

Knowing Who You Are and Adding to It: Reduced Self-Concept Clarity Predicts Reduced Self-Expansion

Lydia F. Emery, Courtney Walsh and Erica B. Slotter
Social Psychological and Personality Science published online 17 October 2014
DOI: 10.1177/1948550614555029

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://spp.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/10/16/1948550614555029>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

Society for Personality and Social Psychology



Association for Research in Personality
ASSOCIATION FOR
RESEARCH IN PERSONALITY

European Association of Social Psychology



Society of Experimental and Social Psychology



Additional services and information for *Social Psychological and Personality Science* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://spp.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://spp.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Oct 17, 2014

[What is This?](#)

Knowing Who You Are and Adding to It: Reduced Self-Concept Clarity Predicts Reduced Self-Expansion

Social Psychological and
Personality Science
1-8

© The Author(s) 2014
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1948550614555029
spps.sagepub.com



Lydia F. Emery¹, Courtney Walsh², and Erica B. Slotter³

Abstract

People are generally motivated to increase the diversity of their self-concepts, within their relationships and outside of them. Self-expansion enhances both individual and relationship well-being; however, almost no research has investigated what circumstances attenuate people's desire for self-expansion. The present research addressed this question by testing the central hypothesis that experiencing lower self-concept clarity would predict less interest in self-expansion. Across three studies, the present research demonstrated that individuals primed with low self-concept clarity expressed less interest in self-expansion outside of romantic relationships (Studies 1–2) and were less likely to actually self-expand by incorporating attributes from a potential romantic partner into the self (Study 3). Despite the benefits of self-expansion, certain situations may reduce people's desire to add content to the self.

Keywords

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

I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865/1999)

Although not everyone falls down a rabbit hole, grows to the size of a house, or attends a mad tea party, people often have experiences that catalyze self-change. Some ways of altering the self, especially through adding new content to one's identity, are usually seen as a positive experience and even a “central human motivation” (Aron & Aron, 1997, p. 251). However, as Alice implies, self-change can occur unexpectedly or unconsciously, suggesting that it may not always be desirable. The current research examined the circumstances under which people may not be motivated to change their self-concept. We proposed that people experiencing uncertainty about who they are would exhibit less desired and actual expansion of their self-concepts.

Self-expansion

The self-concept includes everything that an individual claims as “me” or “mine”: the physical attributes, social relationships, motives, personal possessions, and so on, that constitute people's sense of who they are (Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003; James, 1890; Markus, 1977). Although the self-concept is often perceived as temporally consistent, it is continuously constructed through new life experiences and is malleable over time (Markus, 1977; Markus & Wurf, 1987; McConnell, 2011). One means of altering the self-concept is

self-expansion—adding diverse content to the self-concept, including new identities, knowledge, or social roles (Aron & Aron, 1997).

People often self-expand through adopting aspects of close others (Aron & Aron, 1997). Empirical evidence finds that people self-expand in relationships by taking on characteristics of their partners, typically via shared experiences and time (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). After falling in love, people exhibit more diverse self-concepts (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995). In long-term romantic relationships, people experience high self–other overlap, mistaking traits describing a romantic partner as characteristic of the self (Mashek, Aron, & Boncino, 2003). People can also self-expand outside of relationships by embracing new hobbies or interests on their own (Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2014).

Individuals anticipating the start of a romantic relationship will spontaneously self-expand without shared experience to incorporate characteristics of potential partners (Slotter & Gardner, 2009, 2012; Slotter & Lucas, 2012). However, spontaneous self-expansion only occurs when individuals are

¹ Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA

² University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA

³ Villanova University, Villanova, PA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Lydia F. Emery, Department of Psychology, Northwestern University, Swift Hall 409, Evanston, IL 60208, USA.

Email: lemer@u.northwestern.edu

interested in a relationship with the potential partner (Slotter & Gardner, 2009). Spontaneous self-expansion emerges on both explicit measures and implicit reaction time measures, suggesting that self-expansion may not be a conscious decision (Slotter & Gardner, 2009, 2012).

In romantic contexts, self-expansion benefits relationship well-being through increased relationship quality (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000; Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2007; Mattingly, Lewandowski, & McIntyre, 2014). Both in and outside of romantic relationships, self-expansion also fosters individual well-being, via increased self-efficacy and self-esteem (Aron et al., 1995; Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2013a, 2013b). Although past research has provided clear indications of the process and consequences of self-expansion, little is known about *when* people desire self-expansion and when they do not. Given the benefits of self-expansion, examining when people avoid self-expansion has ramifications for a broader understanding of psychological well-being.

Self-Concept Clarity

After expanding the self, people are theorized to integrate their new attributes into their self-concept to maintain consistency (Aron & Aron, 1997). If too many traits are added to the self-concept too quickly, people's understanding of the self could become unstable. This potential for a fragile sense of self dovetails with self-concept clarity (SCC), which denotes the clarity and coherence that people perceive in their self-concepts and whether their self-aspects are coherent and stable over time (Campbell et al., 1996). Like self-expansion, SCC enhances well-being. Low SCC is associated with poor relationship quality, low self-esteem, stress, and depression (Campbell et al., 2003; Lewandowski, Nardone, & Raines, 2010; Treadgold, 1999). Situational factors can reduce SCC. Positive and negative daily events, respectively, increase or decrease SCC; romantic relationship dissolution and changing roles also predict reduced SCC (Light & Visser, 2013; Nezlek & Plesko, 2001; Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010). SCC can even be experimentally manipulated (Beymer, Slotter, & Gardner, 2014; Csank & Conway, 2004).

In the present research, we investigated whether reduced SCC predicts less interest in self-expansion. Given that people vary in the amount of SCC they possess, it could be conceptualized as a finite resource. When resources are limited, people are more cautious in expending them (Shah, Mullainathan, & Shafir, 2012). Analogously, people with low SCC may be reticent to self-expand, because they risk exhausting an already limited supply of self-clarity. If people with high SCC adopt attributes that conflict with other aspects of their self-concepts, they may lose some self-clarity, but given that they had a large pool of it initially, their overall well-being will probably not diminish. Conversely, if people with low SCC take on attributes that do not cohere with their self-concept, they may lose what little clarity of self they had. Despite the benefits of self-expansion, it risks lowering SCC, and we expect someone who with low SCC will not take this risk.

Current Studies

People are motivated to add diverse content to their self-concepts, both in romantic relationships (Aron et al., 1995; Slotter & Gardner, 2009) and outside of them (Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2014). However, little or no research has examined what circumstances decrease motivation to self-expand. Given the possibility of adopting an attribute that conflicts with the rest of the self-concept, we expect that lower SCC may deter individuals from self-expanding.

We predicted that individuals with lower dispositional SCC (Study 1) or experimentally reduced SCC (Study 2) would report lower interest in nonrelational self-expansion. Moreover, we expected that individuals primed with reduced SCC (Study 3) would be less likely to self-expand in the context of a potential romantic relationship. By examining both relational and nonrelational self-expansion, we hoped both to increase the generalizability of our findings and to conceptually replicate Study 2 in Study 3.

We also sought to replicate an effect found in previous research that individuals only adopt characteristics of potential partners when motivated to affiliate with the person. As such, we examined whether higher romantic interest in the potential partner would predict greater spontaneous self-expansion across each level of our SCC manipulation (Study 3). We predicted that, when primed with reduced SCC, romantic interest would not predict self-expansion, as these individuals should avoid self-expansion in the first place. In contrast, in the control and increased SCC conditions, we predicted greater romantic interest to predict greater self-expansion.

Finally, we aimed to establish that SCC would predict reduced interest in self-expansion beyond any contributions of self-esteem (Studies 1–3). SCC and self-esteem are distinct constructs. Conceptually, SCC encompasses the perception that the self is meaningfully and consistently organized (Campbell, 1990), whereas self-esteem denotes believing that the self is positive and worthwhile (James, 1890). Empirically, SCC and self-esteem are often positively associated, but this association is modest (Campbell, 1990; Slotter et al., 2010). In the context of self-expansion, we expected that uncertainty about the self would predict reduced interest in adding information to the self-concept, whereas self-positivity or negativity would not.

Study 1

Method

Participants and Procedure

One hundred and sixty-six adults (88 women) from the United States participated through Amazon.com's "Mechanical Turk" (MTurk) website. After completing measures online, participants were debriefed and compensated.

Table 1. Means for Ratings of SCC and Self-Expansion Measures.

	Study 2			Study 3		
	N	SCC	Self-Expansion Interest	N	SCC	Post-Profile Viewing Target Attribute Self-Rating
SCC Confirmation	59	4.62 (0.98)	6.21 (0.61)	46	4.93 (1.13)	3.13 (1.75)
SCC Threat	61	3.92 (1.07)	5.89 (0.76)	52	4.29 (1.48)	1.93 (0.93)
Control	57	4.27 (0.86)	6.26 (0.58)	53	4.88 (1.22)	2.81 (1.48)

Note. SCC = self-concept clarity. Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

Measures

Self-concept clarity. Participants completed a 12-item measure of SCC (e.g., “In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am”; 1 = *disagree strongly*, 7 = *agree strongly*; $\alpha = .94$; $M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.33$; Campbell et al., 1996).

Self-esteem. Participants completed a 10-item measure of dispositional self-esteem (e.g., “I think that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others”; 1 = *disagree strongly*, 7 = *agree strongly*; $\alpha = .93$; $M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.28$; Rosenberg, 1965).

Interest in self-expansion. Participants completed an 8-item measure of interest in nonrelational self-expansion—that is, expanding their self-concept on their own (e.g., “having new experiences” and “expanding myself”; 1 = *not at all*, 8 = *extremely*; $\alpha = .85$; $M = 6.54$, $SD = 1.05$; Mattingly, Lewandowski, & Bobrowski, 2013).

Results

All variables were standardized ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$) to ease interpreting effects and calculating effect sizes; SCC and self-esteem were then entered simultaneously into a regression predicting interest in self-expansion. As hypothesized, greater SCC predicted greater self-expansion interest, $\beta = .25$, $t(163) = 3.21$, $p < .01$, 95% confidence interval (CI): [.07, .31], whereas self-esteem did not, $\beta = -.09$, $t(163) = -1.19$, $p = .24$, 95% CI: [−.03, .01].

Study 2

Study 1 established a link between SCC and desire to self-expand. However, it did not investigate the causal association between clarity of self and desire to self-expand. Study 2 examined this idea by experimentally manipulating SCC.

Method

Participants

One hundred and seventy-seven undergraduates (92 women) participated in the current study over two semesters for partial credit toward a course requirement (age $M = 18.59$, $SD = 0.89$, range = 18–22).

Procedure

During a single laboratory session, after consenting to participate and completing demographic questionnaires, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three SCC conditions (Beymer et al., 2014). In the *threat* condition, participants generated two inconsistent self-aspects. Participants were asked to consider the various traits, preferences, characteristics, and social roles that made up who they were. They were then asked to select two that they felt contradicted each other. They were given “lazy” and “ambitious” and “funny” and “serious” as examples. They were then instructed to write about “how these two aspects of who you are sometimes come into conflict with one another in your everyday life.”

In the *confirmation* condition, participants were given similar instructions to generate two consistent self-aspects (e.g., intelligent/ambitious and serious/thoughtful) and wrote about “how these two aspects of who you are sometimes complement one another in your everyday life.” In the *control* condition, participants wrote about “your trip to get to this study today.” Participants then completed measures of SCC, self-esteem, desire for self-expansion, and a suspicion check before being debriefed. None expressed suspicion regarding the true nature of the study or the SCC manipulation.

Measures

Participants completed the same measures of SCC ($\alpha = .84$; $M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.01$), self-esteem ($\alpha = .88$; $M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.00$), and interest in self-expansion ($\alpha = .81$; $M = 6.11$, $SD = 0.68$) used in Study 1.

Results

We first conducted a manipulation check. As predicted, a between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant effect of condition on SCC, $F(2, 174) = 7.67$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$, 95% CI: [.35, 1.05] (Table 1). Planned contrasts showed that participants in the *threat* condition reported less SCC than participants in the *confirmation*, $t(174) = -3.92$, $p < .001$, or *control*, $t(174) = -1.96$, $p = .05$, conditions. Participants in the *confirmation* condition reported more SCC than participants in the *control* condition, $t(174) = 2.04$, $p < .05$. We ran a parallel analysis predicting self-esteem from condition. The SCC manipulation did not influence participants’ self-esteem, $F(2, 174) = 1.35$, $p = .26$,

partial $\eta^2 = .02$, 95% CI: $[-.09, 0.39]$. Thus, the SCC manipulation operated by influencing individuals' perceptions of having a cohesive identity, rather than the positivity with which they viewed themselves.

We next examined our primary hypothesis that individuals with lowered SCC would express less interest in self-expansion. As predicted, a between-subjects ANOVA revealed a significant effect of condition on self-expansion interest, $F(2, 174) = 5.83$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$, 95% CI: $[.09, .57]$ (Table 1). Planned contrasts revealed that participants in the *threat* condition reported less interest in self-expansion than participants in the *confirmation*, $t(174) = -2.74$, $p < .01$, or *control*, $t(174) = -3.12$, $p < .01$, conditions. However, participants in the *confirmation* condition did not express more interest in self-expansion than participants in the *control* condition, $t(174) = 0.40$, $p = .69$.

We also examined our auxiliary hypothesis that manipulated SCC but not self-esteem would predict desired self-expansion. We analyzed the respective effects of self-reported SCC and self-esteem separately within each condition, and a preliminary analysis collapsing across conditions revealed no significant effects of either SCC or self-esteem. Thus, self-reported SCC and self-esteem were entered simultaneously into regressions, predicting interest in self-expansion within each condition (all variables $M = 0$, $SD = 1$). Within the *threat* condition, lower self-reported SCC predicted less interest in self-expansion, $\beta = .42$, $t(58) = 2.20$, $p < .05$, 95% CI: $[.04, .80]$, whereas self-reported self-esteem did not, $\beta = .31$, $t(58) = 1.56$, $p = .12$, 95% CI: $[-.09, .71]$. Unexpectedly, within the *confirmation* condition, SCC did not predict interest in self-expansion, $\beta = .27$, $t(56) = 1.60$, $p = .11$, 95% CI: $[-.06, .59]$, but higher self-esteem did predict greater interest in self-expansion, $\beta = .44$, $t(56) = 2.85$, $p < .05$, 95% CI: $[.13, .74]$. In the *control* condition, neither SCC, $\beta = .03$, $t(54) = 0.21$, $p = .84$, 95% CI: $[-.28, .34]$, nor self-esteem predicted interest in self-expansion, $\beta = .13$, $t(54) = 0.90$, $p = .37$, 95% CI: $[-.15, .40]$.

Finally, none of our key effects were moderated by participant age or gender, $ps > .10$. Taken together, the results of Study 2 demonstrate that individuals with situationally reduced SCC have less interest in adding novel content to their self-concepts. In line with predictions, in our *threat* condition, lessened SCC but not self-esteem predicted reduced interest in self-expansion. Somewhat contrary to predictions, self-esteem did predict greater interest in self-expansion in the *confirmation* condition. Perhaps self-esteem can bolster interest in self-expansion when SCC is already high.

Study 3

Study 3 expanded on Study 2 by examining how altering SCC influences actual self-expansion, rather than interest in self-expansion. When motivated by a desire to affiliate with a potential romantic partner, individuals can incorporate attributes of a desired partner into their self-concepts even without interacting with the person (Slotter & Gardner, 2009). In

Study 3, we predicted that individuals primed with reduced SCC would be less likely to engage in this spontaneous self-expansion, compared to those primed with increased SCC or a control scenario.

We also predicted that our SCC manipulation would moderate the effect of individuals' affiliative motivation toward the potential partner on spontaneous self-expansion (Slotter & Gardner, 2009). We hypothesized that when experiencing a control scenario or increased SCC, individuals' greater desire to meet the potential partner would predict greater self-expansion. In contrast, we did not hypothesize affiliative motivation to predict self-expansion when SCC is reduced; self-expansion may simply be too risky in this context, regardless of motivation to affiliate. In Study 3, we also ruled out the possibility that our SCC manipulation influenced mood or affiliative motivations.

Method

Participants

One hundred and fifty-two heterosexual, single participants (87 women) from the United States completed the study in a single online session through MTurk (age $M = 30.77$, $SD = 10.06$, range = 18–63).¹

Procedure

In a single online session, after consenting to participate, participants completed demographic questionnaires and the self-rating task. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the three SCC conditions in Study 2. They then reported SCC, self-esteem, and affect.

Next, participants were told that the current study was part of an initiative to develop an online dating service. They viewed a profile of an opposite sex individual described as someone looking for a romantic relationship and interested in the new dating service. Due to the diverse ages of MTurk participants, the profile information did not include a picture. However, the profile had several statements about the person's personality and preferences. One of these indicated that the potential partner possessed the *not me* attribute that the participant had generated at the beginning of the study (see measures; e.g., "I am very *athletic* [emphasis added]. I ran track in high school and run 5k's now. I am also training for a marathon"). The other statements were the same across participants (I enjoy going to the movies with friends. I like to read. I enjoy going out to eat). After viewing the profile, participants completed filler questions about the profile layout. They then reported their interest in meeting the potential partner and completed the self-rating task a second time. Finally, participants completed a suspicion check before being debriefed and compensated. None expressed suspicion regarding the true nature of the study or the SCC manipulation.

Measures

Participants completed the same measures of SCC ($\alpha = .94$; $M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.37$) and self-esteem ($\alpha = .94$; $M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.36$) used in Studies 1 and 2.

Positive and negative affect. Participants also rated how much each of 10 positive terms (e.g., alert and inspired) and 10 negative terms (e.g., anxious and hostile) describe their present feelings (positive and negative affect schedule; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988; $\alpha_{\text{positive}} = .92$; $M_{\text{positive}} = 2.97$, $SD = 0.96$; $\alpha_{\text{negative}} = .93$; $M_{\text{negative}} = 1.35$, $SD = 0.65$).

Self-rating task. We used a well-validated measure of spontaneous self-expansion (Slotter & Gardner, 2009) to examine participants' willingness to self-expand due to their manipulated SCC. At the beginning of the study, participants rated how much each of 10 neutral or mildly positively valenced attributes (e.g., musical, artistic, and athletic; Anderson, 1968) was characteristic of them (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*; Slotter & Gardner, 2009). One idiosyncratic attribute was randomly selected from the attributes that participants rated as "not characteristic of me" (rating of 1 or 2); thus, each participant generated an attribute for the study that was not part of their self-concept ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 0.90$).

Participants completed the self-rating task again after viewing the dating profile. Key to the present study was their second self-rating of the attribute they had rated as "not characteristic of me" at the beginning of the study. This second rating served as our measure of spontaneous self-expansion ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.49$). We predicted that participants would rate the attribute as more characteristic of themselves post-profile viewing, examined in a residualized analysis controlling for their pre-profile viewing ratings, when SCC was higher. Thus, we expected participants who experienced reduced SCC to rate the attribute as less characteristic of them than participants in other conditions.

Interest in meeting the target. Participants completed a 1-item assessment of interest in meeting the target they viewed (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*; $M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.57$) as an index of affiliative motivations toward the potential partner (Slotter & Gardner, 2009).

Results

We first checked whether our manipulation altered participants' perceptions of having clear and cohesive identities. As predicted, a between-subjects ANOVA revealed a significant effect of assigned condition on SCC, $F(2, 148) = 3.21$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$, 95% CI: $[-1.12, -0.04]$ (Table 1). Planned contrasts showed that participants in the *threat* condition reported less SCC than those in the *confirmation*, $t(148) = -2.38$, $p < .05$, or *control*, $t(148) = -2.23$, $p < .05$, conditions. In contrast to Study 2, participants in the *confirmation* condition did not report significantly more SCC than participants

in the *control* condition, $t(148) = .22$, $p = .83$, although the means conformed to the expected pattern.

As in Study 2, the SCC manipulation did not influence participants' self-esteem, $F(2, 148) = 0.46$, $p = .63$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$, 95% CI: $[-.79, .31]$. The manipulation also did not influence participants' positive mood, $F(2, 148) = 1.08$, $p = .34$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$, 95% CI: $[-.18, .59]$, negative mood, $F(2, 148) = 0.72$, $p = .49$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$, 95% CI: $[-.41, .12]$, or interest in meeting the target individual, $F(2, 148) = 1.01$, $p = .36$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$, 95% CI: $[-.63, .63]$. Thus, the SCC manipulation did not operate through influencing self-esteem, mood, or romantic approach motivations.

We next examined our primary hypothesis that our manipulation influenced participants' spontaneous self-expansion. As predicted, a between-subjects analysis of covariance revealed a significant effect of condition on self-ratings of the target attribute participants generated at the beginning of the study after viewing the dating profile, $F(2, 148) = 11.33$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .14$, 95% CI: $[-1.60, -.62]$, controlling for initial self-ratings, $F(2, 148) = 39.24$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .21$, 95% CI: $[.48, .91]$ (Table 1). Planned contrasts revealed that participants in the *threat* condition endorsed the target attribute less than participants in the *confirmation*, $t(148) = 4.23$, $p < .001$, or *control*, $t(148) = -3.23$, $p < .01$, conditions, indicating less spontaneous self-expansion. Participants in the *confirmation* condition did not endorse the target attribute more than participants in the *control* condition, $t(148) = 1.13$, $p = .26$.² Reducing SCC decreased spontaneous self-expansion, but bolstering SCC did not increase spontaneous self-expansion.

Finally, we examined our auxiliary hypothesis that participants' affiliative motivation toward the target individual would differentially predict spontaneous self-expansion across conditions. When entered into a regression controlling for pre-profile viewing self-ratings (condition coded $-1 = \text{threat}$, $0 = \text{control}$, $1 = \text{confirmation}$; other variables $M = 0$, $SD = 1$), condition significantly predicted residualized post-profile viewing self-ratings as a main effect, $\beta = .39$, $t(147) = 4.59$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: $[-.22, .56]$, whereas desire to meet the potential partner did not, $\beta = .11$, $t(147) = 1.61$, $p = .11$, 95% CI: $[-.03, .25]$. As hypothesized, these main effects were qualified by a significant interaction, $\beta = .18$, $t(147) = 2.13$, $p < .05$, 95% CI: $[.01, .34]$ (Figure 1). Tests of simple effects revealed that in the *confirmation* condition, $\beta = .50$, $t(147) = 3.37$, $p < .01$, and marginally in the *control* condition, $\beta = .22$, $t(147) = 1.79$, $p = .08$, greater desire to meet the potential partner predicted higher self-ratings on the target attribute—or greater self-expansion. In contrast, as predicted, the desire to meet the potential partner did not predict self-ratings in the *threat* condition, $\beta = .09$, $t(147) = 1.54$, $p = .13$, indicating that the even strong affiliative motivation did not predict self-expansion when SCC was low. None of our key effects were moderated by participant age or gender, $ps > .10$.

The findings from Study 3 indicate that people experiencing SCC threat are less likely to self-expand when confronted with a potential romantic partner, compared to those in a control condition or whose SCC is confirmed. Bolstering SCC did not

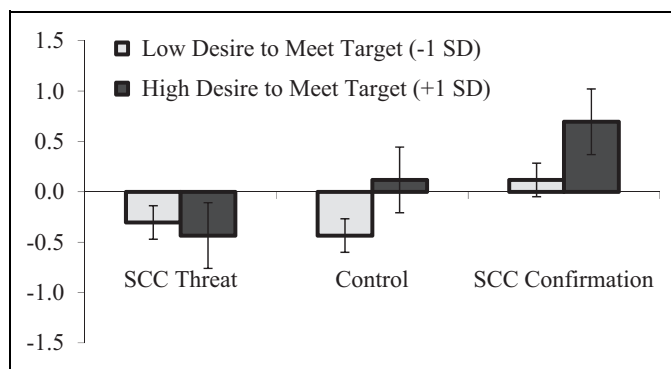


Figure 1. Study 3: Participants' residualized self-ratings after viewing the target profile as a function of SCC condition and desire to meet the target. Note. SCC = self-concept clarity. Error bars represent standard errors.

increase propensity to self-expand. Although affiliation motives increased the likelihood of self-expansion among individuals whose SCC was confirmed and marginally for those in a control condition, these motives did not influence self-expansion among those whose SCC was threatened. As interest in meeting the potential partner did not vary across conditions, perhaps this indicates that individuals in the threat condition simply would not risk self-expansion, regardless of interest in the potential partner.

General Discussion

The self-concept is malleable, and people alter their selves in the face of new experiences, new acquaintances, and life events (e.g., Aron & Aron, 1997; Markus, 1977). These changes often benefit well-being (Aron et al., 1995, 2000; Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2013b). Traditionally, self-expansion has been theorized to be a general human motivation (Aron & Aron, 1997). However, for someone with low SCC, self-expansion is risky, due to the possibility of adopting an attribute that conflicts with the rest of the self-concept and producing even lower SCC. In the present work, we hypothesized that reduced SCC would lower people's desire for self-expansion and make them less likely to self-expand.

Three studies supported this hypothesis. People with low dispositional SCC (Study 1) or whose SCC was threatened (Study 2) reported relatively less interest in nonrelational self-expansion. In a romantic context, people with experimentally lowered SCC (Study 3) were less likely than individuals in other conditions to self-expand by incorporating a novel attribute into the self-concept when encountering a potential partner. Consistent with previous research (Slotter & Gardner, 2009), greater desire to meet the potential partner predicted greater self-expansion for all participants except those whose SCC was threatened. This finding suggests that no matter how interested individuals are in a potential partner, they may be unlikely to take on that partner's characteristics when experiencing uncertainty about who they are.

This research enables a more nuanced understanding of self-expansion and self-concept change more broadly. Although past studies have established *how* people self-expand, and the benefits of self-expansion, our understanding of *when* people self-expand is relatively limited. The present research suggests that people's understanding of their self-concepts determines willingness to engage in self-growth or self-exploration. If people lack a clear sense of who they are, they avoid adding more attributes to the self-concept, perhaps because doing so would only increase their confusion about the self. These findings highlight the importance of people's views of the self in driving psychological processes.

The current studies add to the literature regarding the adverse effects of low SCC. Although previous research has established that having low SCC is associated with outcomes such as low self-esteem and neuroticism (Campbell et al., 2003), the present studies suggest that it also deters people from seizing opportunities that might bolster self-growth. They complement a growing body of research suggesting that although self-expansion is often considered to be a positive, desirable experience, it has potentially adverse consequences (e.g., taking on negative attributes; Slotter & Gardner, 2012).

The findings were robust across samples of college students and nonstudent adults, and the experimental design of Studies 2 and 3 enables us to be confident in the causal direction of the effects. Nevertheless, this research is not without limitations. A key direction for future research is examining the consequences of not taking opportunities to self-expand. Given the benefits of self-expansion (e.g., Aron et al., 1995; Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2013b), failing to self-expand is likely associated with poorer well-being and difficulty establishing romantic relationships. At the same time, if individuals with low SCC do self-expand, our theoretical framework would suggest that their SCC might be lowered even further. Understanding these well-being outcomes is crucial, given dramatic differences in life expectancy and quality of life based on individual and relationship well-being (e.g., Campbell et al., 2003; Coyne et al., 2001).

Although self-expansion can be a motivated process (Slotter & Gardner, 2009), the current study did not examine the extent to which it is conscious. That is, are people with low SCC making an intentional choice not to self-expand or does this decision occur on a more implicit level? We suspect that this process is usually not conscious. Understanding whether self-expansion is a choice potentially has implications for intervening to enhance well-being. If people with an incoherent sense of self engage in an SCC affirmation task, then they might be willing to self-expand, which would benefit the health of their romantic relationships and their individual self-growth.

The present research is limited in that it focused only on North American participants. However, people from different cultures may vary in willingness to self-expand. We suspect that cultural background may moderate the association between SCC and self-expansion. That is, the individual self tends to drive behavior in individualistic cultures, so SCC may be central in determining self-expansion; conversely, SCC may

not affect self-expansion in collectivistic cultures, where connection to others is emphasized (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Individuals from collectivistic cultures are more oriented to other people, so they may be more likely to self-expand overall. Considering the role of culture in how SCC affects self-growth is an important direction for future research, given the influence that culture plays in psychological processes and experiences.

The manipulation decreasing SCC was effective in both Study 2 and Study 3. However, the confirmation manipulation significantly increased SCC in Study 2 but not in Study 3. We suspect that the divergent effectiveness of this manipulation between Study 2 and Study 3 may stem from age differences between the samples. The average age was 18 in Study 2 and 30 in Study 3; given that younger people tend to have lower SCC than adults (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2010), it may be easier to increase SCC among younger individuals.

These studies investigated self-expansion in nonrelational (Studies 1 and 2) and relationship initiation (Study 3) contexts, suggesting that the findings are applicable to both domains. However, we did not look at this process among ongoing relationships, and future work would benefit from a dyadic approach to this question, given the influence that romantic partners exert on each other (Campbell & Simpson, 2013). If one person in the relationship has low SCC, that person's partner may be less likely to self-expand. Alternatively, if the partner of someone with low SCC does self-expand and includes that individual in the self, then the partner's own SCC may be lowered.

Conclusion

People are generally motivated to increase the size of their self-concepts, but the present research suggests that this motivation may be attenuated when people lack SCC. Individuals who do not have a clear sense of who they are express low desire for self-expansion and are less likely to self-expand when encountering a potential romantic partner. As Alice in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* observed, sometimes a previously clear sense of self becomes murky after experiencing self-change. These studies suggest that people who are already unsure of who they are appear to avoid such change altogether.

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.

Research Materials

Researchers interested in accessing study materials should contact the first author.

Notes

1. Two hundred and fifty participants were initially recruited; however, 98 did not complete the survey measures ($n = 34$), did not generate a usable *not me* attribute ($n = 35$), or were currently in a romantic relationship ($n = 29$). We report the 152 participants with usable data.
2. As in Study 2, we examined whether self-reported SCC, self-esteem, or affect would predict participants' residualized post-profile viewing self-ratings across conditions. Although all effects for reported SCC were in the correct direction, none reached statistical significance. Neither self-esteem nor affect predicted residualized self-ratings.

References

- Anderson, N. H. (1968). Application of a linear–serial model to a personality–impression task using serial presentation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *10*, 354–362.
- 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). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Aron, A., Aron, E. N., Tudor, M., & Nelson, G. (1991). Close relationships as including other in the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *60*, 241–253.
- Aron, A., Norman, C. N., Aron, E. N., McKenna, C., & Heyman, R. E. (2000). Couples' shared participation in novel and arousing activities and experienced relationship quality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *78*, 273–284.
- Aron, A., Paris, M., & Aron, E. N. (1995). Falling in love: Prospective studies of self-concept change. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*, 1102–1112.
- Beymer, S., Slotter, E. B., & Gardner, W. L. (2014) *The self soufflé: Increasing self-concept clarity allows the self to be open to new experiences*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Campbell, J. D. (1990). Self-esteem and the clarity of the self-concept. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *59*, 538–549.
- Campbell, J. D., Assanand, S., & Di Paula, A. (2003). The structure of the self-concept and its relation to psychological adjustment. *Journal of Personality*, *71*, 115–140.
- 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*, 141–156.
- Campbell, L., & Simpson, J. A. (2013). The blossoming of relationship science. In J. A. Simpson & L. Campbell (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of close relationships* (pp. 3–12). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Carroll, L. (1865/1999). *Alice's adventures in wonderland*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.
- Carson, J. W., Carson, K. M., Gil, K. M., & Baucom, D. H. (2007). Self-expansion as a mediator of relationship improvements in a mindfulness intervention. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *33*, 517–528.
- Coyne, J. C., Rohrbaugh, M. J., Shoham, V., Sonnega, J. S., Nicklas, J. M., & Cranford, J. A. (2001). Prognostic importance of marital

- quality for survival of congestive heart failure. *American Journal of Cardiology*, 88, 526–552.
- Csank, P. A. R., & Conway, M. (2004). Engaging in self-reflection changes self-concept clarity: On differences between women and men and low- and high-clarity individuals. *Sex Roles*, 50, 469–480.
- James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lewandowski, G. W., Nardone, N., & Raines, A. J. (2010). The role of self-concept clarity in relationship quality. *Self and Identity*, 9, 416–433.
- Light, A. E., & Visser, P. S. (2013). The ins and outs of the self: Contrasting role exits and role entries as predictors of self-concept clarity. *Self and Identity*, 12, 291–306.
- Lodi-Smith, J., & Roberts, B. W. (2010). Getting to know me: Social role experiences and age differences in self-concept clarity during adulthood. *Journal of Personality*, 78, 1383–1410.
- Markus, H. R. (1977). Self-schemata and processing information about the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 35, 63–78.
- Markus, H., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98, 224–253.
- Markus, H. R., & Wurf, E. (1987). The dynamic self-concept: A social psychological perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 38, 299–337.
- Mashek, D. J., Aron, A., & Boncimino, M. (2003). Confusions of self with close others. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29, 382–392.
- Mattingly, B. A., & Lewandowski, G. W. (2013a). The power of one: Benefits of individual self-expansion. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 8, 12–22.
- Mattingly, B. A., & Lewandowski, G. W. (2013b). An expanded self is a more capable self: The association between self-concept size and self-efficacy. *Self and Identity*, 12, 621–634.
- Mattingly, B. A., Lewandowski, G. W., Jr., & Bobrowski, M. E. (2013). *The Desire for Non-Relational Self-Expansion Scale*. Unpublished manuscript, Ursinus College, Collegeville, PA.
- 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, 176–190.
- McConnell, A. R. (2011). The Multiple Self-aspects Framework: Self-concept representation and its implications. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 15, 3–27.
- Nezlek, J. B., & Plesko, R. M. (2001). Day-to-day relationships among self-concept clarity, self-esteem, daily events, and mood. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27, 201–211.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Shah, A., Mullainathan, S., & Shafir, E. (2012). Some consequences of having too little. *Science*, 338, 682–685.
- 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, 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, 1173–1178.
- Slotter, E. B., Gardner, W. L., & Finkel, E. J. (2010). Who am I without you? The influence of romantic breakup on the self-concept. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 36, 147–160.
- Slotter, E. B., & Lucas, G. M. (2013). Validating a scale of self and partner change in romantic relationships: The Perceived Change in Relationships Scale. *Self and Identity*, 12, 177–185.
- Treadgold, R. (1999). Transcendent vocations: Their relationship to stress, depression, and clarity of self-concept. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 39, 81–105.
- Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54, 1063–1070.

Author Biographies

Lydia F. Emery is a graduate student at Northwestern University.

Courtney Walsh is a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin.

Erica B. Slotter is an assistant professor of Psychology at Villanova University.