Chapter 3
Sources of Self-Concept Clarity

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Abstract How we define ourselves shapes our cognition, affect, behavior, and motivation. Optimal functioning is in part contingent on having a clear sense of ourselves (Campbell et al. J Person Soc Psychol 70:141–156, 1996). But what shapes self-concept clarity? In the current chapter, I provide an overview of findings about sources of self-concept clarity. By and large, findings to date indicate effects of self-confirmation, anxiety, and uncertainty on self-concept clarity. I also provide recommendations for future investigations, with an eye toward potential moderators of the effects of self-confirmation, anxiety, and uncertainty on self-concept clarity (including the nature of self-beliefs, trait and state self-concept clarity, and self-focus) as well as additional potential antecedents of self-concept clarity (including trait self-concept clarity, situational stability, interpersonal power, group identification, reflected appraisals, social acceptance, and mood). I attend to the distinction between self-concept clarity and self-esteem, and I consider explanations of self-concept clarity from extensions of relevant existing theory [including distinctiveness hypothesis (McGuire and Padawer-Singer, J Person Soc Psychol 33:743–754, 1976), Identity Consolidation Theory (McGregor, Defensive zeal: compensatory conviction about attitudes, values, goals, groups, and self-definition in the face of personal uncertainty. In: Spencer S, Fein S, Zanna M (eds) Motivated social perception: the Ontario symposium, vol 9, pp 73–92. Erlbaum, Mahwah, 2003), Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, Optimal distinctiveness theory: its history and development. In: Van Lange PAM, Kruglanski AW, Higgins ET (eds) Handbook of theories of social psychology, vol 2, pp 81–98. Sage Publications, Los Angeles, 2012), Self-Verification Theory (Swann, Self-verification: brining social reality into harmony with the self. In: Suls J, Greenwald AG (eds) Social psychological perspectives on the self, vol 2, pp 33–66. Erlbaum, Hillsdale, 1983), Sociometer Theory (Leary, Sociometer theory. In: Van Lange PAM, Kruglanski AW, Higgins ET (eds) Handbook of theories of social psychology, vol 2, pp 141–159. Sage Publications, Los Angeles, 2012; Leary and Baumeister, The nature and function of self-esteem: sociometer theory. In: Zanna MP (ed) Advances in experimental social psychology, vol 32, pp 1–62. Academic Press, San Diego, 2000), Terror Management Theory

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How we define ourselves shapes our cognition, affect, behavior, and motivation. Optimal functioning is in part contingent on clearly knowing ourselves. Self-concept clarity is "the extent to which the contents of an individual's self-concept (e.g., perceived personal attributes) are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable," (Campbell et al., 1996, p. 141). But, what shapes self-concept clarity? In this chapter, I provide an overview of findings, and I provide recommendations for future investigations. I attend to the distinction between self-concept clarity and self-esteem, and I consider explanation of self-concept clarity by relevant existing theory.

Self-Concept Clarity: What Is It?

The nature of self-concept clarity is more thoroughly addressed elsewhere in this volume (see DeMarree and Bobrowski, Chap. 1, and Dunlop, Chap. 2). I briefly address particular considerations of its nature to provide insight into this chapter. Self-concept clarity reflects structure of self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is malleable, and thus, so too is self-concept clarity. It is distinct from self-esteem, which reflects self-evaluation. It is expressed metacognitively, subjectively, and directly via self-report, such as with the Self-Concept Clarity Scale (SCCS; Campbell et al., 1996), as well as objectively and indirectly via observations of extremity, internal consistency, and stability (both temporal stability and stability from trait to state) of self-knowledge (Campbell, 1990; Campbell & Lavallee, 1993; Campbell et al., 1996).

Self-concept clarity is a property of the entire self-concept. Recall that internal consistency between pieces of self-knowledge is a component of self-concept clarity. Thus, one could say that an individual piece of self-knowledge is clearly and confidently defined and stable over time, but one should not say that there is self-concept clarity with respect to that individual piece of self-knowledge. Self-esteem is also a property of the entire self-concept, but it is inherently linked to the valence of individual pieces of self-knowledge.

Self-concept clarity emerges from the working self-concept, or the contents of the self-concept that are currently in awareness, which can shift across time and situations (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Trait self-concept clarity emerges from what is typically in the working self-concept, whereas state self-concept clarity emerges from the current working self-concept. Trait and state self-concept clarity correlate with each other, but they can shift independently (Nezlek & Plesko, 2001). Across different working self-concepts, there might be inconsistency and instability, but to the extent that self-concept clarity emerges from the working self-concept, inconsistency and instability across different working self-concepts might not impact it.

Sources of Self-Concept Clarity: Overview of Empirical Findings

What impacts self-concept clarity? In what follows, I provide an overview of empirical findings. I primarily review only experimental studies or observational studies that are longitudinal and include repeated measurements, as single time-point/cross-sectional observational studies produce ambiguous evidence with respect to whether correlates are antecedents or outcomes. For the most part, the experimental studies address state self-concept clarity, whereas the observational studies address trait self-concept clarity. In addition, I review only studies that clearly assess self-concept clarity as defined by Campbell et al. (1996), given no theoretical justification for tangential measures. The studies and their central methodological features are presented in Table 3.1.

Most studies have revealed effects of self-confirmation, anxiety, and uncertainty on self-concept clarity. I first provide an overview of findings about these antecedents. Because of their similarities, I review anxiety and uncertainty together. I then provide an overview of findings about other antecedents. There are findings that are reviewed in other chapters (Lodi-Smith & Crocetti, Chap. 8; Slotter & Emery, Chap. 9) that I also review here, most as demonstrations of self-confirmation effects (Light & Visser, 2013; Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2010; Lodi-Smith, Spain, Cologgi, & Roberts, 2017; Schwartz et al., 2011; Slotter, Emery, & Luchies, 2014; Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010; Slotter, Winger, & Soto, 2015; Van Dijk et al., 2014).

Table 3.1 Studies reviewed and their central methodological features

Study	Assessment	Design	Sample	Self-esteem predictor control?	Self-esteem outcome control?
Slotter et al. (2015)	Coded written content (Study 1) SCCS (Studies 2 and 3)	Experimental	Adults (Studies 1 and 2) College students (Study 3)	No	No
Burkley et al. (2015)	SCCS	Experimental	College students	No	No
Ayduk et al. (2009)	SCCS	Experimental (Study 1) Observational – longitudinal (Study 2)	College students	No	No
Slotter & Gardner (2014)	SCCS	Experimental	College students	No	No
Schwartz et al. (2011)	SCCS	Observational – longitudinal	Adolescents	No	No
Schwartz et al. (2012)	SCCS	Observational – longitudinal	Adolescents	No	No
Stinson et al. (2010)	Trait stability (Study 1, 4) SCCS (Study 2, 3, 6) Coded written content (Study 5)	Experimental	College students	N/A	Yes
DeMarree & Rios (2014) (Study 3)	SCCS	Experimental	College students	N/A	No
Slotter et al. (2010) (Study 3)	SCCS	Observational – longitudinal	College students	No	No
Slotter et al. (2014) (Study 3)	SCCS	Observational – longitudinal	College students	No	No
Lodi-Smith & Roberts (2010)	SCCS	Observational – single time-point/cross-sectional	Adults	No	No

Light & Visser (2012)	SCCS	Observational – single time-point/cross-sectional	Adults	Yes	Yes
Luchies et al. (2010)	SCCS	Experimental (Studies 2 and 3) Observational – longitudinal (Study 4)	College students	No	No
Vorauer et al. (1998)	SCCS	Experimental	College students	No	No
Van Dijk et al. (2014)	SCCS	Observational – longitudinal	Adolescent	No	No
Orr & Moscovitch (2015)	SCCS	Observational – single time-point	College students	No	No
Hohman & Hogg (2015)	SCCS	Experimental	College students	No	No
Landau et al. (2009)	Trait extremity (Campbell, 1990)	Experimental	College students	No	No
McGregor & Marigold (2003)	Trait endorsement reaction time (Campbell, 1990)	Experimental	College students	N/A	No
Boucher (2011)	Trait extremity (Campbell, 1990) (Study 2) Trait consistency and trait endorsement reaction time (Campbell, 1990) (Study 3)	Experimental	College students	N/A	No
Wu et al. (2011)	SCCS	Observational – longitudinal	Adolescents	Yes	No
Johnson & Nozick (2011)	SCCS	Observational – longitudinal	College students	No	No
Morrison & Wheeler (2010)	SCCS	Experimental	Adults	Yes (Study 1)	No

Self-Confirmation

A number of the studies indicate that self-concept clarity is bolstered when self-beliefs are confirmed and is undermined when self-beliefs are disconfirmed. Studies have addressed both specific self-beliefs and the self-concept as a whole.

Specific Self-Beliefs

In three different studies, Slotter et al. (2015) asked participants to imagine and write about no longer being a member of or no longer being able to maintain a group identity. Particularly among those who strongly identified with their group, those who engaged in this thought exercise indicated less self-concept clarity, in part because the thought exercise invoked anticipating self-concept change as a function of anticipating no longer sharing the traits and attributes of the group.

Burkley, Curtis, Burkley, and Hatvany (2015) assessed whether students in an introduction to psychology course had fused the goal of learning psychology with their self-concepts. Afterward, students received either positive or negative feedback about possessing the skills required to be a good psychologist. Positive feedback boosted self-concept clarity among those with goal fusion, whereas negative feedback boosted self-concept clarity among those without goal fusion. Similarly with respect to personal goals, Ayduk, Gyurak, and Luerssen (2009) observed that social rejection undermined self-concept clarity but only for those who were sensitive to rejection and thereby had a personal goal of avoiding rejection.

Slotter and Gardner (2014) provided premed students who entertained the notion of already considering themselves as doctors with the threatening feedback that they were not fit to be doctors. Subsequent to this, the students were given the opportunity to receive social support for their notions of being doctors. Ultimately, this opportunity boosted certainty in the belief about being a doctor and, in turn, self-concept clarity. Schwartz et al. (2011) conducted a multi-wave, daily diary study among Dutch adolescents over the course of 6 months. The investigators assessed commitment to and reconsideration of education as indicators of educational identity, noting that education is highly valued for its social and aspirational ramifications. They observed that increases in commitment to education were associated with increases in self-concept clarity, whereas increases in reconsideration of commitment to education were associated with decreases in self-concept clarity. Similarly, in a study that involved yearly assessments among adolescents, commitment to education and a best friend prospectively positively predicted self-concept clarity (Schwartz, Klimstra, Luyckx, Hale, & Meeus, 2012).

Stinson et al. (2010) examined the extent to which perceived relational value information impacted self-concept clarity. In a series of studies, they first assessed self-perceived relational value. They assessed either trait self-esteem, which reflected typical self-perceptions of relational value, where high self-esteem reflected self-perceived high relational value and low self-esteem reflected self-

perceived low relational value, or specific self-beliefs reflecting relational value (e.g., physically attractive, popular). Then they experimentally invoked information about being valued by others (e.g., recalling compliments or criticisms about traits or interacting with an interpersonally warm or cold person). It was repeatedly observed that consistency between self-perceived relational value and information about being valued by others resulted in more self-concept clarity. Among those with high self-esteem, high perceived relational value information resulted in more self-concept clarity than low perceived relational value information. Among those with low self-esteem, low perceived relational value information resulted in more self-concept clarity than high perceived relational value information. Information consistency distinctly impacted self-concept clarity. Information that was consistent with self-perceived relational value bolstered state self-concept clarity, whereas high relational value information bolstered state self-esteem regardless of whether it was consistent with self-perceived relational value. DeMarree and Rios (2014) also examined the relationship between self-esteem beliefs and self-concept clarity. They assessed self-esteem and then presented information suggesting that having high self-esteem can be either good or bad. Information consistent with self-esteem resulted in more self-concept clarity, and this appeared to particularly be the case for those with high self-esteem.

In all, research has demonstrated that processing specific self-belief relevant information that reinforces the belief boosts self-concept clarity, whereas processing specific self-belief relevant information that threatens the belief decreases self-concept clarity. Findings generalize across different assessments of self-concept clarity [Self-Concept Clarity Scale (Campbell et al., 1996), trait consistency, and coded written content], different methodologies (experimental and observational), and different populations (adolescents, college students, and adults).

Self-Concept as a Whole

The above research focused on specific self-beliefs. Research has also demonstrated that processing the self-concept as a whole has an impact on self-concept clarity.

Given that people's self-concepts become intertwined with those of their relationship partners, the dissolution of relationships results in self-concept change – specifically, a shrinking of the self-concept – and, as a result of this change, less self-concept clarity (Slotter et al., 2010). However, relationship dissolution does not always result in self-concept change. Self-concept change that occurs because of the relationship partner and that is internalized via effort put forth in developing it is likely to be maintained through a breakup. Maintenance of this change results in reduced self-concept clarity (Slotter et al., 2014). One important reason for this outcome is perhaps perceived lack of opportunity to continually confirm that change or, perhaps, more simply, confusion generated by maintaining an internalized self-belief that originated with the relationship partner despite no longer being with that partner.

Lodi-Smith and Roberts (2010) investigated the reasons for why age is linked to self-concept clarity, with the insight that it is not age per se that is associated with self-concept clarity but what comes with age that is critical. They demonstrated that self-concept clarity increases with age through 60 and decreases with age after age 60 and that limitations in social functioning due to health problems accounted for the negative relationship between age and self-concept clarity after age 60. Additional work demonstrated that increases in health-related social role limitations were associated with decreases in self-concept clarity regardless of age but most strongly among older adults (Lodi-Smith et al., 2017). Similarly, Light and Visser (2012) observed that exiting a social role (e.g., stopping work) is associated with less self-concept clarity. Interestingly, they provided evidence that loneliness and alterations in daily behavioral routines accounted for this relationship, which reflects the idea that social roles are tied to self-verifying social relationships and prescriptions for action.

Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, and Kumashiro (2010) examined the effects of forgiving someone for a personal transgression on self-concept clarity. They discovered that forgiving someone decreases self-concept clarity, because doing so represents a failure to stand up for oneself. The outcome is reversed when the person doing the forgiving feels valued, or at least anticipates feeling valued, by the person who is being forgiven.

Vorauer, Main, and O'Connell (1998) examined self-concept clarity shifts resulting from interactions between members of a dominant in-group and members of an out-group. Specifically, the investigators examined shifts in self-concept clarity among White Canadians resulting from them having interactions with Aboriginal Canadians. Self-concept clarity decreased among members of the former group as a function of thinking they were being perceived in terms of stereotypical group characteristics and not individual characteristics. This was particularly true among the group members who expressed prejudice toward the out-group, ostensibly because they felt more similar to the in-group than the out-group, expected to be stereotyped, and believed the stereotypes could readily be applied to them.

To date, research has indicated that processing the self-concept as a whole can affect self-concept clarity. This research has particularly concentrated on the influence of self-relevant life span and social experiences and has predominantly shown that self-concept threatening experiences undermine self-concept clarity. Like with research on specific self-beliefs, this research generalizes across different assessments of self-concept clarity [SCCS (Campbell et al., 1996) and coded written content], different methodologies (experimental and observational), and different samples (adults and college students).

Anxiety and Uncertainty

A number of studies have also indicated that anxiety and uncertainty can affect self-concept clarity. Two studies have examined the relationship between trait anxiety and self-concept clarity. In a longitudinal study among adolescents in the

Netherlands, Van Dijk et al. (2014) demonstrated that more experiences of myriad anxiety symptoms predicted less self-concept clarity. The authors speculated that this relationship exists because experiencing anxiety symptoms results in being less inclined to explore identities and being more uncertain about current identities. Orr and Moscovitch (2015) evaluated the relationship between trait social anxiety and self-concept clarity. They argued that trait social anxiety is associated with negative self-beliefs and translates into less self-concept clarity because of the tendency to inaccurately self-disclose out of fear of being negatively evaluated and experiencing social isolation. They conducted a study in which they assessed trait social anxiety and manipulated honest self-disclosure. Honesty significantly ameliorated the negative association between trait social anxiety and self-concept clarity. Thus, trait anxiety appears to undermine self-concept clarity.

There have also been experimental tests of the effects of situational anxiety and situational uncertainty on self-concept clarity. Landau, Greenberg, Sullivan, Routledge, and Arndt (2009) evaluated predictions extending from Terror Management Theory (Greenberg & Arndt, 2012; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) (for brief overviews of theories mentioned in this section, see section "Considering Theory"). They asserted that mortality salience produces anxiety and, to defend against this anxiety, also results in increased self-concept clarity. They further asserted that this self-concept clarity response would be particularly likely for those who desired structure. They assessed personal need for structure and experimentally manipulated mortality salience. Among those with a strong personal need for structure, those who contemplated their death expressed heightened self-concept clarity. Interestingly, those who also affirmed a core self-characteristic after contemplating their death did not show this response.

McGregor and Marigold (2003) tested predictions of Identity Consolidation Theory (McGregor, 2003). In particular, they evaluated whether self-concept clarity serves as compensatory conviction in response to personal uncertainty. Critically, they argued that those with high trait self-esteem might be particularly likely to bolster self-concept clarity following uncertainty, as those individuals tend to protect their self-views. The investigators assessed trait self-esteem and then experimentally manipulated uncertainty by having some participants focus on an unresolved personal dilemma. For those with high trait self-esteem, those who experienced uncertainty reported elevated self-concept clarity.

Working from a Terror Management Theory and Identity Consolidation Theory perspective, Boucher (2011) also evaluated the extent to which mortality salience and uncertainty could result in self-concept clarity and whether trait self-esteem moderated the effect. In two different studies, Boucher assessed trait self-esteem and then experimentally manipulated mortality salience or being generally uncertain about things. Among those with high trait self-esteem, those who contemplated either their death or being generally uncertain about things reported heightened self-concept clarity.

Working from an Uncertainty-Identity Theory perspective (Hogg, 2007, 2012), Hohman and Hogg (2015) hypothesized that mortality salience not only produces anxiety but also undermines self-concept clarity. Moreover, they argued that boosting

state self-esteem can positively impact self-concept clarity. Thus, if mortality salience does negatively impact self-concept clarity then boosting state self-esteem should eliminate the effect of mortality salience on self-concept clarity. They experimentally boosted state self-esteem, then experimentally induced mortality salience, and then assessed self-concept clarity. Consistent with the hypothesis, among those who did not have their state self-esteem boosted, those who contemplated their death reported lower self-concept clarity. Moreover, among those who did have their state self-esteem boosted, there were no differences in self-concept clarity between those in the mortality salience and control conditions. They thereby concluded that mortality salience undermines self-concept clarity.

At first glance, there are seemingly inconsistent findings across these studies on the effects of situational anxiety and situational uncertainty. Whereas Landau et al. (2009), McGregor and Marigold (2003), and Boucher (2011) showed that mortality salience and uncertainty resulted in more self-concept clarity, Hohman and Hogg (2015) showed that mortality salience undermined self-concept clarity. However, McGregor and Marigold (2003) and Boucher (2011) observed trends among those low in trait self-esteem that were similar to the trend observed in Hohman and Hogg (2015) among those who did not have their state self-esteem boosted. Moreover, like in Hohman and Hogg (2015), Landau et al. (2009) observed that reactions to mortality salience were dampened when state self-esteem was boosted. Furthermore, it is important to recognize the difference between typically having high self-esteem or structure and having it in the moment. Having high trait self-esteem or structure does not ensure having high state self-esteem, and there is a strong tendency to engage in tactics to maintain high state self-esteem in the face of threats that could lower state self-esteem (particularly if high trait self-esteem is fragile – Kernis, Lakey, & Heppner, 2008). Situational boosts to state self-esteem serve to thwart off potential decreases in state self-esteem. Thereby, it is to be expected that mortality salience or uncertainty would result in more self-concept clarity among those with high trait self-esteem or personal need for structure, whereas mortality salience would have no effect on self-concept clarity among those with high state self-esteem or need for structure.

Taken together, it appears that, all things equal, situational anxiety and uncertainty undermine self-concept clarity. However, for those with high trait self-esteem or personal need for structure, anxiety and uncertainty result in an increase in self-concept clarity, and when there is a boost to state self-esteem, anxiety and uncertainty do not affect self-concept clarity.

Additional Antecedents

Although most of the research to date points to self-confirmation, anxiety, and uncertainty as antecedents to self-concept clarity, some work points toward additional sources that could be fleshed out in future research.

Self-Esteem

Given the strong correlation between self-esteem and self-concept clarity (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996), one might think self-esteem gives rise to self-concept clarity. Wu, Watkins, and Hattie (2010) assessed self-esteem and self-concept clarity at two time points among a sample of adolescents. Self-esteem at Time 1 positively predicted self-concept clarity at Time 2. Similarly, Johnson and Nozick (2011) investigated change in self-concept clarity across two time points due to variables indicative of psychosocial development. Those who expressed self-defensiveness demonstrated increases in self-concept clarity. Self-defensiveness may have reflected high trait self-esteem (perhaps fragile high trait self-esteem, Kernis et al., 2008). Recall also that high trait self-esteem was associated with more self-concept clarity under conditions of self-threat (Boucher, 2011; McGregor & Marigold, 2003). Together, these findings indicate a potential causal effect of self-esteem on self-concept clarity.

Open Communication

In their study among adolescents, Van Dijk et al. (2014) demonstrated that more open communication with parents predicted more self-concept clarity. Ostensibly, open communication with parents allows for consolidating ideas about the self. Open communication was assessed with items such as "'It is easy for me to express all my true feelings to my parents'" and "'My parents are always good listeners'" (Van Dijk et al., 2014, p. 5). Thus, open communication may also foster confirmation of self-beliefs. It may also prevent social anxiety. Itzchakov, Kluger, and Castro (2017) experimentally observed that being thoroughly listened to decreased social anxiety. Moreover, it decreased subjective attitudinal ambivalence, which indicated that it increased self-concept clarity. Interestingly, considering that social anxiety was defined in this work as a discrepancy between how one thinks of oneself and the reactions of others to oneself, social anxiety could also be thought of as self-disconfirmation.

Personal Distinctiveness

According to the distinctiveness hypothesis (McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976), contents of the working self-concept are influenced by what is personally distinct in the social environment. For instance, people's ethnicities are more salient in their self-concepts when they are in the ethnic minority (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978). According to Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 2012), people are motivated to express identities that offer an optimal balance of affiliation and distinction from other people.

Motivated by these perspectives, Morrison and Wheeler (2010) argued that what makes one distinct, particularly when that distinction does not come at the cost of belongingness, makes for self-concept clarity. They observed that people expressed more self-concept clarity when they believed they held a minority opinion, especially one that was consistent with their values, and particularly when they believed they held this opinion within a group with which they strongly identified and thus while maintaining a sense of belonging.

However, in their longitudinal study, Johnson and Nozick (2011) also observed that those who expressed a normative identity style – which reflects a tendency toward conforming to others – demonstrated an increase in self-concept clarity. It's possible that both distinctiveness and fitting in bolster self-concept clarity and that the effects of each are regulated by other factors. For instance, those who typically have a clear sense of who they are may benefit from distinctiveness, whereas those who typically have an unclear sense of who they are may benefit from fitting in with others. This question warrants future research.

Sources of Self-Concept Clarity: Toward the Future

In the preceding section, I provided an overview of empirical findings to date. In the current section, I consider explanations of self-concept clarity by theories identified in the overview. I then address potential moderators of antecedents of self-concept clarity identified to date, and I also address potential additional antecedents of self-concept clarity. I end with addressing some methodological considerations.

Considering Theory

Five different theories that could be considered as offering explanations of self-concept clarity were identified in the overview of findings, including Uncertainty-Identity Theory, Terror Management Theory, Identity Consolidation Theory (for an overarching perspective of these theories that focuses on psychological threat and responses geared toward ameliorating it – including, potentially, alterations in self-concept clarity – see Jonas et al. (2014)), distinctiveness hypothesis, and Optimal Distinctiveness Theory. In addition, Self-Verification Theory (Swann, 1983) is implicated in the findings about self-confirmation. How should they be considered as explanations of self-concept clarity?

None of the theories are, by design, about self-concept clarity, and none directly mention self-concept clarity. Yet, they can be readily considered as accounting for it. Consider that self-concept clarity can be thought of as a marker of self-coherence (Morrison & Wheeler, 2010; Stinson et al., 2010) and self-certainty. Self-Verification Theory (Swann, 1983, 2012) primarily attempts to explain maintenance of self-beliefs, under the guise that verification of those self-beliefs brings about a coherent

view of self and a coherent and predictable view of the social world, which in turn gives rise to smooth social interactions. The focus of Uncertainty-Identity Theory (Hogg, 2007, 2012) is on group identification following self-uncertainty, with the notion that group identification brings about self-certainty. Both Terror Management Theory (Greenberg & Arndt, 2012; Greenberg et al., 1986) and Identity Consolidation Theory (McGregor, 2003) primarily address reactions to anxiety and uncertainty, one of which is an increase in self-certainty. Interestingly, early Terror Management Theory initially concentrated on self-esteem changes as a reaction to existential anxiety, and only later was the theory extended to also consider self-certainty as an outcome.

Given that it is attended to in theories about the self, more direct theorizing about self-concept clarity is warranted. For instance, one might extend Self-Verification Theory or Uncertainty-Identity Theory to more fully consider circumstances under which maintenance of a self-belief or identification with a group has implications for self-concept clarity. One might also extend Terror Management Theory or Identity Consolidation Theory to consider circumstances under which self-concept clarity is chosen as the preferred route to dealing with anxiety or uncertainty, given myriad alternatives, or, at least, an articulation of the relationships between potential outcomes (e.g., does more fervently adopting cultural worldviews increase self-concept clarity?). Along these lines, consider that Landau et al. (2009) suggest that self-concept clarity boosts are the preferred route to dealing with anxiety for those who strongly desire structure. One might also expand on when and why personal distinctiveness contributes to self-concept clarity. One thing to consider is that the distinctiveness hypothesis and optimal distinctiveness theory provide explanation for the expression of self-beliefs. Expression of beliefs does not necessarily translate into being clear about those beliefs.

As a start for extending the theory, in the next section, I address potential moderators of the antecedents reviewed above that are ripe for investigation, with a particular eye toward self-confirmation, anxiety, and uncertainty.

Potential Moderators of Antecedents to Self-Concept Clarity

In this section, I address some potential moderators of antecedents that have been identified to date, namely, self-confirmation, anxiety, and uncertainty. What regulates whether self-confirmation, anxiety, or uncertainty results in self-concept clarity?

Nature of the Self-Beliefs

Confirmation of strong self-beliefs should result in more self-concept clarity than confirmation of weak self-beliefs. In particular, confirmation of self-beliefs that are held with certainty might contribute more to self-concept clarity than confirmation

of beliefs held with uncertainty. Self-beliefs that are held with certainty are particularly likely to be verified (Giesler & Swann, 1999) and are most indicative of self-belief stability (Pelham, 1991). Confirmation of self-beliefs held with uncertainty might also produce self-concept clarity, but not as strongly as confirmation of self-beliefs held with certainty. One thing to consider, however, is that confirmation of self-beliefs held with uncertainty may have an ironic effect of undermining self-concept clarity, as confirmation may only serve to reinforce the notion of being uncertain about these self-beliefs. It may take repeated confirmation of self-beliefs held with uncertainty to result in increases in self-concept clarity. Confirmation of important as opposed to unimportant self-beliefs may also have a strong influence on self-concept clarity, perhaps because they loom large in the self-concept. Wakslak and Trope (2009) provided evidence of this in a study of the effects of self-affirmation. Participants who wrote about an important value reported more self-concept clarity than did participants who wrote about an unimportant value. A control group was not included, however, and so it is not clear whether writing about the important value boosted self-concept clarity or writing about an unimportant value decreased self-concept clarity. Along these lines, confirmation of moral self-beliefs may be critical, given that moral self-beliefs are considered an essential component of identity (Strohminger & Nichols, 2014). The same goes for master identities (e.g., gender identity), which are considered core aspects of self, connected to other identities, and influencers of other identities (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets & Burke, 2014). Similarly, confirmation of internalized self-beliefs, which are representative of who one truly is, should lead to more self-concept clarity than confirmation of non-internalized beliefs, which are thought due primarily to social influence (Slotter et al., 2014). In addition, certain types of traits may confer more clarity than other types. Stinson, Wood, and Doxey (2008) observed more self-concept clarity with respect to communal quality traits than with respect to less communal, social commodity traits.

Trait and State Self-Concept Clarity

Those with typically high self-concept clarity are likely to engage in extra efforts to maintain it. This is indicated by research that showed that those with high trait self-esteem or personal need for structure expressed more self-concept clarity after self-threats (Boucher, 2011; Landau et al., 2009; McGregor & Marigold, 2003).

But research also suggests that when self-concept clarity is strategically bolstered, there is less motivation to engage in efforts to bolster it even further, and threats to it are not as damaging. Studies presented as involving a self-esteem boost or self-affirmation lend support to this notion. Hohman and Hogg (2015) observed that contemplating death did not undermine self-concept clarity among those who had their self-esteem boosted. Landau et al. (2009) observed that those high in personal need for structure expressed more self-concept clarity than those low in personal need for closure when contemplating their death unless they previously affirmed a core self-characteristic.

The self-esteem boost in Hohman and Hogg (2015) consisted of the following message: "'While you may feel that you have some personality weaknesses, your personality is fundamentally strong' and 'Most of your aspirations tend to be pretty realistic'" (Hohman & Hogg, 2015, p. 34). This manipulation confirmed self-beliefs and thus likely boosted self-concept clarity. Similarly, self-affirmation in Landau et al. (2009) confirmed a self-belief and, thus, likely boosted self-concept clarity. Indeed, Wakslak and Trope (2009) provided evidence that self-affirmation via value expression increases self-concept clarity. Note that it is typically thought that self-affirmation increases self-esteem (McQueen & Klein, 2006), boosts psychosocial resources for dealing with threats to self-integrity, and expands the self (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). It appears to also increase self-concept clarity. Lack of defensiveness following self-affirmation (Sherman & Cohen, 2006) may in part be attributed to this boost in self-concept clarity.

These assertions and findings call into question the motivational nature of self-concept clarity. An important consideration is whether people are motivated to attain self-concept clarity, and if so, under what conditions they are motivated to do so. From the perspective of Self-Verification Theory (Swann, 1983, 2012), people are motivated to have self-concept clarity. To the extent that people are motivated to attain self-concept clarity, it is also important to consider the nature of that motivation. From the perspective of Self-Verification Theory, people are motivated to seek self-concept clarity rather than avoid self-concept confusion. According to Uncertainty-Identity Theory (Hogg, 2007, 2012) and also from the perspective of Terror Management Theory (Greenberg & Arndt, 2012; Greenberg et al., 1986), people seek to avoid self-concept confusion rather than gain self-concept clarity. Hence, it is argued that people have either an approach or an avoidance motivation for self-concept clarity. This argument is akin to the debate as to whether people are driven by self-enhancement or self-protection (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009).

The different motivations would be associated with different patterns of action and different ramifications of those actions. If people seek self-concept clarity, they should take actions to attain self-concept clarity regardless of their prevailing sense of it, and those actions should continually affect it. If people avoid self-concept confusion, people should take actions to attain self-concept clarity when they lack self-concept clarity or forecast a threat to self-concept clarity, and actions would affect it only under those conditions.

To a certain degree, parsing whether there is an approach or avoidance motivation is splitting hairs. Evidence suggests that people might proactively engage in self-verifying behaviors, such as displaying their identity through clothing choices. Yet, in the studies that have seemingly demonstrated these proactive efforts, whether actions were taken without thinking about the alternative possibility of failing to confirm self-beliefs cannot be ruled out. Indeed, studies on self-verification have primarily shown that people adopt self-verifying strategies when there is potential for disconfirmation of self-beliefs (Swann & Buhrmester, 2012).

It appears that people are motivated to have self-concept clarity. Although it may not be the case that people seek self-concept clarity, they are clearly averse to losing it. And in moments when self-concept clarity has been bolstered, efforts to attain it might be relaxed, and potential threats to it might be rendered inconsequential.

Self-Focus

Self-concept clarity is likely most impacted when self-focus is high. When self-focus is low, self-beliefs are likely not processed and actions are likely not evaluated with respect to self-beliefs, and thus any actions that serve to confirm or disconfirm self-beliefs are not likely to impact self-concept clarity. Consistent with this thinking, Swann et al. (1990) demonstrated that people more quickly endorsed their self-beliefs and were more likely to self-verify when they were not under cognitive load. Recall that Morrison and Wheeler (2010) demonstrated that participants reported more self-concept clarity when they were led to believe that they held a minority opinion, particularly when that opinion expressed a core value. These effects may have emerged in part because the participants were more self-focused by nature of considering themselves to be part of the minority. Interestingly, the direction of the moderating effect of self-concept focus may be contingent on the nature of it. Campbell et al. (1996) observed that those who tend to ruminate about themselves, as opposed to curiously reflect on themselves, also tend to have lower self-concept clarity.

Additional Potential Antecedents of Self-Concept Clarity

It is also important to consider additional antecedents to self-concept clarity that have not been addressed to date.

Trait Self-Concept Clarity

Trait self-concept clarity may affect situational self-concept clarity and the ability to further develop trait self-concept clarity. Those with high trait self-concept clarity are likely to have more positive self-beliefs (Campbell & Lavallee, 1993), and these are more likely to be confirmed by others given the norms of appraising others positively (DePaulo & Bell, 1996; Wallace & Tice, 2012). It is also likely the case that those with more self-concept clarity have more self-beliefs about which they are certain. Self-beliefs held with certainty have more ramifications for self-concept clarity, and so those with more self-concept clarity inherently have more opportunities to maintain their clear sense of themselves.

Those with clear self-concepts can more readily describe, predict, interpret, and remember themselves (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996). They are also likely to have more ability to maintain their self-beliefs. In other words, those with more self-concept clarity have a clearer schema about themselves, and schema-consistent effects perpetuate this clarity.

Moreover, self-concept clarity can be conceptualized as a self-schema with expectation effects in and of itself. Those with more self-concept clarity likely expect to have clear thoughts about who they are. As a result, they may more readily conclude that they have a clear understanding of themselves, have an easy

time remembering instances in which they acted consistent with their self-beliefs, and have stronger expectations for receiving information that is consistent with their self-beliefs. Regarding the latter, those with low self-concept clarity may treat information that is consistent with how they think about themselves as idiosyncratic and as information that they can discount (see also Guerrettaz and Arkin (2015), for a similar line of thinking about self-related expectations driven by self-concept clarity).

These expectations come with a downside, however. For those with high self-concept clarity, having a difficult experience with self-reflection potentially undermines self-concept clarity because it violates expectations of easy self-reflection (Guerrettaz & Arkin, 2015). Along these lines, Csank and Conway (2004) observed that self-reflection undermined self-concept clarity for those with high self-concept clarity (while also boosting self-concept clarity for those with low self-concept clarity) perhaps because the self-reflection task was overly difficult. This was particularly true for females. The investigators argued that the gender effect occurred because females are often more self-focused.

Situational Stability

Situational stability has the potential for impacting self-concept clarity. All other things equal, those who maintain the same occupation, maintain the same romantic partners, or live in the same place for an extended amount of time might end up developing clearer perceptions of themselves than those who experience frequent change because of the prevailing opportunities for self-confirmation that come with the situational stability. Light and Visser (2013) showed that routine stability was positively correlated with self-concept clarity. People often choose to exit situations that do not offer self-confirmation (Swann & Buhrmester, 2012; Swann & Pelham, 2002). Self-change can occur in situations (Burke & Stets, 2009; Markus & Wurf, 1987), and this may temporarily decrease self-concept clarity. But should a stable situation emerge, clarity may emerge. Given the prospects of situational stability for long-term self-confirmation and self-concept clarity, people may even choose to withstand short-term self-disconfirmation, self-change, and dips in self-concept clarity.

Interpersonal Power

Those with interpersonal power in a situation should be able to maintain their perceptions of who they are and, thus, maintain self-concept clarity, whereas those without power should have difficulty maintaining their self-concepts and thereby remaining clear about who they are. Those with power tend not to pay attention to individuating information and influence self-conceptions of those they have power over. Those without power more fully and individually process, as well as have self-beliefs shaped by, those with power over them (Burke & Stets, 2009; Erber & Fiske, 1984; Fiske, 1993; Goodwin, Gubin, Fiske, Yzerbyt, 2000) (yet see Vorauer et al. (1998), for an exception).

Group Identification

Uncertainty-Identity Theory (Hogg, 2007, 2012) posits that uncertainty-motivated group identification reduces self-concept confusion. This effect is thought to be particularly likely when group identities are clear (Usborne & Taylor, 2010), which is likely for groups with high entitativity. To date, however, this potential effect has received little attention (Szabo & Ward, 2015). Adopting a group identity is thought to give rise to a depersonalized, group member prototype-based self-concept. To the extent that self-concept clarity emerges primarily from personal identities (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets & Burke, 2014), adopting a group identity may not boost self-concept clarity. However, individuals can adopt the identity of a group while maintaining a personal identity (Swann, Gomez, Seyle, Morales, & Huici, 2009). It may also be the case that group identities are at times represented as part of personal identities. Moreover, any given self-belief can be represented at both the person and group level. For example, a person may consider herself to be an introvert, and that may distinguish her from other people, but that same person may also consider herself to be part of a group of introverts (Burke & Stets, 2009). And so, group identification may indeed positively impact self-concept clarity.

Reflected Appraisals

Reflected appraisals are others' perceptions of who one is; they reflect a third-person perspective of oneself (Burke & Stets, 2009; Wallace & Tice, 2012). To the extent that reflected appraisals affect self-perceptions, clear reflected appraisals might give rise to self-concept clarity. If people have a clearly articulated notion about how others perceive them, then they might also think clearly about themselves. Whatever gives rise to those clearly articulated notions, therefore, might also give rise to self-concept clarity. Group identification, for instance, might give rise to self-concept clarity given a clear, shared understanding of what it means to be member of that group (Hogg, 2007, 2012). Fully identifying with a role (e.g., student or father role identities when at school or in action as a father) (or social investment in a role, see Lodi-Smith and Roberts (2007)) may also generate self-concept clarity, in that those identities may be associated with a clear idea about how others in a situation might perceive who one is.

Social Acceptance

Findings from Light and Visser (2013) indicate that loneliness is associated with less self-concept clarity. In conjunction with the recognition that others want to maintain coherent and predictable social environments (Swann, 1983, 2012), social acceptance may be perceived as indicating that one is clearly perceived by others (and rejection may be perceived as indicating that one is not clearly perceived by others). Given that one's self-perceptions can in part be based on beliefs about how one is perceived by others, perceiving that others perceive one clearly may translate

to having a clear self-perception. This notion is reminiscent of the idea put forth in Sociometer Theory (Leary, 2012; Leary & Baumeister, 2000) that social acceptance elevates and social rejection undermines self-esteem.

However, other evidence suggests that only self-esteem is directly responsive to social acceptance, whereas self-concept clarity is responsive to whether that social acceptance matches self-perception. Recall that Stinson et al. (2010) demonstrated that perceived relational value information directly affected self-esteem regardless of trait self-esteem, whereas perceived relational value information affected self-concept clarity depending on trait self-esteem. Ayduk et al. (2009) demonstrated that social rejection undermines self-concept clarity only for those who have a personal goal to avoid social rejection. Boucher (2011; Study 3) observed that contemplating social isolation resulted in more self-concept clarity for those with high self-esteem but less self-concept clarity for those with low self-esteem.

Although it seems as if the findings of Stinson et al. (2010) and Boucher (2011) are in conflict with each other, they may not be. It is difficult to compare the findings because a neutral control group was not employed in Stinson et al. (2010) but was employed in Boucher (2011). It could be that the reactions of those in the low perceived relational value conditions in Stinson et al. (2010) were the same as those in the social isolation conditions in Boucher (2011). But above and beyond this, as observed in Stinson et al. (2010), perceiving being valued by others may have a boosting effect for those with high self-esteem and an undermining effect for those with low self-esteem. In addition, the extremity of the perceived relational value information differed. Social isolation (Boucher, 2011) is a stronger relational value threat than is contemplating being criticized by others (Stinson et al., 2010). Strong threats to relational value can have stronger impacts on self-esteem than implied threats to relational value (Blackhart, Nelson, Knowles, & Baumeister, 2009). Stronger perceived relational value threats might produce different reactions than weak relational value threats. For those with low self-esteem, social isolation may be so strong a threat as to be inconsistent with perceived relational value, thus undermining self-concept clarity. For those with high self-esteem, social isolation may be a strong enough threat to not simply shake self-concept clarity but to produce a compensatory reaction. This is consistent with the observation that uncertainty mixed with threat results in less political tolerance than does uncertainty alone (Haas & Cunningman, 2014).

Mood

Mood processes may also play a role in self-concept clarity. Negative affect (Nezlek & Plesko, 2001), anger (Bond, Ruaro, & Wingrove, 2006), stress (Ritchie, Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Gidron, 2011; Treadgold, 1999), and depression (Butzer & Kuiper, 2006) are all associated with less self-concept clarity. It's possible that negative moods signal concern over the content of the self and invoke systematic, bottom-up processing of the content of the self (Schwarz & Clore, 2003), all of which could serve to undermine self-concept clarity.

Methodological Considerations

There are important methodological considerations particular to studying sources of self-concept clarity. First, it is important to control for self-esteem, both as an antecedent and as an outcome (see, e.g., Stinson et al., 2010). Second, research on existential anxiety has shown that defensiveness tends to emerge only after a non-conscious consolidation period (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). Similarly, experimental effects on self-concept clarity may change over time, such that immediate effects may differ from effects after a delay period. And so it is important to systematically measure self-concept clarity at different points in time following experimental manipulations. In addition, it is important to consider measurement from the perspective of the participant, particularly in experimental studies. For instance, it is quite possible that participants sometimes report being clear about who they are following an experimental manipulation (e.g., anxiety, momentary recognition of self-beliefs), simply because it is the only response option put in front of them, rather than because it is the naturalistic primary response following the manipulation.

Concluding Comments

How is it that we come to have a clear sense of who we are? A considerable amount of theory and research has shed light on its sources. To date, the research primarily points to self-confirmation, anxiety, and uncertainty as sources of self-concept clarity. Yet, there is much work on the horizon, particularly with respect to exploring the variety of conditions under which clarity may be bolstered or dampened. Concentrated future theorizing and investigations will, in time, offer a clearer picture of when self-concept clarity emerges.

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