

Self-Concept Clarity

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Editors

Self-Concept Clarity

Perspectives on Assessment, Research,
and Applications

 Springer

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Foreword

It is with great pleasure and gratitude that I write a foreword to this volume summarizing recent research and theory regarding self-concept clarity. The self-concept clarity construct evolved from earlier studies I conducted that focused on self-esteem differences in how individuals responded to self-relevant feedback, both real and imaginary and social and nonsocial. In pursuing this line of research, I engaged in many debriefing sessions during which I explained to research participants that the feedback they had received was false and that they had been randomly assigned to feedback conditions. I then inquired about their reactions to the feedback. Let me describe one of those studies and its results before noting the observations I made in these debriefing sessions.

In Campbell and Fairey (1985), we showed anagrams to low self-esteem (LSE) and high self-esteem (HSE) participants and informed them that they would soon be taking a timed anagram test. We then said that although we had no idea of how well they would perform on this test, we would like them first to write an explanation for a hypothetical success or failure on the test (in a control condition, they wrote no explanation). Following this, they either stated or did not state their performance expectancies, and then all participants took the same anagram test with performance on that test constituting the primary dependent measure.

Compared to the no-explanation condition, both LSE and HSE participants performed better in the success-explanation condition, but only LSE participants performed worse in the failure-explanation condition (this result was more pronounced when expectancies were stated). In other words, the performance of HSE participants was only affected by “feedback” that was consistent with their positive self-views (success explanation), whereas the performance of LSE participants was affected by both types of feedback. It was also the case that a content analysis of the explanations yielded a robust self-serving bias among HSE participants; they included a much higher proportion of characterological reasons for a hypothetical success than a hypothetical failure. LSE participants were relatively even-handed in their explanations, providing a similar proportion of characterological reasons for succeeding and failing.

I cite this particular study because I found it remarkable that we had not given participants any actual feedback; we only asked them to consider the possibility of receiving such feedback. But in other studies where actual feedback was delivered, the pattern of results was similar. HSE participants were robustly resistant and indeed often completely unaffected by feedback that was inconsistent with their self-concepts. LSE participants were influenced by whatever feedback they were given. The results suggested to me that LSE people were generally more susceptible to external feedback. That, in turn, led me to suspect that perhaps their self-concepts were not just more negative in terms of evaluation but were also more uncertain and confused. In other words, perhaps their self-concepts lacked clarity. This impression was solidified in the debriefing sessions. LSE participants often expressed confusion and self-doubts about who and what they were. And some even referenced the idea that they were dependent on environmental cues for self-definition. For example, I asked one LSE participant if she was extraverted. To paraphrase her response, she said she thought she was extraverted because nearly all of her friends said she was. But then, her mom had said she was kind of shy, so she wasn't really sure.

Thus, I initially explored the idea of self-concept clarity and its relation to self-esteem because it provided a more cogent explanation for some findings in the self-esteem literature than did the self-esteem trait itself. That is, a simple consistency explanation using self-esteem could not account for the fact that LSE people appeared to be generally susceptible to environmental cues, both positive and negative. And similar to the construct of self-esteem, I conceptualized clarity as a relatively stable personality variable trait and speculated that self-esteem and self-concept clarity were probably confounded and causally related to one another in a reciprocal manner.

I retired from the University of British Columbia in 2003 and moved to Florida. About 6 months into an unsuccessful quest to decide what I wanted to do in the role of "retired" person, I abandoned the role altogether and took a full-time administrative position at what is now Palm Beach State College. My position was not an academic one but I immersed myself in the new role, leaving behind my academic interests. In 2015, I retired again having enjoyed a challenging and rewarding second career at the College. A few months after my retirement, I received an email from Jennifer Lodi-Smith, the coeditor of this volume, introducing herself and inquiring as to whether I would be interested in contributing to this book. I have to admit I was stunned. When I said that I left my academic interests behind, I really do mean behind. I had no idea that the clarity construct had continued to be an active research area. When Jennifer began to send me references and articles and then finally draft chapters of this volume, I was even more stunned. What a lovely post-retirement gift!

The chapters in this volume demonstrate the remarkable strides that have been taken in the 25 years or so since the construct was introduced. Without commenting on specific chapters, the new directions in the field have greatly enhanced the depth and the breadth of the self-concept clarity construct. For example, the conceptual boundaries of the construct have been more clearly delineated by research addressing measurement of the construct, its distinction from self-esteem, and its location

within personality theory in general and identity theory in particular. The authors explicate the usefulness of clarity not only as a trait but as a state, as a characteristic adaptation and highlight its utility within the context of narrative identity, where personal narrative can serve both as a measure of and a consequence of clarity. The volume also addresses applications of the construct to issues of well-being, motivation, workplace behavior, body image, and eating disorders and psychopathology. Of particular surprise to me in terms of application was the research demonstrating a connection between self-concept clarity and schizophrenia, both in terms of the positive symptoms such as delusions and the negative symptoms such as a lack of emotion.

In addition to the chapters focusing on conceptual boundaries and application, there are chapters concerned with the development of self-concept clarity. Here the sources of both state and trait self-concept clarity are carefully examined within the context of three types of antecedents – self-verification, anxiety, and uncertainty. There is also a consideration of how clarity both changes and remains stable over the lifespan, indicating that while there is substantial rank-order stability across time, there are changes in the mean levels of clarity, coupled with individual variability in how clarity develops and changes. Social role transitions are potent in eliciting changes in clarity, with the loss of important social roles, such as the end of a romantic relationship, being an especially important factor. Finally, there is an extension of self-concept clarity beyond the level of the individual to the notion of collective identity, an extension that explicitly acknowledges the critical importance of group memberships to self-definition.

From even this very brief summary of the book's contributions, it should be apparent that giant strides have been made to the self-concept clarity construct since its inception. I am grateful to the present authors and a host of other researchers whose persistence has resulted in the rich body of work presented here.

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Contents

1	Structure and Validity of Self-Concept Clarity Measures	1
	Kenneth G. DeMarree and Miranda E. Bobrowski	
2	Situating Self-Concept Clarity in the Landscape of Personality	19
	William L. Dunlop	
3	Sources of Self-Concept Clarity.....	43
	Andrew W. Hertel	
4	Self-Concept Clarity Development Across the Lifespan.....	67
	Jennifer Lodi-Smith and Elisabetta Crocetti	
5	Self-Concept Clarity and Social Role Transitions.....	85
	Erica B. Slotter and Lydia F. Emery	
6	Self-Concept Clarity and Romantic Relationships	107
	Kevin P. McIntyre, Brent A. Mattingly, and Gary W. Lewandowski Jr.	
7	Understanding Our Groups, Understanding Ourselves: The Importance of Collective Identity Clarity and Collective Coherence to the Self.....	125
	Wendi L. Gardner and Alexandra Garr-Schultz	
8	Who Am I and Why Does It Matter? Linking Personal Identity and Self-Concept Clarity.....	145
	Seth J. Schwartz, Alan Meca, and Mariya Petrova	
9	Leadership, Work Careers, and Self-Concept Clarity	165
	Seth M. Spain and Jayoung Kim	
10	Self-Concept Clarity, Self-Regulation, and Psychological Well-Being.....	177
	Alysson E. Light	

11 Self-Concept Clarity and Body Dissatisfaction 195
Lenny R. Vartanian and Lydia E. Hayward

12 Self-Concept Clarity and Psychopathology 219
David C. Cicero

**13 Common Themes and Future Directions
for Self-Concept Clarity Research**..... 243
Jennifer Lodi-Smith and Kenneth G. DeMarree

Index..... 251

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Introduction

An Overview of Self-Concept Clarity: Definitions, Empirical Themes, and Introduction to the Volume

Kenneth G. DeMarree and Jennifer Lodi-Smith

People's beliefs about themselves – their self-conceptions – play a central role in their psychological experiences and can be powerful determinants of their thoughts, feelings, and actions (Baumeister, 1998). Self-conceptions are important considerations in domains as diverse as social perception (e.g., Dunning & McElwee, 1995; Markus, Smith, & Moreland, 1985; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1993), self-evaluation (e.g., Marsh & O'Mara, 2008; Pelham & Swann, 1989), interpersonal relationships (e.g., Andersen, Chen, & Miranda, 2002; Gabriel, Carvallo, Dean, Tippin, & Renaud, 2005; Swann, Hixon, & de la Ronde, 1992), decision making (e.g., Freitas, Langsam, Clark, & Moeller, 2008; Niedenthal, Cantor, & Kihlstrom, 1985; Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2015), and even consumer behavior (e.g., Aaker, 1999; Belk, 1988; Wheeler, Petty, & Bizer, 2005).

Researchers studying the self have examined a variety of aspects of people's self-conceptions, including their accuracy (e.g., Brown, 1991; Robins & John, 1997) and relative stability versus malleability (e.g., Markus & Kunda, 1986; McConnell, 2011; McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976). One important aspect of people's self-conceptions – and the focus on this book – is the clarity with which people hold their self-conceptions (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996).

Campbell (1990; see also her foreword to this volume) first introduced self-concept clarity, positing that differences in the clarity or confidence of self-knowledge could account for some of the differences observed between individuals high and low in self-esteem. Notably, Campbell observed that compared with people who scored high on measures of self-esteem, people who scored low in self-esteem appear to be more malleable in response to situational influences, such as false feedback or social influence attempts (e.g., Brockner, 1984; Campbell & Fairey, 1985). She posited that such malleability might be due to lower clarity or certainty in the self-conceptions of people low, compared with high, in self-esteem. She tested this idea in a series of studies using a variety of indirect methods. For example, compared with their high self-esteem counterparts, people low in self-esteem had less extreme, less confident, less internally consistent, and less accessible self-views across a range of self-perceptions. They also exhibited reduced

stability over time and across situations and less self-conception-behavior congruence. Campbell concluded that reduced clarity among people low (versus high) in self-esteem may pose a compelling explanation for their apparently increased malleability.

This initial work was highly influential with over 1300 citations as of 2017, according to Google Scholar. Campbell and her colleagues' subsequent publication of the Self-Concept Clarity Scale (Campbell et al., 1996) provided researchers with a useful tool for studying and more fully understanding the clarity construct. Although researchers continue to use other assessment strategies, including the ones used in Campbell's original (i.e., 1990) paper (for examples, see Boucher, 2011; Burger & Guadagno, 2003; Landau, Greenberg, Sullivan, Routledge, & Arndt, 2009; Stopa, Brown, Luke, & Hirsch, 2010), this scale has, in many ways, become synonymous with the construct, with over 1300 citations itself.

Since these seminal publications, self-concept clarity has been evoked to help understand a variety of topics. Campbell's own work in part explored the relationships between self-concept clarity and mental health and well-being (e.g., Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2000, 2003; Campbell et al., 1996). As Chapters 10–12 highlight, a great deal of research has followed up on these initial findings, documenting negative associations between self-concept clarity and a variety of mental health problems, including symptoms related to depression (Lee-Flynn, Pomaki, DeLongis, Biesanz, & Puterman, 2011; Richman et al., 2016), anxiety (Kusec, Tallon, & Koerner, 2016; Stopa et al., 2010), eating disorders (Vartanian, 2009; Vartanian, Foreich, & Smyth, 2016; see also Chap. 12, this volume), prolonged grief disorder (Boelen, Keijsers, & van den Hout, 2012), and schizophrenia (Cicero, Becker, Martin, Docherty, & Kerns, 2013; Cicero, Martin, Becker, & Kerns, 2016; see also Chap. 13, this volume), among others.

But the potential importance of self-concept clarity goes well beyond the mental health domain, as the chapters in this volume indicate. Because our selves are intimately intertwined with our personal relationships, the clarity of these selves can impact and be impacted by forming and terminating social relationships (Light & Visser, 2012; Slotter, Emery, & Luchies, 2014; Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010) and in the operation of relationships themselves (Lewandowski, Nardone, & Raines, 2010; Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, & Kumashiro, 2010). Self-concept clarity also reflects people's identity and identity development, including their personal, social, and role identities, across the lifespan (Johnson & Nozick, 2011; Lodi-Smith, Cologgi, Spain, & Roberts, 2017; Morrison & Wheeler, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2011; Osborne & Taylor, 2010). Self-concept clarity may also predict how one deals with conflict (Bechtoldt, De Dreu, Nijstad, & Zapf, 2010), how one responds to social influence attempts (Burger & Guadagno, 2003), and how well someone can predict their own behavior (Lewandowski & Nardone, 2012).

Undoubtedly, the clarity of one's self-conceptions is relevant across a wide range of people's lives. But what is self-concept clarity? The most cited definition (Campbell et al., 1996) is "the extent to which the contents of an individual's self-concept are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable" (p. 141). A few aspects of this definition are worthy of note. First, it refers to

self-conceptions (i.e., people's mental representations of the self) rather than self-esteem. Self-conceptions can include a wide variety of self-beliefs and domain-specific self-evaluations (e.g., perceptions of one's athletic abilities). Second, it refers to the whole of one's self-concept rather than a specific self-conception. Certainty or clarity in specific self-conceptions has also been a topic of interest to self-researchers (e.g., Swann & Ely, 1984; Talley & Stevens, 2017), but it is not clear the extent to which more general self-concept clarity relates to certainty in specific beliefs. Third, it discusses multiple ways in which a person's self-concept can be "clear" (clarity, confidence, internal consistency, and temporal stability). These dimensions map onto many of the indirect methods Campbell (1990) initially used to examine clarity, and items from the Self-Concept Clarity Scale attempt to assess people's perceptions regarding different aspects of this definition. Note that although Campbell and her colleagues discussed clarity as a *structural* feature of the self, the Self-Concept Clarity Scale, because it relies on people's self-perceptions regarding their self-conceptions, is metacognitive in nature (DeMarree & Morrison, 2012; Guerrettaz & Arkin, 2016).

Key Challenges and Opportunities

Research on self-concept clarity faces a number of empirical challenges. As noted earlier, Campbell's original 1990 work on self-concept clarity sought to elucidate differences between high and low self-esteem individuals, and consequently, self-concept clarity is closely related to self-esteem. Indeed, a great deal of empirical research has examined the relationship between self-esteem and self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996; DeMarree & Rios, 2014; Nezlek & Plesko, 2001; Wu, Watkins, & Hattie, 2010). Because self-esteem is so closely related to self-concept clarity, it is important to consider self-esteem when discussing clarity. Indeed, some existing work has examined self-esteem as a main effect or interactive antecedent of self-clarity (DeMarree & Rios, 2014; Streamer & Seery, 2015; Wu et al., 2010), and some researchers have postulated that self-concept clarity can play a meditational role in understanding effects of self-esteem (Hohman & Hogg, 2015; Story, 2004). Other work has suggested that self-concept clarity might be an antecedent of self-esteem (Błazek & Besta, 2012), and some researchers have postulated that self-esteem may play a meditational role in understanding effects of self-concept clarity (Lewandowski et al., 2010). Although Campbell (1990) herself postulated that both directions of causality might be possible (see also Wu et al., 2010), the relationship between self-esteem and self-concept clarity is still not well understood. Because of these strong relationships, we asked chapter contributors to discuss the role of self-esteem in their domain.

To date, theory on self-concept clarity has been relatively limited. The papers on self-concept clarity to date have been written by a large number of different researchers and published in wide-ranging outlets. One goal of this volume is to bring many of these different perspectives together and to get clarity researchers to think about

unifying themes and next steps in developing theory related to self-concept clarity. Indeed, we explicitly asked each of the contributors to this volume to discuss the future of self-concept clarity research in their domain. We hope that identifying the gaps in our knowledge and elaborating on potential future directions will help guide interested researchers toward the important work that still needs to be done.

The Present Volume

The goal of the present volume is to bring together different perspectives on self-concept clarity in a single volume both to summarize the current state of the literature and to provide a way forward toward developing novel theoretical and empirical contributions. The chapters from this book draw on clinical, developmental, personality, and social psychology perspectives, among others. Some of the topics examined in these chapters have been the focus of a great deal of self-concept clarity research, whereas other topics have received scant empirical attention to date. Regardless of how much research has been done in each of these topics, each of these chapters provides a roadmap for future research on self-concept clarity.

The early chapters set the stage for the rest of the book by providing basic background on the measurement of self-concept clarity and clarity's relationship to other dispositions. DeMarree and Bobrowski begin by reviewing published and new research on the structure and validity of self-concept clarity measures. Dunlop situates the construct of self-concept clarity into the broader personality and individual difference landscape, including traits, characteristic adaptations, and narrative identity. Hertel documents a wide range of variables that have been studied as potential antecedents of self-concept clarity. Lodi-Smith and Crocetti then take a developmental approach with a meta-analysis and review of the patterns of stability and change in self-concept clarity across the lifespan.

Next, the volume shifts toward the social self, examining interrelationships between self-concept clarity and people's social worlds. Specifically, Slotter discusses how social role transitions (e.g., entering or exiting relationship) can affect and be impacted by self-concept clarity. McIntyre, Mattingly, and Lewandowski discuss how self-concept clarity relates to relationship processes and relationship outcomes. Gardner and Gall-Schultz extend the notion of self-concept clarity beyond the individual self, discussing ways in which the concept of clarity might relate to people's collective identities. Schwartz, Meca, and Petrova then discuss how self-concept clarity relates to the development and maintenance of personal identity. Spain and Kim close this section out with a focus on a specific social context and organizational settings and discuss ways that self-concept clarity can affect leadership.

The final chapters of the book move toward examinations of possible individual-level consequences of self-concept clarity. Light's chapter speculates on potentially important roles that self-concept clarity might play in self-regulation and goal pursuit. Vartanian and Hayward discuss ways that self-concept clarity relates to body

dissatisfaction and other beliefs associated with disordered eating. To close out this section, Cicero discusses the relationship of self-concept clarity to psychopathology and symptoms of schizophrenia in particular.

Together, these chapters provide a relatively comprehensive review of the self-concept clarity literature. Further, they point to key unresolved issues and future directions for work on self-concept clarity. In the final chapter of this book, we return to the empirical themes outlined here and integrate them with the reviews, issues, and suggestions raised by the following chapters. It is our hope that this chapter will thus serve as both a primer on the construct of self-concept clarity and a guide for future research on this important topic.

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