances are you will be critical of your reflected image: you will compare what you see (real self) to a mental representation (standard) of your ideal physical appearance. Like most of us you will probably identify some physical feature you do not like—there will be a discrepancy, and this will produce discomfort. Then psychological

mechanisms will be activated to strategically eliminate negative emotions. The initial reaction is to simply escape self-awareness by avoiding whatever is causing it—the mirror in my example. But obviously people cannot evade mirrors forever—so eventually you will have to face reality and try to reduce the discrepancy between the real self and the ideal self. How? Either by directly modifying the real self (a haircut or a diet might do it) or by changing the ideal self (you could lower your expectations about your looks).

[The same self-evaluation sequence applies to any other self-dimension: behaviors, attitudes, emotions, values, thoughts, sensations, etc. See Diagram A for an example pertaining to emotions, e.g., jealousy.]



**Diagram A – Illustration of emotional discrepancy reduction**

### Recent developments

Obviously, reality is more complex than that and researchers gradually refined this initial view of self-evaluation. One first qualification is that people can experience *positive* discrepancies, as opposed to negative discrepancies, in which case self-awareness won't be painful but instead will generate good feelings about the self. For example, if you just had an unusually nice haircut and stand in front of a mirror, you won't avoid looking at yourself—on the contrary,

People can experience positive discrepancies

you will actively seek mirrors (i.e., self-awareness). Or if you just passed a very difficult exam (success experience) you'll have a tendency to enjoy thinking about it. So overall, self-focus following failure feedback (which will create a "negative" discrepancy between the real and ideal selves) is indeed associated with negative affect and escape from self-awareness; but self-observation following *success* feedback (which will produce a "positive" discrepancy) is linked to enjoyable affect and increased self-focus.

Recently, Paul Silvia (now at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro) and Shelley Duval published a paper in which they review some key factors that influence self-evaluation. I will intentionally neglect technical details and present their main conclusions. People's reactions to self-evaluation can be shaped by at least four variables: the magnitude of the discrepancy, outcome expectancy, rate of progress, and focus of attention (which will affect causal attribution).

When people detect a (negative) discrepancy, do they try to escape self-awareness, or instead, do they work at reducing the discrepancy either by altering the real self or the ideal self? Current research shows that the bigger the discrepancy the stronger the tendency to avoid self-awareness. This is self-evident. For example, you might observe a discrepancy between your actual and ideal weight; if you are slightly overweight (small discrepancy), you will be likely to modify your diet and/or do exercises—i.e., to change the real self; however, if you are severely overweight (important discrepancy), you might feel discouraged before attempting anything and avoid the whole issue (escape self-awareness). But even for small discrepancies, two factors have to be taken into account. (1) You might think that you can indeed lose weight (positive outcome expectancy), in which case you will probably modify your diet and/or do exercises; or you might rather believe that it is unlikely that you will lose weight (negative outcome expectancy), possibly because in the past you already tried without success, in which case you will probably try to forget the problem. (2) You could expect to lose weight fairly quickly and see results in a few weeks (rapid rate of progress) and start working toward this goal with confidence (i.e., change the real self); or you could fear that the entire process might be endless, so that you would eventually observe results only after months of hard work (low rate of progress) and drop the issue (i.e., avoid self-awareness).

**How do people react when they detect a (negative) discrepancy?**

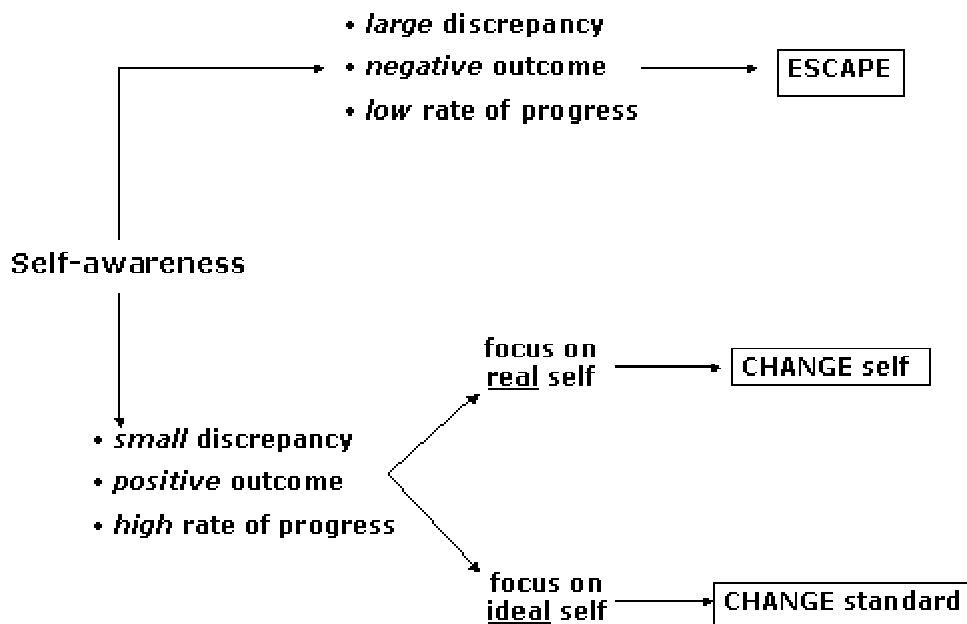
When people observe a discrepancy and *don't* escape self-awareness, do they try to reduce the discrepancy by changing the real self, or instead, the standard (the ideal self)? Here the focus of attention itself is important because it has an impact on "causal attribution"— the

perceived cause of the discrepancy. Research indicates that when self-aware people focus on the real self, they attribute the cause of the discrepancy to the real self and try to change it; when they pay attention to the standard they instead ascribe the cause of the discrepancy to the standard and try to modify it. For example, you are standing in front of a mirror, contemplating the fact that you are overweight; because in this situation you are literally looking at yourself, your attention will focus on your body (the real self), and as a consequence you will explain your weight problem in terms of bad eating habits or lack of exercise—or both. This attribution of causality will motivate you to change your behavior (again, the real self), with the ultimate goal of reducing the discrepancy.

Now let's imagine this next situation. You just read an article on anorexia and how excessive and unrealistic emphasis on beauty and thinness in our society leads young women to starve themselves to death. You go in front of a mirror and are reminded of your extra pounds. Since in this second condition your standard for thinness (ideal self) will be more vivid, your attention will focus on it instead of your body and you will explain your weight "problem" in terms of unrealistic expectations; this attribution of causality will prompt you to modify your standard ("maybe I'm not that fat after all", or "being too thin can be unhealthy"), instead of your real self.

**How do we  
develop an ideal  
self?**

So we can see that self-evaluation is more complex than it looks, and the recent identification of moderating variables definitely increases our understanding of this process. (See Diagram B for a summary.) Yet, as Silvia and Duval point out, some questions still remain. For instance, where do standards come from, or said differently, how do we develop an ideal self? Most theorists agree that some form of "internalization" is involved, but no consensus exists. What standards we use when we compare our real self to the ideal self is also unclear. Silvia and Duval present a rather colorful example: if new parents ask you what you think of their ugly newborn, what standard of social conduct will you choose? Will you "be honest" and state that the baby is hideous, or will you "avoid shaming friends" and lie about the newborn's disgraceful physical attributes? Research is inconclusive about the possible mechanisms at work and hopefully future inquiries will shed light on these unresolved issues.



**Diagram B — Variables involved in self-evaluation**

### Watching TV to escape self-awareness

So self-aware people usually observe things about themselves that they are unhappy with and either avoid self-awareness or face reality. How do people escape self-focus? Drinking alcohol is one way to go about it. (I'll have more to say about this below.). Another very popular activity in our society is watching TV. Lately Sophia Moskalkenko and Steven Heine of the University of British Columbia in Canada conducted four studies aimed at showing that people who experience discrepancies watch more TV to escape self-awareness. Watching TV would represent a powerful distractor that will prevent people from thinking about their shortcomings. For example, in one study Moskalkenko and Heine measured the amount of time participants watched television after receiving the result of a bogus IQ test. To create a discrepancy (and motivate participants to avoid self-awareness), Moskalkenko and Heine informed some participants that they did very poorly on the IQ test. (Other participants receive a positive feedback or no feedback at all.) During a 6 minute period in which television was available after test scores were announced, participants who got back good scores (no discrepancy) were observed watching TV only 2.5 minutes on average. Those who received no word on their score watched a little more TV—about three minutes. But people told that they had low IQ scores (discrepancy) turned to TV an average of more than four minutes.

**How do people escape the unpleasant self-focus?**

## **Self-awareness and self-destruction in famous people**

So we may turn on our TV sets and watch our favorite stars to avoid thinking about ourselves, but our beloved celebrities might actually have even more reasons than us to escape self-awareness. Five years ago Mark Schaller, also at the University of British Columbia, proposed that famous people are chronically self-aware because they are constantly being observed and scrutinized by the media. Because celebrities would be in an almost *permanent* state of self-awareness, the likelihood of identifying more painful discrepancies between the real and ideal selves is greater; this would mean that for famous people self-awareness is especially troubling and more likely to activate escape. Also, for this very exclusive group of individuals, discrepancy reduction will probably be unsuccessful. The culture of fame often exaggerates expectations beyond a level that can be realistically reached, thus attainment of ideals by modifying the real self may be impossible; also, revision of ideals will be difficult because the expectations to which public figures respond are not fully under their control but instead reflect the ideals imposed by others (e.g., fans and critics).

In this perspective, some famous people will resort to extreme strategies in order to reduce negative emotions caused by chronic self-observation: drug and alcohol abuse (alcohol interferes with the cognitive processes underlying self-awareness), or even suicide. Fairly recently, actor David Strickland committed suicide by drug overdose in a hotel room. Actors Charlie Sheen and Robert Downey Jr. repeatedly had problems with substance abuse and the law. These are just examples—the list could be endless: Elvis Presley, Tennessee Williams, Jim Morrison, Janice Joplin, Montgomery Clift... (See Box 1 for additional examples of self-destructive celebrities; note that many are “clean and sober” today.)

**Celebrities are in a  
almost permanent  
state of self-  
awareness**

Betty Ford.	Elton John.
Elton John.	John Lennon.
Dennis Hopper.	Kelsey Grammer.
Drew Barrymore.	Kirstie Alley.
Mary Taylor Moore.	Richard Dreyfuss
Michael Douglas.	John Belushi.
Oliver Stone.	James Cain.
Chris Farley.	Margo Hemingway.
Christian Slater.	Marilyn Monroe.
Matthew Perry.	

### **Box 1 – Some self-destructive celebrities**

Schaller conducted three studies in which he produced biographical analyses of famous persons known for their self-destructive behaviors: songwriters Kurt Cobain (who committed suicide in 1993) and Cole Porter (1891-1964—Porter was an alcoholic), and writer John Cheever (1912-1982—he too was an alcoholic). Schaller measured self-awareness by calculating the number of first-person singular pronouns found in the songs, short stories or personal letters of these three celebrities. (An increase in the use of first-person singular pronouns indicates high self-directed attention, because the more you think about yourself, the more likely you will refer to yourself in your writings.) Using biographies, Schaller then determined the exact moment these individuals attained fame, and also measured Cheever's self-reported alcohol consumption by analyzing his personal letters. As predicted, the onset of fame induced high self-focus. In other words, Cobain, Porter and Cheever began to use significantly more first-person singular pronouns in songs, stories and personal letters following their brush with fame. Also, this onset was significantly related (in Cheever's case) to higher self-reported alcohol use.

### **Cobain, Porter and Cheever**



In a recent paper myself and Lisa Craig (2000), then at St. Francis Xavier University in Canada, expanded these results with one additional celebrity: Nobel Prize winner Ernest Hemingway—a well-known heavy drinker. We analyzed Hemingway’s writings and personal letters and showed that there was a significant increase in

**The onset of fame in celebrities induced high self-focus in their writings.**

self-awareness and drinking patterns following fame. We also wanted to study *alive* people and assessed self-awareness (with a questionnaire) and self-reported alcohol use in 245 relatively well-known and not well-known students and faculty members in a Canadian university; self-focus and alcohol use were indeed significantly higher in the group of well-known participants—Deans, Chairs, Heads of programs, etc.

**Ernest Hemingway**



## **Conclusion**

The study of self-awareness in celebrities represents a potentially exciting new trend for researchers; but gathering psychological data about famous people can be frustrating. You will need a lot of imagination and persistence to contact stars, and that’s no guaranty of participation because many won’t disclose personal information for fear of being exposed in the media. To illustrate this problem, in a preliminary phase of our own study we solicited the participation of more than 100 famous Hollywood actors; we sent questionnaires to these actors' agents, together with a formal letter in which we explained the nature of the study and insisted on the confidentiality of the results. Only *one* actor responded favorably to the study!



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## **Selected references**

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Morin, A. & Craig, L. (July 2000). Self-Awareness, self-esteem, and alcohol use in famous and relatively well-known individuals. *Current Research in Social Psychology* [Electronic journal], 5(16), 236-253.

Schaller, M. (1997). The psychological consequences of fame: Three tests of the self-consciousness hypothesis. *Journal of Personality*, 65(2), 291-309.

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## **Links**

[Paul Silvia's website](#)

[Mark Schaller's website](#)

[The author's 2000 paper on fame and self-destruction](#)

[Kurt Cobain's suicide note](#)

**Keywords:** self-awareness; self-evaluation; discrepancy reduction; standards; TV viewing; fame; self-destruction.