Being Much Better and No Worse than Others: Deviance Regulation, Self-Guides, and the Motive to be Distinct

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Five studies examined whether the concern for self-other distinction is moderated by self-guide activation, with the predictions based on deviance regulation theory that distinctiveness striving is amplified by activation of ideal self-guides and diminished by activation of ought self-guides. In Study 1, trait differences in self-guides predicted trait differences in self-reported distinctiveness motives. In Studies 2–5, state activation of ought versus ideal self-guides led to shifts in participants’ self-reported interest in distinctiveness (Study 2), identification with common versus uncommon social groups (Study 3), preferences for common versus rare consumer products (Study 4), and emotional reactions to distinctiveness versus similarity feedback (Study 5). These findings suggest that self-guide activation can complement known cultural, dispositional, and contextual influences on distinctiveness striving.

Keywords: Self-guides; Distinctiveness striving; Deviance regulation theory; Self-discrepancy theory; Regulatory focus theory.

Much of human behavior can be explained in terms of the desire to identify with similar others or in terms of the seemingly contradictory desire to assert a unique individual identity. Explanations for which motive may prevail as the stronger determinant of behavior have ranged from cultural to dispositional to situational. Cultural analyses have highlighted a Western tendency to form an individualistic self-concept in which the self is defined by a unique personal identity. This has been contrasted with a more collectivistic Eastern self-concept in which relationships and affiliations with meaningful social groups are incorporated into one’s identity (Markus & Kitayama, 1998; Triandis, 1995).

In contrast, dispositional analyses have highlighted individual differences in distinctiveness motivation that can be observed within cultures. Such treatments highlight the fact that some individuals seem to possess a stable need for differentiation and uniqueness, whereas others seem to possess stable preferences for similarity and conformity (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). Finally, situational models have drawn attention to contextual factors that can move people between seemingly opposing tendencies to seek similarity versus distinctiveness. Some researchers in this tradition have posited that similarity and
distinctiveness represent opposing ends of a single motivational continuum (e.g., Snyder & Fromkin, 1980), whereas others have portrayed them as discrete, opposing forces that individuals try to balance in any given social context (e.g., Brewer, 1991).

The present studies test a factor that might underlie some of these differences in distinctiveness between cultures, individuals, and social contexts. Specifically, we propose that distinctiveness and similarity striving are influenced by self-guides that regulate behavior in different domains. In doing so, we integrate previous research on self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) and regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) with deviance regulation theory (Blanton & Christie, 2003) to generate a set of novel predictions about the motive for self-other distinction versus self-other similarity. Our research thus seeks to identify a critical and as of yet untested link between self-standards that regulate behavioral pursuits and the broader psychological motives that shape our desires for uniqueness and similarity. Such a link would complement existing work by cross-cutting known cultural, dispositional, and situational determinants of distinctiveness striving. It would also highlight how the motives for similarity and distinctiveness need not be in tension with one another but, rather, might work in a complementary fashion to shape behavior in different domains.

**Self-Guides and the Meaning of Distinctiveness**

A central aspect of self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1997) and regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) is a critical distinction between two types of self-standards that can regulate behavior. **Ideal self-guides** (personal standards that emphasize one’s aspirations and ideals) motivate people in achievement-related domains, whereas **ought self-guides** (personal standards that highlight one’s obligations to others) motivate people to fulfill their responsibilities and duties (Higgins, 1987). Although both types of self-guides represent internalized standards that motivate behavior, ideal and ought self-standards are generally met using different self-regulatory strategies. While people are motivated to **approach** their ideals, they seek to **avoid** falling short of their duties and obligations (Higgins, 1997; Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994; Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998).

Support for the proposed link between self-standards and distinctiveness striving comes from research on deviance regulation theory (Blanton & Christie, 2003). Based on a range of literatures positing that interpersonal distinctions drive perceptions of the self (e.g., Campbell, 1986; Ditto & Griffin, 1993) and others (e.g., Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1973; see Blanton & Christie, 2003), deviance regulation theory posits that people base their behavioral decisions on the perceived consequences of self-other distinction. That is, people seek to deviate from behavioral norms when distinctive actions will have positive consequences for their identity and to avoid deviations from behavioral norms when distinctive actions will have negative consequences for their identity. In support, Blanton and Christie (2003) found that the perceived social consequences of an action are given greater weight to the extent that they are rare rather than common, and Blanton, Stuart, and Van den Eijnden (2001) found that social influence attempts that highlight the positive or negative consequences of an action are more effective to the extent that the action is uncommon (see also Hall & Blanton, 2009; Stuart & Blanton, 2003).

Deviance regulation theory also makes predictions regarding the regulatory structure that governs different types of pursuits. In achievement and ability-related domains, which are typically represented by ideal self-guides (e.g., academic or athletic pursuits), actions that fall short of the ideal are viewed as normative by most perceivers. In other words, in the absence of additional information, it typically is assumed that most actors will perform
at a level that is consistent with the norm (Frieze & Weiner, 1971; Tillman & Carver, 1980). As a result, the primary way to distinguish oneself from others in achievement-related domains is to excel, and so individuals should be motivated to approach behaviors that create positive self-other distinctions. In contrast, in domains related to moral duties and social obligations, which are typically represented by ought self-guides (e.g., honesty and integrity), actions that uphold moral and societal obligations will be viewed as normative by most perceivers. That is, in the absence of additional information, it typically is assumed that most actors will conform to ethical codes and social mores (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Because distinctive cases in the domain of oughts tend to represent failures to live up to moral and ethical codes, individuals should be motivated to avoid behaviors that create negative self-other distinctions.

This analysis suggests that the activation of ideal versus ought self-guides should activate corresponding desires to approach versus avoid self-other distinctions. No research to date has investigated this logic by testing the deviance regulation theory prediction that self-guides channel distinctiveness and similarity striving. However, this prediction is supported by research linking independent and interdependent self-construals to differences in regulatory focus (Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000; see also Blanton & Christie, 2003). Lee and colleagues found that participants with an independent self-construal were more sensitive to incentives framed around potential gains (consistent with a promotion focus), whereas those with an interdependent self-construal were more sensitive to potential losses (consistent with a prevention focus). Their work demonstrated that a personality variable of relevance to distinctiveness striving, independent versus interdependent self-construal, is linked with a key aspect of regulatory striving.

The present research expands on the work of Lee et al. (2000) in a few key ways. First, its focus is on simple “micro-expressions” of distinctiveness striving—minor ways that one might choose to differentiate the self from others in a given frame of reference or the emotional response one expresses following feedback about similarity or dissimilarity to behavioral norms. In doing so, these studies investigate the fundamental motive to pursue self-other distinction (or self-other conformity), independent of the degree to which individuals incorporate meaningful relationships with others into their own self-concept. Additionally, this research examines a relationship that is reciprocal to the one studied by Lee and colleagues. Rather than examining if a personality variable related to distinctiveness concerns (self-construal) influences regulatory focus, it tests if a variable shown to be predictive of regulatory focus (self-guides) influences distinctiveness concerns. Finally, while the emphasis of Lee and colleagues’ work was on sensitivity to gains versus losses—a defining feature of promotion versus prevention focus—the present studies move “upstream” to show that mere activation of self-guides can exert effects on distinctiveness striving, measured through momentary shifts in preferences and choices.

**Present Research**

Five studies investigated the extent to which activation of ideal self-guides predicts greater distinctiveness striving and activation of ought self-guides predicts diminished distinctiveness striving. Study 1 first tested if trait differences in salient self-guides were linked to trait differences in distinctiveness striving and then Studies 2 through 5 tested if state activation of self-guides would result in state shifts in distinctiveness striving. The working assumption in the latter studies was that if ideal self-guides draw attention to desired self-other distinctions, then a decision context that activates ideal self-guides should prime greater distinctiveness striving on later, unrelated tasks. Similarly, if
ought self-guides orient attention to undesirable self-other distinctions, then a decision context that activates ought self-guides should lead to diminished distinctiveness striving on later, unrelated tasks.

**Study 1**

Study 1 tested the hypothesized link between trait differences in self-guide activation and trait differences in distinctiveness striving by examining the extent to which chronic ideal and ought self-focus predicted self-reported individual differences in distinctiveness striving.

**Participants**

A sample of 344 adults living in the USA (57.9% women) participated in an online study through Amazon Mechanical Turk.

**Measures**

**Self-Guide Salience**

The chronic salience of ideal and ought self-guides were measured using the regulatory focus questionnaire (RFQ; Higgins et al., 2001), which asks participants to rate on a scale ranging from 1 (never or seldom) to 5 (very often) the frequency with which they have experienced success or failure with self-regulation based on ideal and ought self-guides. To the extent that individuals have come to rely more heavily on regulatory strategies oriented around ideal or ought self-guides, the self-guide should be more chronically activated. Sample items include “How often do you do well at different things that you try?” (ideal) and “How often did you obey rules and regulations that were established by your parents?” (ought). The RFQ yields separate indices for ideal and ought self-guides that both demonstrated adequate reliability ($\alpha_{\text{ideal}} = .64$, $\alpha_{\text{ought}} = .81$).

**Distinctiveness Striving**

The desire for similarity versus uniqueness was assessed using a range of measures that capture different ways that individuals orient toward self-other distinctions. A comprehensive set of measures related to this construct was chosen in order to assess separate but related aspects of distinctiveness striving and to increase the generalizability of the findings beyond any specific distinctiveness concern (Epstein, 1980).

*Need for uniqueness* (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). The need for uniqueness (NU) scale measures individual differences in the desire to differentiate oneself from others by asking participants to indicate their level of agreement ($1 = \text{strongest disagreement}, 5 = \text{strongest agreement}$) with 32 statements, including “Being a success in one’s career means making a contribution that no one else has made” and “Feeling ‘different’ in a crowd of people makes me feel uncomfortable” (reverse). The items displayed satisfactory reliability ($\alpha = .86$) and were averaged to form an overall index of the need for uniqueness, with higher scores reflecting a greater desire for self-other distinction and lower scores reflecting a greater desire for self-other similarity.

*Self-attributed need for uniqueness* (Lynn & Harris, 1997). The self-attributed need for uniqueness (SANU) scale was used to capture more directly the motivational aspects of the desire for uniqueness. The SANU is comprised of four items ($\alpha = .80$) that assess the
extent to which participants want to be unique, place importance on being unique, and intentionally strive to differentiate themselves from others. Additionally, in contrast to the NU scale, the statements in the SANU assess general tendencies in the absence of a specific behavioral context. Responses were measured along a five-point scale with higher scores reflecting greater uniqueness striving and lower scores reflecting greater similarity striving.

Uniqueness-enhancing behaviors (Tian & McKenzie, 2001). Uniqueness-enhancing behavior (UEB) was measured using a multiple-act criterion comprised of 30 behaviors that individuals might perform to fulfill a desire for uniqueness (see Tian & McKenzie, 2001). Participants were asked to indicate (1 = yes, 0 = no/not sure) whether they had performed behaviors such as “making a new product from existing products” or “attending a meeting of a special social group or exclusive club” within the past three months. An index of uniqueness-enhancing behavior was created based on the total number of behaviors that a participant had performed, with higher scores reflecting more uniqueness-enhancing behaviors ($\alpha = .85$).

Consumers’ need for uniqueness (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). The consumers’ need for uniqueness (CNU) scale measures the motivation to differentiate oneself from others through patterns of consumer behavior by assessing participants’ level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) with 31 statements, including “I often look for one-of-a-kind products or brands so that I create a style that is all my own” and “I actively seek to develop my personal uniqueness by buying special products or brands.” The items demonstrated satisfactory reliability ($\alpha = .94$) and were averaged to form an overall index of uniqueness striving through consumer behavior, with higher scores reflecting a stronger preference for consumer products and behaviors that promote the expression of a unique identity.

Results

All zero-order correlations relevant to the hypothesized link between self-guides and uniqueness versus similarity striving are listed in Table 1. Inspection of these correlations reveals that the separate indices of ideal self-guide salience and ought self-guide salience were not strongly correlated, $r = .09, p = .10$. This suggests that they tap into relatively independent motivational concerns. Further evidence of that independence can be found in how they link to the different self-reported concerns for uniqueness. A trait focus on ideal self-guides tended to correlate positively with indices measuring uniqueness motivations ($r$s ranging from .02 to .34, $M_r = .19, p < .05$), whereas a trait focus on ought self-guides

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*p < .05, **p < .01.
tended to correlate negatively with indices measuring uniqueness motivations \((rs\) ranging from \(-.16\) to \(-.35\), \(M_r = -.24, p < .01\)). In addition, the pattern of correlations among different uniqueness measures ranged from \(r = .28\) to \(r = .51\), suggesting that they collectively tapped into somewhat distinct but related aspects of similarity and uniqueness striving. Partial correlations of each self-guide index with the four uniqueness indices controlling for the other self-guide index are shown in Table 2. These correlations also reveal the hypothesized pattern, with ideal self-guide salience tending to correlate positively with uniqueness after controlling for ought self-guide salience \((rs\) ranging from \(.06\) to \(.38\), \(M_r = .21, p < .001\)) and ought self-guide salience tending to correlate negatively with uniqueness after controlling for ideal self-guide salience \((rs\) ranging from \(-.19\) to \(-.35\), \(M_r = .27, p < .001\)). Across these two sets of analyses, the only minor deviation from our hypotheses was that ideal self-guide salience did not significantly correlate with the CNU scale.

**Discussion**

The findings from Study 1 suggest that individual differences in the salience of ideal versus ought self-guides predict differences across a range of distinctiveness tendencies. This pattern suggests that self-guide salience is a general individual difference factor that nonetheless influences very specific instantiations of distinctiveness striving, which supports the reliability and generalizability of the hypothesized link between self-guides and uniqueness striving (e.g., Epstein, 1980; see Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995). A limitation of this study, however, is that any number of third-variable confounds might account for the observed patterns (e.g., individualism/collectivism; Aaker & Lee, 2001). Because of this possibility, the findings of Study 1 are best viewed as a descriptive statement of how uniqueness needs and regulatory guides covary. To move to stronger causal statements about the relationship between self-guides and uniqueness needs, Studies 2–5 incorporated experimental methodology to test the hypothesized link between self-guide activation and distinctiveness striving.

**Study 2**

This study utilized a situational manipulation to test if state activation of self-guides would spillover and exert state influences on a self-report measure of distinctiveness striving.

**Participants**

A sample of 72 college students (69% female) participated in a brief experimental study embedded in a larger mass testing session.
Procedure and Design

Participants were randomly assigned to reflect on their ideal self-guides ($n = 24$) or ought self-guides ($n = 23$), or were assigned to a control condition ($n = 25$). After completing a set of questionnaires unrelated to the current study, all participants were given two thought-listing tasks. In the two experimental conditions, the thought-listing tasks were designed to increase the salience of ideal versus ought self-guides, following a procedure used in previous research (Freitas & Higgins, 2002; Higgins et al., 2001). Participants in the ideal self-guide condition were first asked to write about “something you ideally would like to do. In other words, think about a hope or aspiration that you currently have” and then about “a personal ideal you try to live up to in your day-to-day living.” Participants in the ought self-guide condition were asked to write about “something you think you ought to do. In other words, think about a duty or obligation that you currently have” and then about “a moral obligation you try to live up to in your day-to-day living.” Those in the control condition were asked to write about “a food that is part of your regular diet that you give little thought to one way or the other” and then about “a class you are taking this semester that is not your favorite class or your least favorite, but somewhere in the middle.” Immediately following the thought-listing tasks, participants completed a single-item question that assessed the need for uniqueness. This question was adapted from Snyder and Fromkin (1977) and worded “Being unique is ... important to me,” with responses ranging from 0 (not at all) to 9 (extremely) and midpoint anchors of 3 (slightly) and 6 (quite). The use of a single-item measure of uniqueness striving was necessary because Study 2 was presented as part of a larger mass-testing session.

Results

A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of experimental condition on the self-reported need for uniqueness, $F(2, 69) = 9.68, p < .001$. A Dunnett’s test of differences between the experimental conditions and the control condition revealed that those in the ought condition ($M = 5.35, SD = 1.95$) reported less interest in being unique than those in the control condition ($M = 6.44, SD = 1.33$), $p < .01$, whereas those in the ideal condition reported marginally more interest in being unique ($M = 7.42, SD = 1.53$) than those in the control condition, $p = .07$.

Discussion

Study 2 thus provided further support for the hypothesis that ideal self-guides codify desired ways of standing out from the crowd and ought self-guides codify desired ways of blending in with the crowd. Although a potential limitation of Study 2 was its use of only a single-item measure of uniqueness striving, the findings from this study converged with those obtained in Study 1, in which a broad range of measures tapping individual differences in uniqueness versus similarity striving was used. A greater limitation of the first two studies was, however, their reliance on self-report. Study 3 was designed to address this by presenting participants with a judgment task that could assess momentary interest in uniqueness. The study adapted procedures from research on optimal distinctiveness theory to examine individuals’ identification with minimal in-groups that varied in their ability to offer a distinctive identity (Brewer & Weber, 1994).
Study 3

Overview

Participants were exposed to a minimal group assignment, after which an ought or ideal self-guide was activated. They then were given base-rate information suggesting that their group was common or rare and asked to indicate the degree to which they identified with the group. Prior research suggests that there should be an overall tendency for participants to identify more strongly with in-groups that provide a distinct rather than a common basis of identity (Abrams, 1994; Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999; Mullen, 1991; Turnbull, Miller, & McFarland, 1990), particularly in a Western sample (Markus & Kitayama, 1998; Triandis, 1995). We predicted, however, that this documented tendency would be qualified by the effects of the self-guide manipulation, with an ideal focus amplifying the preference for a distinct in-group and an ought focus decreasing this tendency.

Participants

A sample of 100 college students (73% female) participated in an experimental study, with n = 25 randomly assigned to each of four experimental conditions.

Procedure

Participants were exposed to a minimal group manipulation (Tajfel, 1970) adapted from Jetten, Spears, and Manstead (1996; see also Badea, Jetten, Czukor, & Askevis-Leherpeux, 2010). Specifically, participants were given information suggesting that most people can be categorized as “detailed” or “global” perceivers. They were then asked to complete a “dot estimation” task in which they were presented with 10 slides filled with dots and asked to estimate the number of dots on each slide (with a response meter ranging from 20 to 120). The dot estimation task provided the ostensible basis for assessing whether participants were detailed or global perceivers. After completing the task, all participants were informed that they fit the profile of a detailed perceiver.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to focus on their ought self-guides, by performing a thought-listing task in which they described the important duties and obligations in their lives, or to focus on their ideal self-guides, by performing a thought-listing task in which they described their hopes and aspirations. This manipulation was similar to the manipulation of self-guide salience used in Study 2.

After being primed to focus on either ought or ideal self-guides, all participants were given base-rate information on the prevalence of detailed perceivers in the general population. That is, participants were randomly assigned to a common condition—in which they were informed that 85% of the population are detailed perceivers—or a rare condition—in which they were informed that only 15% of the general population are detailed perceivers. This was followed by a brief manipulation check to determine if participants remembered the base-rate feedback (all were within 10 percentage points).

Finally, participants were presented with a three-item scale that provided them with an opportunity to express identification with the in-group (e.g., I feel a strong bond with other detailed perceivers), measured on a scale that ranged from 0 (not at all) to 6 (extremely).

Results

A 2 (self-guide salience: ideal versus ought) × 2 (group distinctiveness: common versus rare) ANOVA was performed on the group identification measure. Consistent with prior
research, this revealed a large and statistically significant main effect of group distinctiveness, $F(1, 96) = 137.83, p < .001$, indicating that participants identified more strongly with fellow detailed perceivers when they believed this group was rare ($M = 4.65, SD = 1.24$) than when they believed the group was common ($M = 2.03, SD = 1.05$) (Figure 1). But, consistent with predictions, the main effect of group distinctiveness was also qualified by the hypothesized interaction with self-guide salience, $F(1, 96) = 7.93, p < .01$. For participants who believed that their group was rare, in-group identification was enhanced after reflection on ideal self-guides ($M = 4.99, SD = 0.72$) as compared to ought self-guides ($M = 4.31, SD = 1.54$), $F(1, 96) = 4.67, p = .03$. In contrast, for participants who believed their group was common, in-group identification was marginally significantly lower after reflection on ideal self-guides ($M = 1.75, SD = 1.10$) as compared to ought self-guides ($M = 2.32, SD = 0.93$), $F(1, 96) = 3.31, p = .07$.

**Discussion**

These results provide evidence for the proposed moderating role of self-guide salience on distinctiveness striving. A potential limitation of this study, however, was the marginal significance in the ought condition and the omission of a measure of uniqueness motivation needed to test if the observed shifts in group identification occurred as a result of state changes in distinctiveness striving. Study 4 sought to address this by providing a conceptual replication that also incorporated the self-reported uniqueness measure utilized in Study 2, to provide a direct test of the proposed mediational pathway.

**Study 4**

**Overview**

This study examined consumer preferences for rare versus distinct items following a self-guide prime. Research on the scarcity principle indicates that scarcity magnifies the
perception of good and bad qualities (Ditto & Jemmott, 1989). In the consumer domain, scarcity leads to a robust increase in the desirability of products (Parker & Lehmann, 2011; Verhallen & Robben, 1994). Despite the documented pull toward scarce consumer goods, we predicted that self-guides would moderate this main effect, increasing interest in rare products following activation of an ideal focus and diminishing interest in rare products following activation of an ought focus.

Participants

A sample of 53 college students (77% female) completed this study as part of a class demonstration.

Procedure

Participants were told that the goal of the research was to examine interest in different health-protective, health-promoting, and health-monitoring devices. Participants’ task was to examine 12 sets of three comparable health-related products (e.g., three electronic toothbrushes, three brands of nutrition bars, etc.). On each of the 12 trials, participants were first asked to imagine that they were interested in buying one of the three items either for themselves or for a friend (whichever they found easiest). Participants were then asked to rank order the three consumer items presented on each trial from highest to lowest in terms of desirability.

The presentation of the 12 trials was carried out in three phases. During the first phase, participants rank-ordered the first 9 of the 12 groups of three items. These trials served as a practice phase that introduced participants to the ranking procedure (to avoid later distraction following the experimental manipulation). Next, as part of what they believed was a separate study, participants underwent a priming manipulation designed to increase the salience of ideal or ought self-guides, following procedures similar to those used in Studies 2 and 3. Finally, participants returned to the consumer preferences task and were asked to rank-order three sets of items related to home health monitoring: a set of three home blood pressure monitors, a set of three blood cholesterol monitors, and a set of three heart-monitor sports watches. Each set included a single control item and then two experimental items. The two experimental items were counter-balanced within each presentation; for half of the participants, a given item was associated with the term “industry standard” and described as the “preferred,” “accepted,” or “most common” choice of consumers and for the other half, it was associated with the term “limited edition” and described as the choice of “discriminating,” “rare,” or “discerning” consumers. Following these three key sets of product rankings, participants completed a distractor set of self-esteem items that had a single item measuring the need for uniqueness embedded within (from Study 2).

Results

To test if the magnitude of preference for rare over common items would be moderated by self-guide salience, a 2 (self-guide) $\times$ 2 (distinctiveness) repeated measures ANOVA was performed on the ranking for items, with distinctiveness treated as a within-subject factor that compared the rankings for items that were rare versus common. Consistent with research on the scarcity principle, rare items were viewed as more desirable overall as evidenced by their higher rank ordering (rankings closer to the value of 1; $M = 1.70$, $SD = 0.58$) than common items ($M = 2.11$, $SD = 0.44$), $F(1, 51) = 9.43$, $p < .01$
As predicted, however, this main effect was qualified by the salient self-guide, $F(1, 51) = 5.19, p = .03$. The nature of this effect was that, for the rare items, rankings were lower after an ideal prime ($M = 1.55$, SD = 0.47) than after an ought prime ($M = 1.88$, SD = 0.66), $F(1, 51) = 4.31, p = .04$. In contrast, for the common items, rankings were lower after an ought prime ($M = 1.97$, SD = 0.46) than after an ideal prime ($M = 2.21$, SD = 0.39), $F(1, 51) = 4.02, p = .05$. Process analysis revealed that the prime also influenced distinctiveness striving, $t(51) = 2.10, p = .04$, with distinctiveness valued more following priming of ideals ($M = 5.62$, SD = 2.15) than priming of oughts ($M = 4.12$, SD = 3.03). When this effect on self-rated distinctiveness was included as a covariate in the above analyses, self-guide no longer moderated the effect of distinctiveness on rankings, $F < 1$, nor did self-guide influence ratings of the rare or common items in isolation, $Fs < 1$.

Discussion

Results provided evidence that self-guides can moderate consumers’ preference for scarce products, and that this moderating effect was mediated by state changes in distinctiveness striving. This latter finding suggests that the effects of self-guide salience on consumer preferences were motivational in nature, reflecting state changes in distinctiveness striving. However, self-reported differences in both the dependent variable and mediator might have been driven by the differences in a non-motivated factor that influences self-report—such as construct accessibility. To further flesh out the psychological dynamics underlying regulatory effects on preferences, Study 5 was designed to examine the influence of ideal and ought self-guides on a more dynamic marker of motivational shifts, emotion (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Higgins, 1987; cf. Baumeister, Masicampo, & Vohs, 2011).

Study 5

Procedures for this study were adapted from Snyder and Fromkin’s (1980) personality-feedback method. Participants first completed a bogus personality test and were then
exposed to a prime of their ideal or ought self-guides. They next received bogus feedback indicating that their personality was exceptionally common or rare. The primary hypothesis was that participants would experience more negative emotion when told that they had a common personality after focusing on ideals and when told that they had a rare personality after focusing on oughts.

Participants
A sample of 128 college students (64% female) participated in this study for course credit. Three participants were eliminated from the sample because they scored 3 standard deviations beyond the mean on either or both of the negative and positive affect scales.

Procedure
All participants began by taking a bogus personality test that was comprised of questions drawn from widely used personality inventories (e.g., Myers-Briggs, self-monitoring, impulsivity, self-esteem, Big 5). They were next informed that the computer would provide feedback “if possible and feasible” when they finished. Prior to receiving any personality feedback, however, participants were asked to participate in a brief thought-listing task. At this point, they were randomly assigned to write about an ideal attribute they possessed and an action they had pursued recently to try to live up to the ideal, or to write about an attribute they possessed that revealed their sense of responsibility or obligation and an action they had pursued recently to try to live up to the obligation. This manipulation was similar to that used in Studies 2–4.

After completing the thought-listing task, all participants were told that the computer was not able to provide them with details on their personality profile. Half were randomly assigned to learn that this shortcoming was because their personality score was “too common” to provide informative feedback and half were told that their personality score was “too rare” to provide informative feedback. All participants were then asked to rate their emotional reaction to being in the group that could not receive feedback. They completed a four-item scale of negative affect (angry, upset, sad, and irritated; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .70$) and a three-item scale of positive affect (hopeful, excited, and happy; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .79$), rating each item on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 6 (extremely). Using the same response scale, participants were also asked to report the degree to which they thought the personality test (1) was “good” and “bad” (after reverse-coding, $r(120) = .86$, $p < .01$) and (2) was designed to provide feedback that was “accurate” and “valid for someone like you” ($r(120) = .44$, $p < .01$).

Results
Analyses revealed that positive and negative reactions to the test were positively correlated, $r(123) = .21$, $p = .02$, suggesting that feedback was not received as universally positive or negative but as mixed. These two indices also were distinct enough from one another that it was meaningful to treat each as separate criteria for evaluating the influence of the feedback. A 2 (self-guide) $\times$ 2 (distinctiveness) ANOVA on ratings of positive reactions found no main or interactive effects of the two manipulations, $ps > .20$. This is not surprising, in that the lack of feedback gave participants no strong basis for feeling good about oneself. However, effects were observed for negative reactions, with the emergence of a significant interaction between salient self-guide and distinctiveness, $F(1, 121) = 8.17$, $p < .01$ (Figure 3). Simple main effects analyses revealed that for
participants who had been focused on ought self-guides, negative reactions were stronger when they were told that their personality was too distinct for feedback ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.52$) than when they were told that it was too common ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.21$), $F(1, 121) = 4.61$, $p = .03$. In contrast, for participants who had been focused on ideal self-guides, negative reactions were marginally stronger when they were told that their personality was too common for feedback ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.28$) than when they were told that it was too rare ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.27$), $F(1, 121) = 3.56$, $p = .06$.

Discussion

These findings suggest that participants least liked receiving distinctiveness feedback that ran counter to the salient self-guide. It stands to reason that participants might also reject the validity of the test or the validity of their specific feedback under these same circumstances. Interestingly, however, there were no significant main or interactive effects of the experimental manipulations on these ratings (nor did the statistical significance of these manipulations on negative affect differ when these influences were entered as covariates, all $ps > .20$). This seems to suggest that participants were mostly accepting of the personality test and, possibly for this reason, the negative reactions they reported might reflect genuine disappointment when the distinctiveness feedback ran contrary to their salient self-guide.

General Discussion

The present research complements existing work on known cultural, dispositional, and situational factors that influence distinctiveness striving by suggesting that people want to stand out more when thinking about their aspirations and idealized pursuits and want to blend in more when thinking about their duties and responsibilities. Studies 1 and 2 supported the hypothesized links between ideal self-guides and uniqueness striving and between ought self-guides and conformity orientation. The studies that followed established that shifts in distinctiveness striving can be triggered by self-guide salience to influence a range of diverse outcomes, including group identification (Study 3), consumer choices (Study 4), and affective reactions (Study 5).
Theoretical Implications

These findings support a central tenant in deviance regulation theory, that ideal self-guides codify desired ways of distinguishing the self from others and ought self-guides codify undesired ways of distinguishing the self from others (Blanton & Christie, 2003). They also introduce new perspectives on other existing theories of distinctiveness striving, particularly theories that highlight ways that similarity and uniqueness motives can work in opposition to one another (e.g., Lemaire, 1974; Maslach, 1974; Ziller, 1964). According to uniqueness theory (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977), for instance, people seek to maintain a balance between extreme self-other similarity and extreme self-other dissimilarity. That is, the theory predicts that “an intermediate degree of similarity is preferable to either very slight or extremely high similarity” (Snyder & Endelman, 1979, p. 474). Another equilibrium-based theory, optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), posits a “fundamental tension between human needs for validation and similarity to others (on the one hand) and a countervailing need for uniqueness and individuation (on the other)” (p. 477). Both uniqueness theory and optimal distinctiveness theory further maintain that disruptions to the desired balance between self-other similarity and self-other differentiation produce compensatory shifts, either in behavioral decisions (Fromkin, 1970) or level of identification (Brewer, 1991).

The current studies focus attention on the drivers of distinctiveness striving that are not in tension with one another. Ideal and ought self-guides are activated in different social contexts and serve different purposes. In fact, they have a degree of compatibility, in that each provides an individual with strategies to pursue desirable personal and public identities. It is just that “desirable” takes different forms and serves different functions when it is evaluated relative to these different self-guides: as the presence of positive distinctions in the case of ideals and the absence of negative distinctions in the case of oughts. Importantly, however, these two pursuits can be compartmentalized within given social or decision contexts, such that an individual who is in a conforming mindset while pursuing personal obligations can shift to greater uniqueness striving when pursuing ideals.4

Despite the lack of an assumed conflict between distinctiveness and conformity striving, the deviance regulation framework is nonetheless compatible with other approaches that focus on the need to balance these two motives. The key difference between a self-guide effect on distinctiveness striving compared to conflict or equilibrium-based approaches is the level of analysis. A self-guide framework focuses on the distinctiveness motives that are activated in a given social context, when actors are preoccupied with a single, isolated goal associated with an activated self-guide (e.g., “what should I do to achieve this ideal?” or “how do I avoid falling short of my obligations?”). In contrast, conflict and equilibrium-based models focus on distinctiveness motives when individuals are preoccupied with evaluating their global identity (e.g., “Am I different enough to be interesting to others but similar enough to be accepted by them?”). So, the two theories are focused on different concerns. This is not to say, however, that actions oriented toward concern at one level will not have implications for concerns at another. For instance, a woman strongly driven by her ideals might at some point step back and wonder if her accomplishments have resulted in estrangement from others, and a man strongly obligated by rules and responsibilities might at some point question if others appreciate his unique qualities. As these examples highlight, although deviance regulation theory suggests ways that distinctiveness motives can be compartmentalized around self-guides that are dominant in any given moment, long-term and single-minded pursuit of one or the other self-guide might result in broader feelings of identity imbalance. When such a
dynamic occurs, equilibrium-based models should provide greater predictive utility than deviance regulation theory.

An Inclusion Model of Distinctiveness Striving?

A more critical point of contrast between a self-guide treatment of distinctiveness striving and other treatments is in the posited relation between distinctiveness striving and belonging. A number of analyses of the distinctiveness motive portray the desire for uniqueness as working at odds with the motive to feel socially connected. For instance, Brewer’s optimal distinctiveness model pairs the conformity motive (“assimilation” in her model) with not just a desire to minimize self-other distinction, but also with the need for “inclusion” and “belonging.” One can interpret this model as suggesting that the downside to pursuing a distinct personal identity is that an actor might experience weaker social bonds. A similar interpretation can follow from cross-cultural analyses in which communal goals are often portrayed as at odds with agentic goals (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1998; Triandis, 1995). As one example of this interpretation in action, Tafarodi and Swann (1996) posited a “cultural trade-off” in which some (typically Eastern) cultures promote self-liking (developed through conformity to the wishes of others) and other (typically Western) cultures promote self-competence (developed by the pursuit of individualistic identity and the shunning of conformity; see pp. 654 and 655).

Deviance regulation theory proposes no such conflict between the desires for inclusion and distinction, because both ideal and ought self-guides play an integral role in psychological development (Higgins, Loeb, & Moretti, 1995) and build a foundation for social connections that provide a stable basis for self-esteem (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). By extension, the theory suggests that both conformity and distinctiveness striving can promote social standing and thereby further interpersonal ties (see also Hornsey & Jetten, 2004, for a discussion of the balancing of assimilation and distinctiveness motives via social identity). In the domain of duties and obligations, for instance, efforts to minimize negative self-other distinctions can prevent the criticism and social ostracism that can result from perceived social or moral transgressions. In the domain of ideals, efforts to pursue positive self-other distinctions can produce the praise and admiration from others that can result from noteworthy successes and achievements. In fact, the increased social standing associated with uncommon successes may be one impetus for adopting an ideal (e.g., Ditto & Griffin, 1993). From a deviance regulation perspective, both conformity and uniqueness striving can serve the goal of inclusion.

Applications

These studies also suggest some potentially useful field applications. Consider social marketing attempts to promote healthier decisions, a domain examined in Study 4. When individuals make decisions related to their personal health, they often can construe their choices either in terms of felt obligations or hoped for ideals. How a specific health decision is presented to an individual might, therefore, have important ramifications for how communicators seek to influence subsequent health decisions. When an actor is encouraged to think of health decisions in terms of health obligations, the current findings suggest that communicators should draw attention to the importance of avoiding unhealthy deviations from the norm. In contrast, when health decisions are construed in terms of healthful ideals, the results instead argue for drawing attention to healthy deviations. (See Lee & Aaker, 2004; Uskul, Sherman, & Fitzgibbon, 2009, for relevant approaches.) More generally, communicators will have greater success promoting conformity when targets
construe their choices in terms of felt obligations, but will have greater success promoting uniqueness or anti-conformity when targets instead construe choices in terms of their ideals.

Conclusion

Similarity and distinctiveness motives have been shown to influence a wide range of behaviors, with cultural, dispositional, and situational factors often shaping the extent to which people strive to be similar to or distinct from others. Building on the frameworks of self-discrepancy, regulatory focus, and deviation regulation theories, the present research investigated whether concern for self-other distinction is also influenced by the self-guides that are activated in specific behavioral domains. Taken together, five studies provided evidence for a motivational link between the desire for self-other differentiation and the pursuit of ideal self-guides, and between the desire for self-other similarity and the pursuit of ought self-guides. That is, state and trait differences in ideal versus ought self-guide salience corresponded with respective shifts in distinctiveness versus similarity striving. The findings reveal that the behavioral contexts and the salient self-standards that guide behavior in specific domains may complement and potentially interact with cultural and dispositional influences on the desire for self-other distinction.

Notes

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1. Interestingly, this constraint offers further support for the proposed framework, as Eastern and Western differences in interdependence have been linked to differences in promotion and prevention focus (Aaker & Lee, 2001; see also Blanton & Christie, 2003).
2. Given the lack of independence between rank ordering of rare versus common objects (and empirical dependence of \( r = -.64 \)), one might instead focus only on the influence of the between-subjects factor, self-guide, on the difference score. All results reported here are supported when pursuing this method. We prefer the use of a mixed ANOVA as it allows us to separately examine influences on the rare and common objects, despite the dependence.
3. An alternative analytic method would be to regress the difference in rare versus common ratings on self-guide focus and test for mediation by distinctiveness. When this was done, a self-guide effect exerted a significant influence on the difference score, \( B = 0.56, t(51) = 2.27, p = .03 \), which a Sobel test confirmed was fully mediated by the effect of self-guide on distinctiveness striving.
4. Further, Brendl, Higgins, and Lemm (1995) find evidence that an ideal self-focus and an ought self-focus might in some ways inhibit one another, suggesting that when one mode is activated in a given context, the potentially contradictory tendencies of the other might be diminished.

References


