



DERLEME

REVIEW

## Fear of Self with Definition, Causes and Effects\*

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\*The first version of this study was presented as an oral presentation at the 23rd International Psychological Counseling and Guidance Congress held at Istanbul Kültür University on 13-15 June 2022.

### Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explain the concept of fear of self, one of the new concepts studied, and to express its causes and consequences. In line with the stated purpose of this study, which was prepared as a compilation, first of all, general information about the concept of fear of self was given, then the causes of fear of self and its effects were discussed with national and international studies. Self-contradiction theory is at the root of fear of self, and according to this, the conflicts that may occur between the real self and the ideal self-cause the individual to move away from the person they want to be and may cause fear with the thought of “What if I become someone I don’t want to be.” Studies have revealed that fear of self is associated with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) symptoms and associated thought-action confusion, internal negative attributions, and inferential confusion. There are also studies that detect the relationship between eating disorders and fear of self apart from OCD. It is seen that there is a limited number of studies on the fear of self, which basically arises from the thought that the individual will turn into the person they do not want to be. The concept of fear of self, which has been found to be associated with OCD and eating disorders, needs to be visible for more studies on the fear of self to be conducted. In this context, suggestions were made to the researchers.

**Keywords:** Self, Fear of Self, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Eating Disorder

### Tanımı, Nedenleri ve Etkileri ile Benlik Korkusu

#### Öz

Çalışılan yeni kavramlar arasında yer alan benlik korkusu kavramının açıklanması, nedenleri ve sonuçlarının ifade edilmesi bu araştırmanın amacını oluşturmaktadır. Derleme olarak hazırlanan bu çalışmada belirtilen amaç doğrultusunda, öncelikle benlik korkusu kavramı hakkında genel bilgiler verilmiş, ardından benlik korkusunun temelinde ne olduğu ve etkileri ulusal ve uluslararası çalışmalarla tartışılmıştır. Benlik korkusunun temelinde benlik çelişkisi teorisi yer almaktadır ve buna göre gerçek benlik ve ideal benlik arasında yaşanabilecek çatışmalar bireyin olmak istediği kişiden uzaklaşmasına ve “Ya olmak istemediğim biri olursam.” düşüncesiyle korkmasına sebep olabilmektedir. Yapılan çalışmalar benlik korkusunun obsesif-kompulsif bozukluk (OKB) belirtileri ve onunla bağlantılı düşünce-eylem karmaşası, içsel negatif atıflar ve çıkarımsal karmaşa ile ilişkili olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Ayrıca OKB dışında yeme bozuklukları ile benlik korkusu arasındaki ilişkiyi tespit eden çalışmalar da bulunmaktadır. Temelde bireyin olmak istemediği kişiye dönüşeceği düşüncesinden ortaya çıkan benlik korkusu ile yapılan çalışmaların sınırlı sayıda olduğu görülmektedir. Mevcut çalışmalar arasında OKB ve yeme bozuklukları ile bağlantılı olduğu tespit edilen benlik korkusuna dair daha fazla çalışma yapılması, kavramın görünür olmasından geçmektedir. Bu çerçevede araştırmacılara önerilerde bulunulmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Benlik, Benlik Korkusu, Obsesif Kompulsif Bozukluk, Yeme Bozukluğu

**Received:** 11.11.2022; **Revised:** 21.07.2023; **Accepted:** 04.08.2023; **Publication:** 31.12.2023

**Citation:** Yücel, S. (2023). Fear of self with definition, causes and effects. *Current Research and Reviews in Psychology and Psychiatry*, 3(2), 59-66.



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## Introduction

Human beings have the ability to think, the capacity to realize their consciousness, and can express themselves as 'I'. The process of formation of the self begins with the awareness of the being (Levinas, 2002). While this emerging self sometimes represents the real state of being, it can sometimes be the state we are alienated from.

"I have a crab in me. He must live in the most secluded hole in me; I guess he watches everything I go through. However, I feel its presence occasionally – it only shows itself once in a while. But I know: it's always there..." Considering the crab mentioned by Aruoba (2018), the "crab" that we know to be there from time to time, which we know to be there, and which we sometimes say, "what if it's actually me," can frighten us. It can cause us to become anxious or directly frighten us.

At this point, the individual's "Who am I?" question is critical. Answers given to this question reveal what the concept of self is filled with. These answers can be quite diverse, they can be gathered around a single theme, or they may have characteristics that do not change over time, while in some cases they do change.

According to James (1963), who was one of the first to do research on the self, the self consists of two dimensions and which statements that indicate what the individual is. One of the two dimensions mentioned by James is the knowing self (I), and the other is known self (me). While expressing me the individual benefits from both their observations and evaluations and the opinions of others about themselves. One of the conclusions that can be drawn from this is that the self is not only a design created by the individuals themselves, but also that meaningful and important others affect the formation of the individual's self.

When the studies on the self are examined, the concept of fear of self emerges as a new concept. It is noticeable that there is a limited

number of studies on fear of self, especially in the national literature. However, while studying the concept, it has been learned that fear of self is associated with psychological disorders and difficulties, especially obsessive-compulsive disorder and eating disorders.

In this context, the aim of this compilation study is to explain the concept of fear of self. Such a study is necessary to determine what the existing research (literature) shows about the fear of self and will be useful for future studies to examine its relationship with various other variables. At the same time, it is aimed to make a comprehensive evaluation by including the theoretical basis of the concept, the psychological disorders it is related to, measures, and the results of the relevant research.

## 1. Fear of Self

Although it is difficult to define, the self can be expressed as a dynamic process that can change/transform due to interaction with the immediate environment and social life of the individual (Banaji & Prentice, 1994). The two-dimensional relational self-change model can be considered as a reflection of this quality of the self and it found a place in today's research. According to this, the self can expand (add positive qualities to the self), narrow down (positive features in the self may decrease), prune (negative characteristics in the self may decrease) and/or can be contaminated (negative features can be added to the self) (Mattingly et al., 2014). This process of change can result from both relationships and our partners in relationships and our individuality (Mattingly & Levandowski, 2013; Mattingly et al., 2014).

In the process of constructing and defining the self, occasionally, the individual's feelings, thoughts, and observations about themselves may not be compatible with those coming from the environment, and conflicts may arise. These conflicts are the factors that may cause erroneous definitions of the self and a decrease in the value

that the individual attaches to his/her self (Cüceloğlu, 1997). One of the problems related to the self is the fear of self. Fear of self is an individual's fear of being, having a thought that he will turn into the person he does not want, and the fear of this thought (Aardema & O'Connor, 2003).

## 2. Basics of the Concept

Because of the concept of fear of self, the triple model created by Higgins (1989) and the self-discrepancy theory were utilized (as cited in Melli et al., 2016). In the model, it is seen that the self is handled in three categories as real, desired and ideal self. All of the positive and negative features of the individual are stated as "real self", the features expected from him by others as "desired self" and being himself, and the self that he wants to achieve as "ideal self". According to Higgins (1989), if there are inconsistencies between the states of the self-divided into these three groups, negative experiences and emotions may arise.

Kierkegaard states that the individual who dreams of and desires getting rid of his/her self and experiences despair when he/she cannot be the person he/she wants to be. According to Higgins' model, conflicts that may occur between the real and ideal self can cause the individual to move away from the person they want to be and cause fear with the thought of "What if I remain as someone I don't want to be".

A research conducted by Oyserman and Markus (1990) in light of the relevant model showed that most of the participants in the research are worried that they will not be able to achieve the harmony between the selves they want to be and the selves they fear to be. Fearing self, the individual's being in constant doubt about his self and the thought that he will turn into the person he does not want to can cause anxiety (Akin et al., 2016). Supporting the results of Oyserman and Markus (1990), when individuals with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) symptoms are compared with individuals suffering from other anxiety disorders, it has been found that

individuals with OCD believe compelling thoughts that they do not accept, show the dark, dangerous side of the self (Nikodijevic et al., 2015).

## 3. OCD and Fear of Self

Ego-dystonic (alien to the self, unwanted type) thoughts are included in the fear of the self. In this direction, researchers reveal that fear of self may be associated with OCD symptoms (Aardema et al., 2013). Obsessions, i.e., repetitive, stereotyped, and persistent impulses and thoughts that cause anxiety in the individual, lead to discomfort to the individual and/or are experienced as ego-dystonic (Bokor & Anderson, 2014; Pittenger & Bloch, 2014). Compulsions that may be of cleanliness, order, symmetry, aggression, sexuality and religious content, are also used to eliminate or prevent obsessions and the anxiety associated with them. Actions such as cleaning, checking, counting, or repeating are among the compulsions (Nabil et al, 2016).

According to studies, the concepts of thought-action confusion and inferential complexity are related to fear of self, and according to the inferential complexity model in OCD, the individual may have obsessions that he cannot accept as a result of confusing his imagined self with his/her real self (Aardema & O'Connor, 2007). Inferential confusion, which progresses in a dual process, includes actions of over-investing in the possibilities that are not yet close with their senses or lack of self-confidence (O'Connor & Aardema, 2011). The individual who experiences this is suspicious and thinks that the sample is not clear. Then, the individual continues to make inferences with reasoning even though this doubt is disturbing (O'Connor & Aardema, 2011).

As a result of the inferential confusion, he may start to swear at religion, and his thoughts about sexuality may change in the direction he does not want. An individual who experiences fear of self may also think of himself/herself as a dangerous person, like someone who experiences inferential confusion, and may be worried about the

unwanted features that may appear in himself (Aardema et al., 2013). For example, in a study by Aardema et al. (2013), a mother reported, “I want to be a good mother. But what if I’m a bad mother? If I’m a really bad mother, I might hurt my baby. I thought I could hurt her, I’m a terrible person and I could hurt my baby.” ... “I am thinking of harming my baby again. I rethought this.” She may have such thoughts and may create negative internal attributions towards herself, her thoughts cause confusion (Aardema et al., 2013). Individuals who are afraid of becoming the person they would rather not be may go extreme with their behavior. For example, those who have an obsession to harm, behave kindlier, or individuals with religious obsessions are more faithful and more attached to religion (Freeston & Ladouceur, 2004).

In the emergence of fear of self, it has been found that the individual is affected not only by his obsessions, but also by his perceptions of himself/herself, although they do not have any evidence (O’Connor et al., 2005). The individual may believe that he has “bad” features that he does not know yet, that he is not aware of, and that has not yet emerged.

In an individual with fear of self, a situation called thought-action fusion may occur, in which the difference between what he thinks and putting what he/she thinks into action is confused. Accordingly, a single thought that passes through an individual’s mind is strong enough to make him/her a bad person.

Researchers think that fear of self is related to internal negative attributions in OCD and that fear of self is a predisposing factor in the emergence of OCD in the individual (Melli et al., 2016). A detailed explanation of the concept of fear of self was also made with the cognitive behavioral model of OCD. Undesirable thoughts are present in everyone, but depending on how negative, risky and dangerous the individual finds these thoughts to be and how he interprets them, it turns into a disorder (Doron et al., 2007). It is suggested

that these unwanted thoughts are related to whether they pose a threat to the core self-perception of the individual (Bhar & Kyrios, 2007; Clark & Purdon, 1993; Rowa et al., 2005). If the individual’s self-perception and the unwanted thought are entirely different from each other, it is highly likely that the individual will interpret this situation as more dangerous (Bhar & Kyrios, 2007; Clark, 2004).

In their study on individuals diagnosed with OCD, Aardema et al. (2013) concluded that the fear of being an immoral, dangerous and bad person is predominant. Individuals mostly feel fear because they consider themselves to be someone with negative characteristics and if they are not cautious, these characteristics may have devastating consequences, and they may turn into a person (Nikodijevic, 2015; Rachman, 1997).

#### **4. Eating Disorders and Fear of Self**

Eating behaviors, which are among the important behaviors to meet physiological and psychological needs, can be divided as healthy and impaired. As a result of experiencing stress, a physical or mental problem, and desires to look thin, the eating pattern and actions of the individual may be disrupted (Gitimu et al., 2016). Actions such as overeating or restricting food can be given as examples. Disrupted eating behaviors can lead to eating disorders when psychopathological conditions occur, that is, diseases that can result in death if the appropriate diagnosis and treatment are not given. Studies show that low self-esteem, need for approval and control, depression and anxiety disorders, body image disorders, obsessions, and perfectionism are significant risk factors for eating disorders (Ambrose & Deisler, 2014). Due to unrealistic and repetitive thoughts about the body, strict diet practices, continuous weight loss, and considering these actions as a way to cope with difficult emotions are encountered (Ambrose & Deisler, 2015).

Purcell-Lalonde et al. (2015) studied the relationship between the individual’s obsessions,

fear of self, and eating disorders in clinical and non-clinical samples. They concluded that the ego-dystonic thoughts and fear of self-levels of those with eating disorders are higher and related. In another study conducted with individuals diagnosed with bulimia nervosa, one of the eating disorders, it was found that individuals with the aforementioned diagnosis had a high level of fear of self (Wilson et al., 2017).

### 5. Measuring Fear of Self

Developing the Fear of Self Questionnaire while conducting OCD studies, Aardema et al. (2013) initially tested the 20-item scale in a non-clinical sample and found that it had a good fit. However, the scale, which was later reduced to 8 items for practical reasons, was rearranged as a short form, and it was concluded that the level of correlation with the 20-item form was high (Aardema et al., 2013). Items such as “I often question my own mental health” or “I must be very careful not to do anything terrible” were used in the scale, and a 6-point rating was included. The lowest score that can be obtained for the short form is 8, and the highest score is 48. According to the confirmatory factor analysis applied for the construct validity of the original form of the scale, it was observed that it had good fit in one dimension ( $\chi^2=35.995$ ,  $df=19$ ,  $CFI=.986$ ,  $RMSEA=.055$ ,  $SRMR=.028$ ). In the concordance validity study, positive correlations were found between fear of self and experiences in close relationships ( $r=-.43$ ), depression ( $r=.63$ ), anxiety ( $r=.58$ ), and stress ( $r=.50$ ). The Cronbach alpha internal consistency reliability coefficient is .96.

There are two studies in the adaptation of the scale to Turkish culture. First study by Akin et al. (2016) analyzed the data collected from teachers, and according to the results of the confirmatory factor analysis, it was stated that the one-dimensional scale fitted perfectly, and the internal consistency coefficient was .82 ( $\chi^2= 43.82$ ,  $df= 19$ ,  $RMSEA=.081$ ,  $CFI=.95$ ,  $IFI=.95$ ,  $NFI=.91$ ,  $SRMR=.049$ ,  $GFI=.95$ ). Devrim-Ader (2019) adapted the scale again within the thesis study to

perform more comprehensive analyses of the adapted scale. In this study, in which factor analysis was not performed, the value obtained in halving was .78, and the internal consistency coefficient was .85. Adaptation studies were also performed in non-clinical samples as in the original form.

### 6. Results

Since the concept of fear of self is a relatively new concept, research on the subject is limited. However, it is believed that including some of the domestic and international studies on the concept will be a guide for future research.

In a study conducted with a non-clinical study group, it was determined that fear of self and OCD symptoms together have the power to predict the fear of contamination (Nikodijevic et al., 2015).

Evliyaoglu (2019) had similar variables in her thesis study conducted in Türkiye, and examined the relationships between the concepts of mental contamination and fear of self-associated with OCD. She found that individuals with high levels of fear of self-felt mental contamination and internal and external negative emotions after a kissing scenario that was beyond their control. Additionally, she showed that an increase in the desire to wash/clean can be considered consistent with the definition of fear of self. As the level of individuals' fear of revealing the dark sides of their selves increases and as events go beyond their control, there is an increase in the felt mental pollution, internal negative emotions, external negative emotions, and the desire to wash/clean (Evliyaoglu, 2019).

In Melli et al. (2016) study, it was concluded that fear of self predicts unwanted thoughts in OCD when compared to negative mood.

It has also been observed that there are significant relationships between fear of self, unacceptable thoughts, harm and sexual thoughts (Devrim-Ader, 2019). Especially, if the individual has thoughts that can be classified as ‘bad’, they may

be afraid of their actions. In the literature, there are similar results including both the mentioned variables and symmetry (Aardema & O'Connor, 2007; Aardema et al., 2013; Melli et al., 2015).

In the study of Jaeger et al. (2015), it was found that fear of self-increases the level of suspicion in OCD-related situations and conditions. OCD and fear of self are among popular research lines, specifically abroad. Similarly, in a study involving 93 participants in a clinical sample, it was found that the relationship between fear of self and OCD was strong (Aardema et al, 2019).

Apart from OCD and eating disorders, a study on the relationship between fear of self and attachment styles showed that individuals with high fear of self-had higher attachment anxiety (Doron, 2020).

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this study is to share the current results in the literature on defining, identifying and explaining the related variables of fear of self, which is a new concept understudied in the national literature. When the studies on fear of self were examined, it was seen that they were mostly conducted on OCD and its related variables. Fear of self significantly predicted other cognitions suggested to be involved in OC symptoms - such as threat, perfectionism, and the importance of thoughts (Aardema et al. 2013). Individuals who are afraid of behaving morally inappropriately, being considered guilty or being labeled insane should pay attention to the distorted perspectives that support these thoughts. (Clark, 2004; Purdon & Clark, 1999). This explanation comes as no surprise that fear of self is linked to OCD.

In a study, it is stated that 14%-56% of individuals diagnosed with OCD seek treatment and diagnosis and treatment can be delayed for 8-10 years (Richter & Ramos, 2018). This situation creates a problem in terms of both individual and social mental health. The fact that eating disorders and fear of self, which is another field of study, are also related, shows

how important and remarkable are the interventions appropriate to the thought processes of individuals. Considering the basic philosophy of Cognitive Behavioral Therapies (CBT), one of the evidence-based psychotherapy methods today, CBT can be useful in culturally sensitive individual and group intervention studies to reduce fear of self.

In addition, it is critical to be aware of the following information in future studies: the transformation of thoughts into obsessions and the level of fear of self before obsessions may be related to whether the individual has a previous fear of self.

It has been determined that more research on the concept is needed. It is essential to seek answers to the questions of whether there are other factors related to fear of self, or what else mental health specialists can do in the prevention of fear of self. Furthermore, it continues to be unclear for what reason individuals initially experience fear of self. In addition to the limited number of studies, most of which were conducted abroad, more action-oriented and useful information about fear of self can be accessed by conducting studies in different patterns appropriate to the culture.

**Author Contribution:** All contributions were made by the author herself, as it is a single-author study.

**Source(s) of Support:** The author did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

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