


Confusion or Clarity? Examining a Possible Tradeoff Between Self-Expansion and Self-Concept Clarity

Social Psychological and
Personality Science
1–10
© The Author(s) 2021
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/19485506211067040
journals.sagepub.com/home/spp


Lydia F. Emery¹ , Erin K. Hughes¹, and Wendi L. Gardner¹

Abstract

Most people are motivated to self-expand, collecting new attributes and experiences in a process that boosts well-being, but people with low self-concept clarity resist it. Perhaps, then, there is a tradeoff between self-expansion and self-concept clarity. Across a 2-week daily diary, we found no evidence for such a tradeoff—self-expanding was not associated with lower self-concept clarity, either that day, the next day, or the period as a whole. In fact, self-expansion was associated with higher self-concept clarity, but especially for people with lower initial self-concept clarity. Although they were less likely to self-expand on a daily basis, when they *did* self-expand, they reported higher self-concept clarity and, in turn, greater satisfaction with life. These findings suggest that self-expansion in daily life does not come at the cost of a coherent self-concept and that despite their reluctance, people with lower self-concept clarity may experience associated benefits from self-expanding.

Keywords

self-concept clarity, self-expansion, self-concept, romantic relationships

Not that I would not, if I could . . . be a wit, a bonvivant, and a ladykiller, as well as a philosopher; a philanthropist, statesman, warrior . . . as well as a ‘tonepoet’ and saint. But the thing is simply impossible . . . —William James

Who among us would not aspire to be a wit, a warrior, a tonepoet, *and* a saint? Self-expansion, the motivation to broaden one’s sense of self by adding new identities, abilities, and perspectives drives both relationship processes (Aron & Aron, 1997) and individual activities (Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2014). However, a century before Aron and Aron (1997) posited self-expansion as a basic motive, James’ (1890) musing on both the desirability and impossibility of maintaining such a dizzying array of identities pointed to a potential brake: the need to understand the self as a unified whole. Anything new added to the self could clash with self-knowledge already present—although being a bonvivant is unlikely to conflict with wit, it is more difficult to imagine “warrior” and “saint” being so easily harmonized.

Those who struggle to integrate aspects of the self-concept experience lower *self-concept clarity* (Campbell et al., 1996), a reduced sense of having a clear and coherent understanding of the self. Lower self-concept clarity predicts a host of poorer well-being outcomes, such as lower self-esteem, emotional instability, and diminished life satisfaction (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996; Ritchie

et al., 2011). If adding new content to the self-concept could impede self-concept clarity, people may sometimes resist self-expanding, with the potential risks of a fragile self-concept outweighing the desirability of adding to the self. In fact, individuals with lower self-concept clarity do resist self-expanding (Emery et al., 2015), perhaps as adaptive self-protection.

We examined whether and for whom potential tradeoffs exist between self-expansion and self-concept clarity. Both self-expansion and self-concept clarity are reliably and independently associated with psychological well-being (e.g., Campbell, 1990; Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2013; but see Carswell et al., 2021, for an exception). To our knowledge, no studies have examined whether there is a drop of self-concept clarity following self-expansion. Other types of self-change that add content to the self (e.g., role entries) can carry costs to self-concept clarity (Slotter & Walsh, 2017). Moreover, exposure to self-expanding activities (e.g., living abroad, Adam et al., 2018) boost self-concept clarity over the long term, but studies are mute on short-term costs. This research explores associations between self-expansion and self-concept clarity using a 2-

¹Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA

Corresponding Author:

Lydia F. Emery, Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, 2211 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208, USA.
Email: lydia.emery@kellogg.northwestern.edu

week daily diary, which enables us to ask three interrelated questions. Is engaging in more frequent self-expansion associated with lower self-concept clarity across time? On a more fine-grained timescale, is self-concept clarity lower on days when people self-expand? Finally, might the association between self-expansion and either self-concept clarity or well-being depend on whether the individual in question had higher or lower self-concept clarity before self-expanding?

Is There a Tradeoff Between Self-Expansion and Self-Concept Clarity?

Self-expansion appears rewarding; people are eager to adopt traits of new relationship partners (Aron & Aron, 1986; Slotter & Gardner, 2009), and to seek new experiences that add to the self-concept (Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2014). Although self-expansion is tied to a host of positive well-being outcomes (Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2013; Muise et al., 2019), by increasing the diversity and complexity of self-knowledge, self-expansion could challenge self-concept clarity. Too great a diversity of self-knowledge, or self-fragmentation, threatens mental health (e.g., Block, 1961). For example, higher self-concept differentiation, reflected by unshared variance in diverse characteristics across self-aspects, is associated with depression and lower self-esteem (Donahue et al., 1993). Adding content to the self could challenge the self as a coherent and consistent whole and threaten well-being.

Does self-expansion put self-concept clarity at risk? The few studies that have directly examined this association imply an increase, not a decrease, in clarity after self-expanding. Studies of individuals living abroad show that growth experiences from immersing in a different culture reliably increase self-concept clarity (Adam et al., 2018). People with self-expanding opportunities in the workplace have higher self-concept clarity (Treadgold, 1999), and losing a self-expanding job reduces self-concept clarity and well-being (McIntyre et al., 2015). New experiences are theorized to engender self-discernment, ultimately producing greater self-concept clarity (Adam et al., 2018). This model aligns with the notion of an integration stage after self-expansion, when people must incorporate this new attribute into their broader sense of self to avoid self-concept confusion (Aron et al., 2013).

Who Resists Self-Expansion?

If the rewards of adding diverse new content to the self-concept must be balanced by the challenge of integrating them with existing self-knowledge, self-expansion may be a psychological luxury that only those with an already clear self-concept can afford to pursue. In fact, people with lower self-concept clarity tend *not* to self-expand, either through new activities or an attractive partner, despite the potential benefits (Emery et al., 2015). People with low self-concept

clarity even block their current romantic partner from pursuing new goals due to the risk of having to change the self in response (Emery et al., 2018). Moreover, there are individual differences in the preference to self-expand; people with lower self-concept clarity report less preference for self-expansion (Hughes et al., 2019). We recently conceptually replicated these findings (see Online Appendix A), examining 204 participants' self-concept clarity, preferences for self-expansion, and self-identification as a self-expander or self-conserver. People with higher self-concept clarity exhibited greater preferences for self-expansion and identified more as self-expanders than those with lower self-concept clarity.

If people with lower self-concept clarity resist self-expanding, is this adaptive? Self-expansion typically enhances well-being (e.g., Muise et al., 2019), but not always (Carswell et al., 2021). If someone is already experiencing lower self-concept clarity, then adding more content to the self-concept could risk further confusion, just as adding more books to an already cluttered office can increase the chaos. Conversely, if after people self-expand, they incorporate the new attribute into their broader sense of self (Aron et al., 2013), then the process of reflecting on and recontextualizing their self-concept could be associated with higher self-concept clarity—just as acquiring new books can force a person to reorganize a messy office. Given that self-expanding activities can boost self-concept clarity over time (Adam et al., 2018), perhaps by avoiding self-expansion, individuals with lower self-concept clarity may ironically forgo opportunities that would be associated with increased self-understanding and well-being. Research examining self-concept clarity after self-expanding experiences has not considered pre-existing self-concept clarity as a moderator. This previous research also examines associations across a relatively long timescale (e.g., being employed in a self-expanding job). It is unknown how long the self-discernment or integration process may take, and whether self-concept clarity may be temporarily reduced during that process.

The current research tests these possibilities. In previous studies linking self-concept clarity to self-expansion, participants have either self-reported their interest in self-expanding or evaluated a potential romantic partner as a source of self-expansion (e.g., Emery et al., 2015; Hughes et al., 2019). To determine whether the aversion to self-expansion among people with lower self-concept clarity is adaptive, we examined associations with self-concept clarity and well-being when people self-expand on a daily basis.

Overview and Hypotheses

Using a daily diary methodology, we investigated associations among self-expansion, self-concept clarity, and well-being. Consistent with past research, we hypothesized that

people with low self-concept clarity would be less interested in self-expanding and less likely to self-expand:

Hypothesis 1a (H1a): Self-concept clarity will be positively associated with self-expansion preferences.

Hypothesis 1b (H1b): Self-concept clarity will be positively associated with engaging in self-expansion.

We then advanced a series of competing hypotheses focused on our central research questions:

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): There is a temporary tradeoff between self-expansion and self-concept clarity—on days when people self-expand, they report lower self-concept clarity that day and the following day.

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): There is no temporary tradeoff between self-expansion and self-concept clarity, or if anything, self-expanding is associated with higher self-concept clarity.

Hypothesis 3a (H3a): The tradeoff between self-expansion and self-concept clarity is moderated by initial self-concept clarity—people with initially lower self-concept clarity are especially vulnerable to the tradeoff, and they will, in turn, experience lower overall well-being.

Hypothesis 3b (H3b): There is no tradeoff between self-expansion and self-concept clarity for people with initially low self-concept clarity, or if anything, self-expanding is especially associated with self-concept clarity among those whose self-concept clarity is low, which in turn is associated with overall higher well-being.

We used intensive daily diary methods with a community sample of couples. As we were especially interested in people with low self-concept clarity, who on average, do not self-expand, testing this research question required multiple assessments across a short time to capture times when people with lower self-concept clarity actually self-expand. Both members of the couple completed a baseline measure of self-concept clarity and a 2-week daily diary assessing general self-expansion, relational self-expansion, self-concept clarity, and well-being. This design enabled us to examine the effects of both types of self-expansion on self-concept clarity based on initial self-concept clarity, and downstream effects on satisfaction with life. As we had daily measures of each key construct, we could also examine a temporary tradeoff—whether self-expansion temporarily reduced self-concept clarity before rebounding.

Although these hypotheses were not preregistered, the idea to examine self-concept clarity and well-being when people with low self-concept clarity self-expand was developed a priori, and the variables reported are the only ones we analyzed for this set of research questions. Materials and code from this study are available at <https://osf.io/y9tuw/>.

The Current Research

Participants and Procedure

As part of a larger investigation of romantic relationships, we recruited a community sample of 108 couples (216 individuals)¹ from the greater Chicago area, 49.1% male, 49.1% female, 1.4% nonbinary; age $M = 36.38$, $SD = 12.64$; 63.4% European American, White, Anglo, or Caucasian; 24.1% African American, Black, African, or Caribbean; 8.3% Asian-American, Asian, or Pacific Islander; 7.9% Hispanic-American, Latino(a), or Chicano(a); 2.3% Native-American or American Indian; 2.8% other race or ethnicity; annual income *median* = \$41,000, *range* = \$ 0–\$400,000; 78.7% heterosexual, 6.0% gay or lesbian, 5.6% bisexual, 5.6% queer, 2.3% pansexual, 1.4% other; relationship duration $M = 8.26$ years, and $SD = 8.41$; 37.0% married. To be eligible, participants were required to have been in a relationship for at least 6 months, be at least 25 years old, have been born in the United States, and have internet access.

After completing an online screening questionnaire, both members of the couple received links to the online intake questionnaire. Once both finished the intake questionnaire, they began a 14-day daily diary (*median* = 18 days after completing the intake, *range* = 1–78 days). The diary link was available every day between 5 pm and 3 am. Of the 216 participants, 97.7% completed at least one diary; those who completed at least one completed 80% on average ($M = 11.15$, $SD = 3.10$).²

Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, all measures were assessed on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Intake

Self-Concept Clarity. Participants completed the self-concept clarity scale (Campbell et al., 1996; 12 items; $\alpha = .88$; $M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.15$; for example, “In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am”).

General Self-Expansion Preferences. Participants completed a shortened version of the preferences for self-expansion scale (Hughes et al., 2019; 10 items; $\alpha = .76$; $M = 4.72$, $SD = .74$; for example, “I enjoy doing new things”), with the five highest-loading reverse-scored items and the five highest-loading nonreversed-scored items from the original scale.

Relational Self-Expansion. Participants completed the relational self-change scale (Mattingly et al., 2014), which includes a subscale assessing relational self-expansion. Participants indicated whether “in the past 6 months, by being with my partner . . .” they had self-expanded (3

items; $\alpha = .84$; $M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.36$; e.g., “I have added positive qualities to my sense of self”).

Self-Esteem. Participants completed the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965; 10 items; $\alpha = .90$, $M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.11$; for example, “I feel that I’m a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others”).

Satisfaction With Life. Participants completed a scale assessing their life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985; 5 items; $\alpha = .87$, $M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.28$, for example, “I am satisfied with my life”).

Daily Diary

Self-Concept Clarity. Participants completed a 1-item measure of self-concept clarity, adapted from Campbell et al., 1996 (“Today, I had a clear sense of who I am and what I am”; $M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.28$).

General Self-Expansion. Participants completed a 1-item measure of general self-expansion (“Today, I added to my sense of who I am”; $M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.55$).

Relational Self-Expansion. Participants completed a 1-item measure of relational self-expansion (“Today, being with my partner helped me have new experiences”; $M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.71$).

Satisfaction With Life. Participants completed a 1-item measure of satisfaction with their lives, adapted from Diener et al., 1985 (“Today, I felt satisfied with my life”; $M = 5.31$, $SD = 1.51$).

Happiness. Participants completed a 1-item measure assessing how happy they felt in that moment (“Happy”; $M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.74$).

Results

Data Analytic Strategy. We used multilevel modeling and centered all variables. For intake data, we used a two-level multilevel model with individuals nested within couples. For daily diary data, we used a two-level crossed model with individuals nested within couples, and individuals and days crossed (Kenny et al., 2006). Within the diary data, we partitioned daily predictors into between-person and within-person components for most analyses (Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013). To separate within-person effects and between-person effects, we person-mean-centered predictors (capturing within-person variance; for example, the extent to which a person self-expands more or less than they typically do) and created an aggregate across the 2 weeks (capturing between-person variance; e.g., the extent to which a person self-expands more or less across the 2-

week diary period compared to other participants). When analyses focus on the within-person effects, we control for between-person effects.

Self-Concept Clarity and Self-Expansion: Is There a Tradeoff? We first examined associations between self-concept clarity and general self-expansion preferences at intake. Supporting H1a, self-concept clarity at intake was positively associated with general self-expansion preferences, $b = .11$, $t(211.98) = 2.46$, $p = .015$, 95% CI = .02, .19. We then tested H1b. Intake self-concept clarity was not associated with relational self-expansion, $b = .04$, $t(204.43) = .45$, $p = .656$, 95% CI = $-.12$, .19. Next, we examined self-concept clarity and general self-expansion in the daily diary. At times when people felt more self-concept clarity than they typically do, they self-expanded more, $b = .45$, $t(2128.08) = 16.67$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .40, .50, controlling for between-person self-concept clarity, $b = .63$, $t(205.41) = 9.97$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .51, .76. This effect replicated with relational self-expansion; when people felt more self-concept clarity than they typically do, they self-expanded more with their partner, $b = .31$, $t(2112.44) = 9.36$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .24, .37, controlling for between-person self-concept clarity, $b = .39$, $t(212.37) = 5.38$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .25, .53. Thus, we found partial support for H1b; within the daily diary, people with lower self-concept clarity were less likely to self-expand.

Next, we considered tradeoffs between self-expansion and self-concept clarity—whether self-expanding is associated with lower self-concept clarity, either on a given day or on the next (competing hypotheses H2a and H2b). We first tested a model predicting daily self-concept clarity from within-person general self-expansion and between-person self-expansion. Supporting H2b, people who self-expanded more than typical experienced higher self-concept clarity that day, $b = .26$, $SE = .02$, $t(2118.22) = 16.78$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .23, .29, and people who chronically self-expanded more across the 2 weeks reported higher self-concept clarity, $b = .52$, $SE = .05$, $t(199.28) = 10.14$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .42, .62. We also conducted lagged analyses to examine a reduction to self-concept clarity the day after self-expanding. Controlling for self-concept clarity the previous day, $b = .02$, $SE = .02$, $t(1979.33) = 1.45$, $p = .147$, 95% CI = $-.009$, .06, self-expanding the previous day was not associated with a drop in self-concept clarity the following day, $b = .008$, $SE = .01$, $t(1969.43) = .56$, $p = .579$, 95% CI = $-.02$, .04.

We replicated these results with relational self-expansion. Supporting H2b, when a person self-expanded due to their relationship more than typical, they experienced higher self-concept clarity, $b = .13$, $SE = .01$, $t(2073.76) = 9.76$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .11, .16; likewise, people whose relationship nudged them to self-expand more across the 2 weeks experienced higher self-concept clarity, $b =$



Figure 1. Interaction Between Intake Self-concept Clarity and Daily Self-Expansion Predicting Daily Self-Concept Clarity.

.33, $SE = .06$, $t(200.81) = 5.77$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .22, .45. We then tested a potential drop the following day in self-concept clarity. Controlling for self-concept clarity the previous day, $b = .02$, $SE = .02$, $t(1978.46) = 1.41$, $p = .159$, 95% CI = $-.009$, .05, there was no delayed drop of relational self-expansion the previous day on self-concept clarity the following day, $b = .02$, $SE = .01$, $t(1990.65) = 1.44$, $p = .151$, 95% CI = $-.006$, .04.

Overall, we did not detect any detriments of self-expansion to self-concept clarity, supporting H2b. Indeed, self-expansion, on a given day and across the 2 weeks, was associated with higher self-concept clarity. We found no evidence that self-expansion was associated with reduced self-concept clarity the following day. We also examined growth curve models to determine if self-expansion predicted decline in self-concept clarity across the 2 weeks. We found no evidence for this possibility; Online Appendix B.

Is There a Tradeoff for People With Lower Self-Concept Clarity? We examined whether self-expansion presents a tradeoff for well-being for those with lower initial self-concept clarity (competing hypotheses H3a and H3b). We tested a model predicting daily self-concept clarity from daily self-expansion, $b = .26$, $t(2111.02) = 17.29$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .23, .29, intake self-concept clarity, $b = .29$, $t(206.46) = 6.31$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .20, .38, and their interaction, $b = -.11$, $t(2112.78) = -8.00$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = $-.13$, $-.08$, controlling for between-person self-expansion, $b = .49$, $t(203.56) = 10.23$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .40, .58; Figure 1.

Simple slopes analyses revealed that among people with lower self-concept clarity at intake ($-1 SD$), self-expanding more than typical was associated with higher self-concept clarity that day, $b = .38$, $t(2124.80) = 17.62$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .34, .43. Self-expanding more than typical was associated with higher daily self-concept clarity among people with higher self-concept clarity at intake ($+1 SD$), although the effect was descriptively smaller, $b = .14$, $t(2124.98) = 6.72$, $p < .001$; 95% CI = .10, .18. These results support H3b.

We then tested a model predicting daily self-concept clarity from daily relational self-expansion, $b = .13$, $t(2067.14) = 9.56$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .10, .16, intake self-concept clarity, $b = .32$, $t(204.14) = 6.26$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .22, .42, and their interaction, $b = -.04$, $t(2124.13) = -3.34$, $p = .001$, 95% CI = $-.06$ to $-.02$, controlling for between-person self-expansion, $b = .32$, $t(200.37) = 6.01$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .22, .43; Figure 2.

Simple slopes analyses revealed that, among people with lower self-concept clarity at intake ($-1 SD$), self-expanding with their partner more than typical was associated with higher self-concept clarity that day, $b = .18$, $t(2107.44) = 9.40$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .14, .21. Self-expanding more than typical with their partner was associated with higher daily self-concept clarity among people with higher self-concept clarity at intake ($+1 SD$), although the effect was descriptively smaller, $b = .08$, $t(2115.51) = 4.25$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .05, .12, again supporting H3b.

Finally, we conducted lagged analyses to examine a possible delayed drop in self-concept clarity following self-

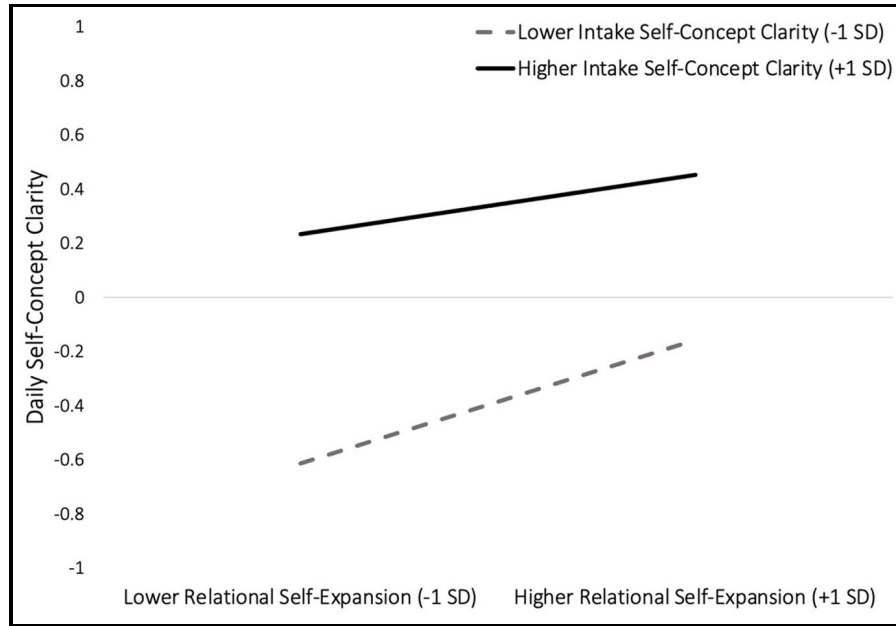


Figure 2. Interaction Between Intake Self-concept Clarity and Daily Relational Self-Expansion Predicting Daily Self-Concept Clarity

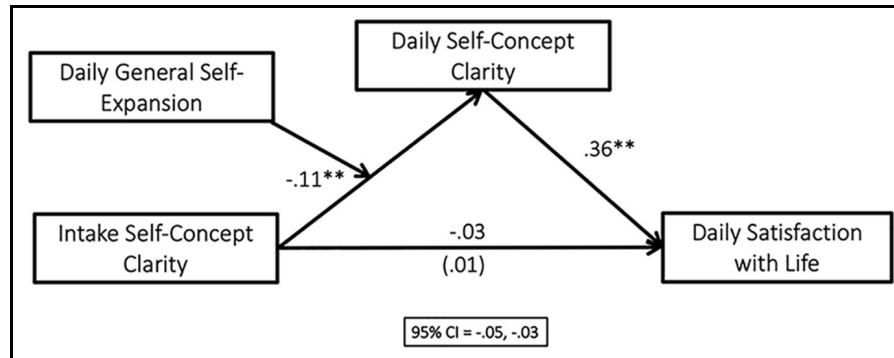


Figure 3. Moderated Mediation: The Interaction Between Intake Self-Concept Clarity and Daily General Self-Expansion Predicting Daily Self-Concept Clarity, Which in Turn Is Associated With Daily Satisfaction With Life

expansion among people with initially low self-concept clarity. We found no evidence that self-expanding the previous day harmed self-concept clarity based on a person's initial self-concept clarity for either general self-expansion, $b = -.02$, $SE = .01$, $t(1987.95) = -1.48$, $p = .139$, 95% CI = $-.04, .005$, or relational self-expansion, $b = -.02$, $SE = .01$, $t(1983.34) = -1.52$, $p = .130$, 95% CI = $-.04, .005$; full model parameters in Online Appendix C.

Self-Concept Clarity, Self-Expansion, and Well-Being

We then examined whether, when people with low self-concept clarity *do* self-expand, it is associated with downstream well-being (H3a and H3b). We tested a moderated

mediation model examining whether the interaction above (intake self-concept clarity moderating the association between daily self-expansion and daily self-concept clarity) was associated with satisfaction with life. We used the Monte Carlo Method for Assessing Mediation (MCMAM; Selig & Preacher, 2008) with 20,000 resamples. The confidence interval was significant (Figure 3); when people with lower self-concept clarity self-expanded generally more than they typically do, they experienced higher self-concept clarity, and higher satisfaction with life, supporting H3b.

We replicated these findings with relational self-expansion. We tested a moderated mediation model examining whether the interaction between intake self-concept clarity and daily relational self-expansion on daily self-concept

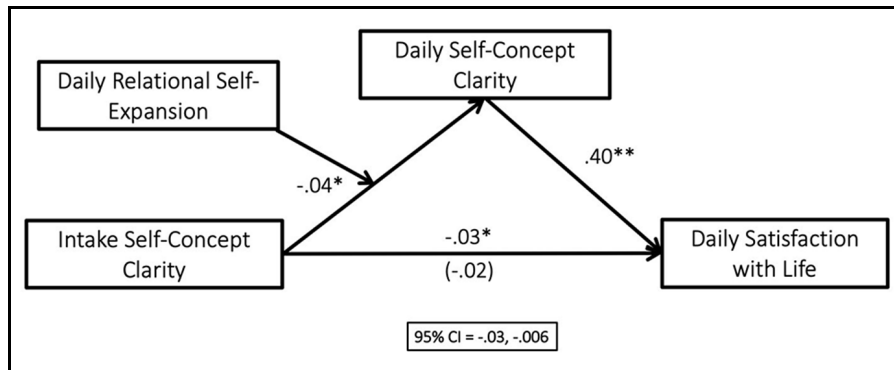


Figure 4. Moderated Mediation: The Interaction Between Intake Self-Concept Clarity and Daily Relational Self-Expansion Predicting Daily Self-Concept Clarity, Which in Turn Is Associated With Daily Satisfaction With Life

clarity was, in turn, associated with satisfaction with life. The confidence interval was significant (Figure 4). When people with lower self-concept clarity self-expanded with their partner more than typical, they experienced higher self-concept clarity, which was associated with greater satisfaction with life, supporting H3b.

We found an identical pattern of effects with relationship satisfaction; Online Appendix D.

Alternative Explanations. All hypothesis tests yielded identical conclusions when controlling for self-esteem, with one exception—the association between self-concept clarity and self-expansion preferences at intake, $b = .03$, $t(207.85) = .50$, $p = .618$, 95% CI = $-.08, .14$. All daily diary hypothesis tests yielded identical conclusions when controlling for self-esteem and daily happiness. The moderated mediation models predicting daily satisfaction with life held when controlling for intake satisfaction with life.

General Discussion

Is there a tradeoff between self-expansion and self-concept clarity? People with lower self-concept clarity are more reluctant to self-expand, either alone or through a partner—is this reluctance explained by risks to self-concept clarity resulting from self-expanding? It is not. People who self-expanded more across the 2 weeks experienced higher, not lower, self-concept clarity. We did not find evidence for even a temporary tradeoff; there was no drop in self-concept clarity on days following self-expansion. When people self-expanded more than typical, they reported higher, not lower, self-concept clarity, especially for people whose self-concept clarity was initially lowest. Although we replicated the finding that people with lower self-concept clarity self-expand less (Emery et al., 2015; Hughes et al., 2019), when they *did* self-expand, they reported higher self-concept clarity, and higher satisfaction with life. These effects were robust across general and

relational self-expansion. Ironically, the people who most resist self-expanding may be the ones who benefit most.

Why might self-expansion be associated with higher self-concept clarity, particularly among people whose self-concept clarity was initially low? New experiences evoke self-discernment, resulting in a clearer sense of self (Adam et al., 2018). When people self-expand, they must incorporate the new aspect into their self-concepts; perhaps this process enables people with lower self-concept clarity to gain insight into making sense of who they are. Moreover, self-expansion results in a larger self-concept (e.g., Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2014); perhaps adding content to the self enables people to seek new links between aspects of who they are and gain clarity. Reorganizing and integrating appear to take place remarkably quickly; the daily measures in this study should have revealed an initial drop in self-concept clarity on the day of self-expanding had there been even a temporary tradeoff, but did not.

Integration may have been eased because we examined self-expansion in daily life rather than activities imposed by an experimenter in the laboratory, an employer at the workplace, or a cultural shock when living abroad. These effects may follow tenets of “niche picking” (Roberts & Nickel, 2017), which posits that as people can often select their environments, they may choose developmental paths that reinforce traits and result in greater personality stability, despite a new environment. Participants may have chosen self-expansion opportunities in daily life that enabled growth that was most easily integrated within their sense of self. Even relational self-expansion may be a form of niche picking—close others are at least as strong a resource for scaffolding and affirming one’s sense of self as they are a resource for growth and change (Emery et al., 2018; Slotter & Gardner, 2014; Swann, 2009). In fact, although self-expansion theory originally examined falling in love and establishing new relationships, perhaps a committed long-term relationship with a partner who knows one well provides an ideal “niche” for self-expanding.

The present research has several strengths and limitations. The longitudinal design afforded an especially strong examination of our hypotheses; because people with lower self-concept clarity tend not to self-expand, examining what happens when they *do* self-expand required multiple time points to capture times when they might self-expand (the daily diary), and a measure of self-concept clarity assessed in advance (the intake survey). Our effects were consistent across both relational and general self-expansion. Moreover, the participants were fairly socioeconomically and racially diverse, which increases the generalizability of our results beyond traditional undergraduate samples. However, all participants were based in the United States. Given that self-concept clarity differs across cultures and that self-concept clarity is more strongly associated with well-being in individualistic cultures (Campbell et al., 1996), it would be interesting to examine whether these effects emerge in collectivistic contexts.

This work is limited by the conclusions we can draw about directionality of the effects; we cannot definitively conclude whether self-concept clarity affects self-expansion or if self-expansion affects self-concept clarity. Despite using intensive diary methods, we did not find significant lagged effects or growth curve effects. The associations between these variables could also be confounded by a third variable. Although we controlled for self-esteem and daily happiness, it is possible that another, third variable, is driving the effects. We are not confident that a one-shot experimental approach would address this limitation, given previous work showing that even when people with lower self-concept clarity have an opportunity to self-expand, they do not take it (Emery et al., 2015). We hope, however, that future work will continue to parse the directionality of these effects.

This research relied on people's self-reports. Self-concept clarity, as a subjective construct, is typically assessed through self-report (although see Slotter et al., 2015). However, self-expansion can be studied objectively. When people are asked to describe who they are on a given day, the number of self-descriptors increases after they have fallen in love (i.e., people self-expand; Aron et al., 1995). Future research could examine whether the same effects emerge for objective measures of self-expansion—on days when people with lower self-concept clarity objectively add more new content to their self-concepts, do they likewise experience boosts in self-concept clarity?

The current studies did not examine whether the self-content people added was positive or negative (Mattingly et al., 2014). Although positive self-expansion is more commonly studied, negative expansion also occurs (Slotter & Gardner, 2012). Whether valence moderates the influence of self-expansion on self-concept clarity may depend on how the new information is organized (Showers, 1992). Theories of self-organization highlight two styles: one which thoughtfully integrates positive and negative beliefs

within existing self-aspects, and another which compartmentalizes negative self-knowledge away from the rest of the self. If adding negative attributes nudges a self-discernment process similar to that evoked by novel cultural experiences (e.g., Adam et al., 2018), it should encourage an integration strategy that boosts clarity. However, defensive compartmentalization of negative attributes would likely reduce clarity (Thomas et al., 2013). Future studies should examine the extent to which self-expansion valence influences well-being.

Although the current results dispute a tradeoff between self-expansion and self-concept clarity as an explanation for why people low in self-concept clarity resist self-expanding, they leave the ultimate explanation unknown. Participants with low self-concept clarity appeared, if anything, to experience greater associated benefits in terms of self-concept clarity and well-being on the days when they engaged in more self-expansion than typical. And yet, they were less actually likely to self-expand across the two-week period, and less likely to report preferences for self-expansion at intake. Understanding their hesitancy remains an avenue for future research.

Conclusion

Although self-expansion is typically associated with well-being (Campbell et al., 1996), William James (1890) theorized that the more content in a person's self-concept, the more difficult it is to understand the self as a whole. To date, research has not investigated a potential tradeoff between self-expansion and self-concept clarity. We found no evidence for a possible tradeoff—in fact, self-expanding was associated with higher self-concept clarity, especially among people who initially were low in self-concept clarity. Contrary to James's assertion that “the thing is impossible,” it appears that when people self-expand, they also experience a clearer sense of who they are.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Eli Finkel and Erica Slotter for helpful comments on a previous version of this paper; they also thank Eli Finkel for his contributions to the main study, and the following research assistants: Brianna Bradley, Shea Christian, Mina Cuhadar, Steven Du, Julia Gaumond, Kaylee Guajardo, Mey Kaynakcioglu, Jiyul Kim, Irmak Kindap, Arianita Krasniqi, Emily Lin, Natalie Olson, Elise Parisian, Alison Rosengren, Patrick Ryan, Hope Salvador, Jason Schwartz, and Emma Steinberg.


Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Lydia F. Emery  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5616-8222>

Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

Notes

1. We enrolled participants between April 2019 and March 2020. We originally aimed to collect 150 couples; however, we had to stop enrolling new participants in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in the final sample size of 108 couples. See Emery & Finkel, 2021 for additional use of this data set.
2. Couples also completed filmed interactions and follow-up surveys, which included some of our variables of interest—self-concept clarity, relational self-expansion, and well-being. We focused our analyses on the intake and daily diary, as that portion of the study afforded the best test of our research questions.

References

- Adam, H., Obodaru, O., Lu, J. G., Maddux, W. W., & Galinsky, A. D. (2018). The shortest path to oneself leads around the world: Living abroad increases self-concept clarity. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *145*, 16–29.
- Aron, A., & Aron, E. N. (1986). *Love and the expansion of self: Understanding attraction and satisfaction*. New York: Hemisphere.
- Aron, A., & Aron, E. N. (1997). Self-expansion motivation and including other in the self. In S. Duck (Ed.), *Handbook of personal relationships: Theory, research, and interventions* (2nd ed., pp. 251–270). John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Aron, A., Lewandowski, G., Mashek, D., & Aron, E. N. (2013). The self-expansion model of motivation and cognition in close relationships. In J. A. Simpson, & L. Campbell (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of close relationships* (pp. 90–115). Oxford University Press.
- Aron, A., Paris, M., & Aron, E. N. (1995). Falling in love: Prospective studies of self-concept change. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*(6), 1102–1112.
- Block, J. (1961). Ego-identity, role variability, and adjustment. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *25*, 392–397.
- Bolger, N., & Laurenceau, J. P. (2013). *Intensive longitudinal methods*. Guilford Press.
- Campbell, J. D. (1990). Self-esteem and clarity of the self-concept. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *59*(3), 538–549.
- Campbell, J. D., Trapnell, P. D., Heine, S. J., Katz, I. M., Lavallee, L. F., & Lehman, D. R. (1996). Self-concept clarity: Measurement, personality correlates, and cultural boundaries. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *70*(1), 141–156.
- Carswell, K. L., Muise, A., Harasymchuk, C., Horne, R. M., Visserman, M. L., & Impett, E. A. (2021). Growing desire or growing apart? Consequences of personal self-expansion for romantic passion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *121*, 354–377.
- Diener, E. D., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The satisfaction with life scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, *49*(1), 71–75.
- Donahue, E. M., Robins, R. W., Roberts, B. W., & John, O. P. (1993). The divided self: Concurrent and longitudinal effects of psychological adjustment and social roles on self-concept differentiation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *64*, 834–846.
- Emery, L. F., & Finkel, E. J. (2021). Connect or protect? Social class and self-protection in romantic relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000368>.
- Emery, L. F., Gardner, W. L., Carswell, K. L., & Finkel, E. J. (2018). You can't see the real me: Attachment avoidance, self-verification, and self-concept clarity. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *44*(8), 1133–1146.
- Emery, L. F., Gardner, W. L., Finkel, E. J., & Carswell, K. L. (2018). “You’ve changed”: Low self-concept clarity predicts lack of support for partner change. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *44*(3), 318–331.
- Emery, L. F., Walsh, C., & Slotter, E. B. (2015). Knowing who you are and adding to it: Reduced self-concept clarity predicts reduced self-expansion. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *6*(3), 259–266.
- Hughes, E. K., Slotter, E. B., & Lewandowski, G. W. Jr. (2019). Expanding who I am: Validating the self-expansion preference scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, *102*, 792–803.
- James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology*. Harvard University Press.
- Kenny, D. A., Kashy, D. A., & Cook, W. L. (2006). *Dyadic data analysis*. Guilford Press.
- Mattingly, B. A., & Lewandowski, G. W. (2014). Expanding the self brick by brick: Nonrelational self-expansion and self-concept size. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *5*, 484–490.
- Mattingly, B. A., Lewandowski, G. W., & McIntyre, K. P. (2014). “You make me a better/worse person”: A two-dimensional model of relationship self-change. *Personal Relationships*, *21*(1), 176–190.
- Mattingly, B. A., & Lewandowski, G. W. Jr. (2013). The power of one: Benefits of individual self-expansion. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *8*(1), 12–22.
- McIntyre, K. P., Mattingly, B. A., & Lewandowski, G. W. Jr. (2015). When “we” changes “me” the two-dimensional model of relational self-change and relationship outcomes. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *32*(7), 857–878.
- Muise, A., Harasymchuk, C., Day, L. C., Bacev-Giles, C., Gere, J., & Impett, E. A. (2019). Broadening your horizons: Self-expanding activities promote desire and satisfaction in established romantic relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *116*(2), 237–258.
- Ritchie, T. D., Sedikides, C., Wildschut, T., Arndt, J., & Gidron, Y. (2011). Self-concept clarity mediates the relation between stress and subjective well-being. *Self and Identity*, *10*(4), 493–508.
- Roberts, B. W., & Nickel, L. B. (2017). A critical evaluation of the Neo-Socioanalytic Model of personality. In J. Specht (Ed.), *Personality development across the lifespan* (pp. 157–177). Elsevier Academic Press.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton University Press.
- Selig, J. P., & Preacher, K. J. (2008). Monte Carlo method for assessing mediation: An interactive tool for creating confidence intervals for indirect effects [Computer software].
- Showers, C. (1992). Compartmentalization of positive and negative self-knowledge: Keeping bad apples out of the bunch.

- Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 62(6), 1036–1049.
- Slotter, E. B., & Gardner, W. L. (2009). Where do you end and I begin? Evidence for anticipatory, motivated self-other integration between relationship partners. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96(6), 1137–1151.
- Slotter, E. B., & Gardner, W. L. (2012). The dangers of dating the “bad boy” (or girl): When does romantic desire encourage us to take on the negative qualities of potential partners? *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(5), 1173–1178.
- Slotter, E. B., & Gardner, W. L. (2014). Remind me who I am: Social interaction strategies for maintaining the threatened self-concept. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40(9), 1148–1161.
- Slotter, E. B., & Walsh, C. M. (2017). All role transitions are not experienced equally: Associations among self-change, emotional reactions, and self-concept clarity. *Self and Identity*, 16(5), 531–556.
- Slotter, E. B., Winger, L., & Soto, N. (2015). Lost without each other: The influence of group identity loss on the self-concept. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 19(1), 15–30.
- Swann, W. B., Jr. (2009). Self-Verification. In H. T. Reis & S. Sprecher (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Human Relationships* (Vol. 3, pp. 1437–1438). SAGE Publications.
- Thomas, J. S., Ditzfeld, C. P., & Showers, C. J. (2013). Compartmentalization: A window on the defensive self. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 7(10), 719–731.
- Treadgold, R. (1999). Transcendent vocations: Their relationship to stress, depression, and clarity of self-concept. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 39(1), 81–105.

Author Biographies

Lydia F. Emery is a postdoctoral scholar at Northwestern University.

Erin K. Hughes is a graduate student at Northwestern University.

Wendi L. Gardner is faculty at Northwestern University.

Handling Editor: Jennifer Bosson