Chapter 6
Who in the World Am I? Self-Concept Clarity and Self-Change in Relationships

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> Was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!—Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

Change can unfold gradually, "feeling a little different" from day to day, or change can unfold dramatically, radically eclipsing the person we used to be. People tend to experience both forms of change throughout their lives, and romantic relationships are an especially fertile ground for encouraging self-change, for better or worse (e.g., Mattingly, Lewandowski, & McIntyre, 2014; McIntyre, Mattingly, & Lewandowski, 2015; see Chap. 1 for an overview). A growing body of research suggests that the ways people understand their own self-concepts play a crucial role in relationship-induced self-change. Self-concept clarity, the extent to which a person has a clear and coherent sense of self (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996), predicts people's likelihood of changing due to their relationships and can be influenced by people having experienced these kinds of changes. This chapter explores the bidirectional links between self-concept clarity and self-change in relationships and how the interplay between these processes predicts well-being.

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6.1 Self-Concept Clarity

People's self-concepts include the various content that defines who they are, including personality traits, personal goals, individual preferences, and social roles (James, 1890; McConnell, 2011). People organize this content in different ways; for example, some people have self-concepts that are more complex than others or find different aspects of themselves to be more cognitively accessible (Linville, 1985; McConnell, 2011). People also reflect on their self-concepts, making subjective evaluations of whether they understand who they are (i.e., self-concept clarity; Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996). Specifically, self-concept clarity captures whether people feel that the diverse aspects of their self-concept make sense together and are relatively consistent over time (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996; Lodi-Smith & DeMarree, 2017).

Self-concept clarity broadly enhances people's well-being. Those with higher self-concept clarity are less neurotic, less socially anxious, less stressed, less depressed, perceive more meaning in their lives, have higher self-esteem, and feel more satisfied with their lives—to name just a few examples (Błażek & Besta, 2012; Campbell et al., 1996; Ritchie, Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Gidron, 2011; Stopa, Brown, Luke, & Hirsch, 2010; Treadgold, 1999). Most research focusing on self-concept clarity examines individual outcomes. However, despite capturing people's understanding of their individual self-concepts, self-concept clarity also shapes people's relationships and vice versa.

6.1.1 Self-Concept Clarity in Relationships

The relational roots of self-concept clarity run deep (see McIntyre, Mattingly, & Lewandowski, 2017, for a review). Self-concept clarity itself is intergenerational—adolescents whose parents have high self-concept clarity are more likely to achieve high self-concept clarity themselves (Crocetti, Rubini, Branje, Koot, & Meeus, 2016). Within romantic relationships, people with high self-concept clarity report being more satisfied and committed, and experimentally threatening people's self-concept clarity can undermine satisfaction and commitment (Lewandowski, Nardone, & Raines, 2010). The existing literature identifies a number of possible reasons why self-concept clarity might enhance people's relationships (see McIntyre et al., 2017, for a review). People with higher self-concept clarity tend to have higher self-esteem (Campbell et al., 1996), which partly explains the link between self-concept clarity and relationship quality (Lewandowski et al., 2010). Those with higher self-concept clarity may also make better choices in their romantic partners and, as discussed further in this chapter, more successfully expand their identities (see McIntyre et al., 2017).

At the same time, relationship dynamics can alter self-concept clarity. Feeling lonely in a relationship, for example, predicts lower self-concept clarity two years

later (Richman et al., 2016). Transgressions and forgiveness in relationships also have implications for self-concept clarity, based on whether people feel as though they have stood up for themselves or feel like a doormat (Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, & Kumashiro, 2010). People who forgive a partner who has attempted to atone experience increases to their self-concept clarity; however, forgiving a partner who has not attempted to atone results in diminished self-concept clarity (Luchies et al., 2010). Thus, just as self-concept clarity can influence relationships, relationships, in turn, can influence self-concept clarity.

Overall, self-concept clarity and relationship dynamics appear to work in positive, stable concert. Yet, relationships can also catalyze changes to people's self-concepts. People can change, for better or worse, as a result of their relationships, and they can change due to their partners or on their own (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995; Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2013; Mattingly et al., 2014; McIntyre et al., 2015; Muise et al., 2019; see Chap. 1, this volume). What, then, is self-concept clarity's role when people's selves are not stable in their relationships, but instead undergo changes to who they are? Extant research suggests that self-concept clarity predicts the likelihood that people will change as a result of their relationships; changing due to a relationship also predicts people's self-concept clarity.

6.1.2   Self-Concept Clarity Predicting Self-Change in Relationships

Relationship Formation The beginnings of a romantic relationship are exciting and often spark self-expansion, taking on attributes from new romantic partners and including them in the self-concept (Aron, Lewandowski, Mashek, & Aron, 2013; see Chap. 1 in this volume). After falling in love, the size of people's self-concepts becomes larger (Aron et al., 1995). Moreover, single people presented with a prospective romantic partner will spontaneously take that person's attributes and incorporate them into their own self-concept (Slotter & Gardner, 2009). For example, if someone who does not consider herself to be artistic views the online dating profile of someone who loves visiting art museums, she may suddenly consider herself to be slightly artistic. People have been theorized to have a general motivation to self-expand (Aron & Aron, 1997), and in fact, self-expansion is not limited to positive qualities—people will also take on negative attributes from a romantic interest (Slotter & Gardner, 2012a).

However, there are also individual differences in people's interest in self-expanding (Hughes, Slotter, & Lewandowski, 2019). Indeed, not everyone does self-expand with a potential romantic partner—people with low self-concept clarity in particular may self-expand less than do those with high self-concept clarity. After people self-expand, they must integrate their new attributes within the larger structure of their self-concept (Aron & Aron, 1997; McConnell, 2011). For people with low self-concept clarity, then, self-expanding is a risk (Emery, Walsh, & Slotter,

2015). They are already confused about who they are and struggling to reconcile the various attributes that define their existing self-concepts. Adding even more content to the self risks even further self-concept confusion. As a result, those with lower self-concept clarity may resist self-expanding, even with an appealing new romantic partner. Conversely, for those with high self-concept clarity, self-expansion carries little risk.

In fact, people with low self-concept clarity do report less interest than people with high self-concept clarity in self-expanding on their own, assessed either through people's self-reported self-concept clarity or through experimental manipulations of self-concept clarity (Emery et al., 2015). Does this resistance to self-expansion extend to relationships? In one study, single participants completed a self-concept clarity manipulation. They then viewed a fictitious online dating profile belonging to someone who had an attribute that the participant did not. For example, a participant who initially rated themselves as not athletic saw a prospective partner who asserted, "I am very athletic. I ran track in high school and run 5 k's now. I am also training for a marathon." Participants who had experienced the self-concept clarity threat manipulation were less likely to self-expand after viewing this profile, compared to those who completed a self-concept clarity affirmation or control prime. Consistent with previous research (Slotter & Gardner, 2009), those who reported more interest in the prospective romantic partner were especially likely to self-expand in the affirmation or control conditions. However, for people whose self-concept clarity was threatened, it did not matter how interested they were in the prospective partner—they did not self-expand (Emery et al., 2015). Thus, a lack of self-concept clarity may interfere with the kinds of self-change that help to deepen closeness and intimacy in fledgling relationships.

Ongoing Relationships As relationships develop over time, partners have fewer opportunities to self-expand by taking on attributes from each other. However, partners can experience self-change by having new and exciting experiences together or by self-expanding on their own (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000; Muise et al., 2019). A person with low self-concept clarity can certainly choose not to pursue self-change within the context of a long-term, existing relationship. But, if their partner starts to change, they must then decide whether or not to support that change. Supporting a partner's self-change can help that partner achieve those changes (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2010). Moreover, partners are more satisfied with their relationships when people support their changes (Drigotas et al., 1999; Fivecoat, Tomlinson, Aron, & Caprariello, 2015; Overall et al., 2010).

Why, then, might someone attempt to sabotage a partner's self-change? For people with low self-concept clarity, a changing partner is risky. Recall that those with low self-concept clarity resist their own self-change, as it theoretically risks even further confusion to their self-concepts. Thus, people with low self-concept clarity may attempt to undermine their partner's self-change, due to fears that if their partner is changing, they may also have to change.

In fact, people with low self-concept clarity do try to prevent their partners from changing (Emery, Gardner, Finkel, & Carswell, 2018). They report engaging in the kinds of behaviors that might prevent their partner from changing; for example, if their partner decided to take up art as a hobby, they might schedule other activities at the same time as their partner's art classes. Moreover, the concern that their partner's change might result in them having to change, too, accounts for the association between self-concept clarity and undermining a partner's change. People with low self-concept clarity are especially likely to undermine their partner's change when their partner is changing more, as these are the kinds of changes that they might also have to adopt. However, these attempts to undermine a partner's change result in both members of the couple feeling less happy and less committed to the relationship in the long run (Emery, Gardner, Finkel, & Carswell, 2018). And, these attempts do not even appear to be successful at stopping a partner's change (Emery, Gardner, Carswell, & Finkel, 2019). The prospect of a changing partner appears to threaten people with low self-concept clarity, but their attempts to stop that change only seem to result in unhappiness for both members of the couple.

Relationship Dissolution Experiencing the end of a relationship can bring a range of changes to the self—people often feel like they have lost part of themselves, especially when their former relationship provided opportunities for self-expanding (Lewandowski, Aron, Bassis, & Kunak, 2006; see Chap. 9 of this volume). To date, existing research has not directly examined how self-concept clarity influences self-change after the end of a relationship. However, previous research might yield two predictions. First, on average, people with lower self-concept clarity should be more likely to experience breakups in their relationships. As discussed earlier, lower self-concept clarity predicts lower relationship satisfaction and commitment (Lewandowski et al., 2010). These relationship evaluations, in turn, robustly predict likelihood of breakup (Le & Agnew, 2003; Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010). Second, losing a self-expanding relationship generally appears harmful for the self-concept (Lewandowski et al., 2006). However, people with lower self-concept clarity may actually be more likely to break up with a partner who provides self-expansion opportunities, given their resistance to self-change. We return to this possibility in the future directions.

6.1.3 Self-Change in Relationships Predicting Self-Concept Clarity

Relationship Formation Entering into a new relationship, almost by definition, can change people's self-concepts. But does relationship formation influence self-concept clarity? To the best of our knowledge, existing research has not directly examined this question. However, uncertainty is a hallmark of early stages of relationships (Tennov, 1998). Limerence theory focuses on uncertainty stemming from

the possibility that a partner might not return one's feelings, which catalyzes passion (Tennov, 1998). To our knowledge, this theoretical perspective has not been extended to *self*-uncertainty. Yet, it seems plausible that this time, filled with changes and uncertainty, might also diminish self-concept clarity. We elaborate on this idea in the future directions.

Long-Term Relationships Once people are in existing relationships, they still continue to change, both inside their relationships and outside of them. In general, the link between self-change and self-concept clarity appears to have some key moderators. First, people's feelings about the change matter. In one study, people listed the three biggest ways they had changed as a result of their current relationship and how positively they felt about these changes (Slotter & Walsh, 2017). People who felt better about the ways they had changed in their relationships reported higher self-concept clarity 6 months later than did those who felt less positively about their changes. These results suggest that it is not simply changing in a relationship that influences self-concept clarity, but how people evaluate the ways that they have changed.

Second, some clues in the literature suggest that self-concept clarity outcomes may depend on having a partner who verifies the ways a person has changed. Consistent with the logic of self-concept clarity, self-verification theory argues that people are motivated to maintain a stable sense of self and that having close others affirm our self-views is one means of preserving this stability (Swann & Read, 1981; Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989). And indeed, when people are at risk of losing a key identity, self-verification from a friend can repair their self-concept clarity (Slotter & Gardner, 2014). Thus, self-verification enhances self-concept clarity and may especially help when a person has changed or is at risk of changing.

Are there individual differences in who is likely to benefit from self-verification when they change? Although this idea has not, to our knowledge, been tested directly, research has examined how self-verification influences self-concept clarity in relationships and who is unlikely to receive it (Emery, Gardner, Carswell, & Finkel, 2018). People high on attachment avoidance find it difficult to trust others and tend to keep their distance from romantic partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012). Therefore, it is possible that avoidant people do not receive self-verification from their partners, which in turn predicts lower self-concept clarity. In one test of this hypothesis (Emery et al. 2018), both members of romantic couples came into the laboratory and, separately, listed 10 responses each to the questions "Who are you?" and "Who is your partner?" This technique enabled researchers to compare, for example, Harry's description of Sally to Sally's description of herself. Avoidant people tended to have lower self-concept clarity. Moreover, objective coding revealed avoidant people tended to have partners who really did not know them as well (as compared to less avoidant people, whose partners knew them fairly accurately). This lack of self-verification, in turn, was associated with lower self-concept clarity for those avoidant people. Avoidant people received less self-verification, in part, because they were less likely to share information about themselves with their partners. Thus, it is entirely conceivable that if avoidant people change over the

course of their relationships, they may not tell their partners, in turn contributing to lower self-concept clarity.

Relationship Dissolution Of the various links between self-change in relationships and self-concept clarity, the ways that breakups influence self-concept clarity have perhaps received the most empirical attention. Leaving social roles in general can threaten self-concept clarity (Light & Visser, 2013), and after a romantic breakup, people tend to experience significant decays in their self-concept clarity (Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010).

However, there are some key moderators of this effect. Breakups do not always harm self-concept clarity—the answer depends on (a) attachment style, (b) whether people were able to self-expand in the former relationship, and (c) whether people change after the breakup. First, individual differences appear to shape breakup's effect on self-concept clarity. Specifically, people high on attachment anxiety yearn for extreme closeness with their partners but also fear rejection (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012). Anxiously attached people are especially likely to experience low self-concept clarity after a breakup (Slotter & Gardner, 2012b). Moreover, they also are particularly susceptible to self-concept change following breakup (e.g., changes in their values and beliefs), which partly accounts for the association between attachment anxiety and lower self-concept clarity after a breakup (Slotter & Gardner, 2012b).

Self-expansion opportunities in a previous relationship may also predict self-concept clarity after breakup (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). People who reported having a partner who provided them with abundant opportunities to self-expand in their previous relationship were more likely to also report loss of self after the breakup. Although not exactly self-concept clarity, loss of self has substantial overlap, including items like "I do not know who I am" (Lewandowski et al., 2006). On the other hand, people who had been in a relationship that did not provide them with opportunities to self-expand were more likely to report self-growth after the end of their relationship (Lewandowski & Bizzocco, 2007). Thus, breakup's effects on self-concept clarity appear to depend partly on whether the former relationship was able to nourish people's self-change.

On average, people who change more after the end of a relationship experience lower self-concept clarity, especially if they are not feeling positively about the breakup (Slotter & Walsh, 2017). However, in some circumstances, *not* changing can actually lead to lower self-concept clarity (Slotter, Emery, & Luchies, 2014). After a breakup, people tend to retain self-concept elements that were due to their former partner, but only if they had put substantial effort into those self-concept changes. For example, someone who took up running marathons with his former partner and spent months training for them would be likely to keep this new self-attribute after a breakup. However, retaining self-concept changes that came from an ex-partner is associated with lower self-concept clarity. In other words, people are reluctant to abandon aspects of their self-concept that came from their former relationship if they put substantial work into them, but having part of their self-concept so tied to their former partner makes them feel confused about who they are.

Changing *more* after a breakup, by discarding pieces of the self that came from the ex-partner, is associated with higher self-concept clarity.

These findings, taken together, may seem inconsistent. How can changing after a breakup both predict lower self-concept clarity (Slotter & Gardner, 2012b; Slotter & Walsh, 2017) and higher self-concept clarity (Slotter et al., 2014)? The key distinction may be the nature of those changes. Self-change after breakup can be compared to caring for a houseplant (Slotter & Emery, 2017). Strategically pruning dead leaves (parts of the self that came from an ex-partner; Slotter et al., 2014) will help the plant to thrive or help people achieve high self-concept clarity. However, failing to prune the dead leaves (retaining parts of the self that came from an ex-partner; Slotter et al., 2014) or cutting off entire parts of the plant (making large, negative changes to the self; Slotter & Walsh, 2017) will lead it to decay or low self-concept clarity.

Understanding how breakup influences self-concept clarity may illuminate people's experiences of losing relationships. On average, people tend to experience lower self-concept clarity after a breakup, which in turn predicts symptoms of depression (Slotter et al., 2010). Similarly, having an accessible and vivid "lost self" predicts lower well-being after divorce (King & Raspin, 2004). Yet, reflecting on aspects of the self lost after a breakup may help people regain self-concept clarity and well-being over time. Divorced women who write in more detailed ways about the person they could have been view their identities more coherently (akin to self-concept clarity; King & Raspin, 2004). Moreover, people assigned to reflect repeatedly on a breakup tend to report greater recovery of self and less distress, compared to those not assigned to complete this sort of reflection (Larson & Sbarra, 2015). Thus, although the end of a relationship tarnishes self-concept clarity, processing the end of that relationship can help people recover their understanding of themselves and improve well-being.

Although people normatively experience distress after the end of a relationship (albeit often less distress than they expect; Eastwick, Finkel, Krishnamurti, & Loewenstein, 2008), the death of a loved one can sometimes induce clinical levels of distress. Prolonged grief disorder features a persistent yearning for the loved one and trouble accepting the loss that continues for longer than six months after the person's death (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Self-concept clarity and self-change may play a role in prolonged grief disorder. Theoretical work suggests that prolonged grief disorder may stem in part from change due to the loss, as people struggle to integrate who they were before the loss with who they are now (McCallum & Bryant, 2013). Moreover, losing a loved one can spark a decrease in self-concept clarity, which is linked with acute symptoms of prolonged grief disorder (Boelen et al., 2012). People who fail to recover self-concept clarity after this loss are more likely to continue to experience prolonged grief disorder (Boelen et al., 2012). Thus, this research raises the possibility that interventions targeting self-concept clarity may help to ameliorate the symptoms of prolonged grief disorder.

6.2 Future Directions

Overall, research has found robust links between self-concept clarity and self-change in relationships. People with higher self-concept clarity are more likely to change in the early stages of their relationships and are more likely to support their partner's self-change in ongoing relationships. Changing during a relationship in positive ways is associated with higher self-concept clarity, and people generally experience declines in self-concept clarity after a breakup. This existing work points to several future directions for research on self-concept clarity and self-change in relationships, at all three stages—relationship formation, long-term relationships, and relationship dissolution.

6.2.1 Relationship Formation

At the beginning of a relationship, people hope that their romantic partner returns their feelings, but they are often uncertain. This uncertainty is theorized to galvanize romantic passion, which ultimately tapers off once people know that their partner cares for them (Tennov, 1998). Within this theorizing, uncertainty is specific to people's beliefs about their partner reciprocating how they feel. But perhaps this romantic uncertainty may also relate to self-uncertainty (i.e., self-concept clarity). It could be that this romantic uncertainty causes decreases in self-concept clarity— that people are less certain of who they are when they are unsure whether their partner returns their feelings. It could also be that people who chronically experience low self-concept clarity are more prone to the kinds of romantic uncertainty that characterize limerence. Past work has distinguished between uncertainty about a person's own feelings about the relationship, uncertainty about a partner's feelings about the relationship, and uncertainty about the relationship itself (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). It falls to future research to examine whether uncertainty about a partner's regard intertwines with uncertainty about one's own identity.

Although past research has examined how self-concept clarity shapes changes in the early stages of relationships, research has not focused as much on attraction specifically. As previously discussed, people with low self-concept clarity avoid changing themselves (Emery et al., 2015) and appear to sabotage their relationships by undermining their partner's attempts to change (Emery, Gardner, Finkel, & Carswell, 2018). The anxiety they experience when considering self-change may also make them less attractive to prospective partners. In friendships, people are more attracted to those who can be instrumental in helping that person achieve their self-change goals (Slotter & Gardner, 2011). In fact, the most attractive people in any social network are those who could potentially assist in pursuing multiple different goals (Orehek, Forest, & Wingrove, 2018). These people are rare, of course, which is partly why they are so attractive to others. Given that those with low

self-concept clarity are so demonstrably averse to change, they may be less appealing to others in the stages of initial attraction.

People with low self-concept clarity may not only suffer in initial attraction because they resist self-change—they may also seem less authentic. Outside of romantic relationships, authenticity is strongly linked to interpersonal charisma (Gardner et al, 2005; Ibarra, 2015), and self-concept clarity plays a key role in expressive authenticity (Diehl, Jacobs, & Hastings, 2006). Within relationships, a partner's authenticity is associated with trust and connection (Wickham, 2013). However, people with low self-concept clarity tend to feel less authentic than do those with high self-concept clarity when introducing themselves to someone new (Duffy, 2014). If authentic people are more romantically appealing, then individuals with higher self-concept clarity may appear more attractive than are those with lower self-concept clarity.

This is not to suggest that people with low self-concept clarity always do worse in the dating pool. People who have low self-concept clarity themselves may be more likely to desire a partner who also has low self-concept clarity. Those with high self-concept clarity are likely to seek a partner who provides them with opportunities to expand and grow, consistent with a general motivation for self-expansion (Aron & Aron, 1997), whereas those with low self-concept clarity may prefer those who also do not want to change. And yet, there are two possible complications. First, people tend to be most attracted to those whom they *believe* are similar to them, which are not always the people who are similar (Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008). In other words, a person with high self-concept clarity might assume that a potential partner would also enjoy going on travel adventures, and they may only later find out that their partner is actually a homebody. Second, when presented with a potential partner who offers self-expansion opportunities, people with low self-concept clarity express no less romantic interest in this person than those with high self-concept clarity (Emery et al., 2015). We hope that future research will examine the interplay between actor and partner self-concept clarity in predicting both initial attraction and later relationship success.

6.2.2   Long-Term Relationships

One potential direction for future research centers on the interaction between actor and partner self-concept clarity—in particular, how relationships can thrive between partners with different levels of self-concept clarity. As discussed, people with low self-concept clarity tend to feel threatened by their partners changing, resulting in problems for the relationship (Emery, Gardner, Finkel, & Carswell, 2018). In fact, researchers have hypothesized that people seeing their partners as less conducive to self-growth than an alternative partner may spell danger for the relationship (Orehek, Forest & Barbaro, 2018). How, then, can people maintain a successful relationship with a partner whose self-concept clarity does not match their own?

Work from the emotion regulation literature may provide a hint. People who rely on a wider range of close others within their social networks to regulate their emotions experience higher well-being than do those who concentrate their emotional needs within a more limited set of people (Cheung, Gardner, & Anderson, 2015). In fact, having a broad set of these emotion-regulating relationships ("emotionships") enhances both a person's individual well-being and relationship satisfaction. When people rely on a broader range of emotionships (and not simply on their partner), they experience better relationship satisfaction over time and are at lower risk of breakup (Cheung, Carswell, Gardner, & Finkel, 2019). Emotion regulation and supporting self-change are fairly distinct domains, but similar principles apply. People often turn to their romantic partners for support as they strive toward the person they ideally want to become (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009). Yet, just as in emotion regulation, romantic partners may sometimes lack the motivation or ability to provide this kind of support. In fact, people do turn to their broader social networks to support their efforts to achieve their ideal selves (Cheung & Gardner, 2016), and people with more supportive relationships in their social networks experience more personal growth (Lee, Ybarra, Gonzales, & Ellsworth, 2018). Based on these literatures, a romantic partner is not the only person who can support self-change. Perhaps, people who have partners with low self-concept clarity can (a) communicate that they do not expect their partner to change and (b) rely on their broader social networks to facilitate their own self-change.

However, these issues also presume that self-change actually does harm people with low self-concept clarity. As discussed, past research has shown that those with low self-concept clarity arduously avoid changing (Emery et al., 2015), going so far as to sabotage their partner's changes due to the possibility that they might have to change as well (Emery, Gardner, Finkel, & Carswell, 2018). Yet, existing research has not established whether self-expansion actually damages those with low self-concept clarity. Perhaps, it depends on the kind of self-expanding activity; although self-expansion is usually discussed in the context of self-change, not all self-expanding activities are created equal (Tomlinson, Hughes, Lewandowski, Aron, & Geyer, 2018). It seems possible, for example, that reading new and interesting facts adds more new content to the self-concept than does carrying an object with chopsticks, although both are self-expanding experiences (see Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2013). People with low self-concept clarity may be able to enjoy new and exciting activities with their partners that do not change their self-concepts, but nevertheless have salutary benefits to their relationship quality.

Future research should also examine effects in the opposite direction—when self-change might diminish people's self-concept clarity. People with high self-complexity, for example, might be especially vulnerable to changes adversely influencing their self-concept clarity. Self-complexity describes the number of domains in the structure of someone's self and how interconnected these domains are (Linville, 1985). For instance, someone who defines himself as a husband and a hard worker would have lower self-complexity than would someone who construes herself as a sister, a writer, a tennis player, a Canadian, a gardener, and an extravert. Adding new content to the self, for a person with high self-complexity, necessitates integrating it

within a more elaborate self-concept structure. Just as a cook with a well-organized kitchen may find it more difficult to find space for a new Dutch oven, someone with high self-complexity may risk a decrease in self-concept clarity when trying to incorporate new content into the self-concept.

6.2.3   Relationship Dissolution

Low self-concept clarity can both presage and ensue from the end of a relationship. Past research has convincingly documented the ways that breakup can cause self-concept clarity to atrophy. Yet, less work has examined normative timelines in recovering self-concept clarity. Over a 6-month study, those who experienced a breakup did not evince upturns in self-concept clarity following its decline (Slotter et al., 2010). When, then, do people tend to recover their self-concept clarity after a breakup, and what might help people regain it more quickly? It appears that fully reflecting on the breakup may speed this process (Larson & Sbarra, 2015). Preliminary evidence also suggests that some people may need more time to recover their sense of who they are after a breakup. Specifically, when people begin a new relationship too soon after a breakup, they experience reduced self-concept clarity, and people who tend to change substantially in their relationships appear to be especially vulnerable to this loss of self-concept clarity (Slotter & Emery, 2019). Although the literature contains several hints as to when and how people might recover self-concept clarity after a breakup, there is ample room for future research to delineate these processes more clearly.

Future research could also explore the circumstances under which self-concept clarity predicts breakup. As previously discussed, people experience lower self-concept clarity after losing a relationship that provided them with opportunities to self-expand (Lewandowski et al., 2010). The reverse, however, might also be true—given their reticence to change, people with low self-concept clarity might be especially likely to end a self-expanding relationship. This should be especially likely when people with low self-concept clarity feel pressured to change. We hope that future research will explore these possibilities.

6.3   Conclusion

People's experiences of change weave together with their subjective understanding of themselves across the life span of their relationships. As relationships are forming, people with low self-concept clarity resist changing to become more similar to romantic prospects, even when attracted to them. In ongoing relationships, people with low self-concept clarity also (unsuccessfully) attempt to sabotage their partner's self-change. Conversely, when people feel good about changes in their relationships, they tend to experience higher self-concept clarity. Those with lower self-concept

clarity may be at higher risk for relationship dissolution, and the end of a relationship tends to undermine self-concept clarity, especially for people high on attachment anxiety or who retain the ways that they had changed in their previous relationship. Although the literature on self-concept clarity and self-change in relationships is relatively nascent, it points to intriguing ways that these two constructs can enhance or undermine one another. We hope that future research will continue to delve into "the great puzzle" of self-change and self-concept clarity.

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