

# Chapter 5

## Self-Concept Clarity and Social Role Transitions

Erica B. Slotter and Lydia F. Emery

**Abstract** Major transitions in people’s lives often disrupt people’s understanding of who they are. This chapter reviews how people’s social role transitions affect their self-concept clarity. We begin with an overview of these role transitions broadly defined, reviewing literature showing that both entering into a new social role and exiting a social role can undermine self-concept clarity. We then focus specifically on social role transition within romantic relationship contexts. In particular, we review the literature on relationship dissolution and self-concept clarity. Although, in general, the end of a relationship tends to undermine self-concept clarity, we highlight several moderators that can attenuate this effect. We then turn to the consequences of experiencing low self-concept clarity after the end of a relationship for well-being. Finally, we highlight six unresolved issues in this literature and identify directions for future research on social role transitions and self-concept clarity.

**Keywords** Self-concept clarity · Self-concept · Social roles · Well-being · Romantic relationships · Breakup · Divorce · Relationship dissolution

That’s the way you live your grown-up life: you must constantly rebuild your identity as an adult, the way it’s been put together it is wobbly, ephemeral, and fragile. — Muriel Barbery (2008) *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*

Throughout their lifetimes, people construct their sense of who they are, in large part through the lens of their relationships or social roles (e.g., Baumeister, 2010; Cooley, 1902). Changes in our social roles can alter the content that we include as part of our identity – the “what” of who we are. Changes in our social roles can also affect the clarity of our identities – feeling like we know how all of the pieces of ourselves fit together. The central aim of the present chapter is to examine how social role transitions impact our self-concept clarity. As defined elsewhere in the

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current volume, self-concept clarity encompasses one's sense that the content and organization of one's self-concept is clear, cohesive, and consistent over time (e.g., Campbell, 1990). We examine how important transitions involving people's relationships contribute to their identities being "wobbly, ephemeral, and fragile." We focus first on the impact that social role transitions, generally speaking, have on self-concept clarity. We then consider how the transitions associated with one of our most important and impactful social relationships – our romantic relationships – relate to self-concept clarity.

## The Socially Defined Self

People's self-concepts are hierarchically organized cognitive structures, developed through their self-reflections as well as their experiences. The content of the self-concept consists of the myriad attributes, aspirations, views, values, beliefs, attitudes, social roles, and even possessions that people identify as being "me" or "mine" (e.g., Baumeister, 2010; Epstein, 1977; James, 1890; Markus, 1977). This content can be organized in more or less complex ways; can contain self-aspects that are central or peripheral to an individual's sense of self; can be positively, negatively, or neutrally valenced; and can include any combination of current, past, feared, or desired selves (Linville, 1987; Markus & Wurf, 1987; McConnell, 2011). The self-concept is simultaneously durable and malleable, with some aspects fairly stable and others more prone to change across time and context (e.g., McConnell, 2011). Crucially, the self-concept is a largely socially created and defined entity; people's senses of self largely are dynamic reflections of the social worlds in which they are situated (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) and the relationships they have with others in that world (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995; Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

People reflect on both the content of the self-concept and its consistency across time, and this assessment determines their self-concept clarity. As previously mentioned, self-concept clarity encompasses people's subjective sense that their overall identities are clear, cohesive, and consistent over time (e.g., Campbell, 1990). Although related, the objective content of the self-concept is both conceptually (e.g., Epstein, 1977) and empirically distinct from people's holistic, metacognitive judgments of self-concept clarity (e.g., Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010). That is, people can have aspects of the self-concept that objectively seem to conflict, but as long as they can make sense of how these attributes might fit together, they can still have high levels of self-concept clarity (see MacDonald & Zanna, 1998 and Otnes, Lowrey, & Shrum, 1997 for a broader discussion of the importance of attitude ambivalence for both behavioral and emotional outcomes). To illustrate this idea, consider someone who thinks of themselves as both lazy and ambitious. These attributes might appear to conflict with one another, given that they are antonyms. However, if a person makes sense of these conflicting aspects of themselves by reconciling that they are lazy on the weekends but ambitious at work, for example, they could still maintain a high level of self-concept clarity. Higher self-concept

clarity is associated with personality traits, such as less neuroticism and greater agreeableness, as well as a host of positive well-being outcomes (e.g., Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003; Campbell et al., 1996; Lewandowski, Nardone, & Raines, 2010; Treadgold, 1999). Self-concept clarity is also often moderately positively correlated with self-esteem (e.g., Campbell et al., 1996). Although often viewed as a fairly stable characteristic that becomes more stable with age (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2010), recent research has demonstrated that a variety of situational factors can alter self-concept clarity, including social factors (e.g., Emery, Walsh, & Slotter, 2015; Nezlek & Plesko, 2001).

## Self-Concept Content, Clarity, and Social Role Transitions

Changes in social roles are a central catalyst of changes in self-concept content and clarity. In many ways, the social roles that we fill via the relationships that we form with other people serve important functions in constructing and understanding of our self-concepts (Aron, 2003). Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that transitions in social roles can contribute to people's understanding of their identities throughout their lives – and, specifically, to their self-concept clarity (e.g., Demo, 1992; Light & Visser, 2013). Some social role transitions include role entries or added social roles (e.g., getting married), whereas others include role exits or subtracted social roles (e.g., getting divorced). From entering the workforce, to retiring, to having children, everyone goes through shifts in social roles that alter who they are.

Research has clearly demonstrated that social role transitions impact the content of people's self-concepts. Adding social roles (e.g., taking on new hobbies, beginning a new friendship or romantic relationship, starting a new job) can expand the content of the self, such that people incorporate new attributes and characteristics into their self-concepts (Aron, 2003; Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2013). Similarly, losing social roles can result in self-concept constriction, wherein the people lose self-aspects that they previously possessed (e.g., Lewandowski, Aron, Bassis, & Kunak, 2006; Mattingly, Lewandowski, & McIntyre, 2014).

In addition to social role transitions influencing the content of the self-concept, they also influence self-concept clarity. Most existing work has focused on the impact that role transitions involving the loss or exit from a social role have on self-concept clarity (Light & Visser, 2013). In general, a variety of role exits predict reductions in self-concept clarity (Light & Visser, 2013). For example, losing an important group membership (e.g., being a college student) is associated with lower levels of self-concept clarity (Slotter, Soto, & Winger, 2015). Similarly, having the social roles that one can participate in reduced or limited by health concerns is associated with reduced self-concept clarity over time, especially in older adults (Lodi-Smith, Cologgi, Spain, & Roberts, 2017).

Role entries also predict changes in people's self-concept clarity. One study measured the relationship between 17 role exits (e.g., "got divorced," "lost job"), 15 role entries (e.g., "got married," "had a baby"), and self-concept clarity. In general,

experiencing greater numbers of both role entries (e.g., having a baby) and exits (e.g., losing a job) is negatively correlated with self-concept clarity (Light & Visser, 2013). However, when role entries and exits are analyzed simultaneously, controlling for variety of individual difference and demographic factors (gender, age, physical health, and self-esteem), only role exits predict reduced self-concept clarity. This suggests that role exits are more likely to be associated with low self-concept clarity than role entries.

Despite these findings, both gaining and losing social roles can represent disruptions in people's lives (e.g., Kiecolt, 1994). Indeed, recent work has begun to examine the conditions under which role entries may be just as disruptive to people's self-concept clarity as role exits. Greater self-concept content change in response to a role transition, regardless of whether it was an exit or entry, predicts reduced self-concept clarity (Slotter & Walsh, 2016). This association is moderated by the positivity that people attach to the role transitions in question and emerges when controlling for people's dispositional levels of self-esteem. Across various social role transitions (e.g., getting married, getting divorced, becoming a first-time parent, entering the workforce, retiring, joining a new social group, exiting a social group), greater positive effect associated with the transition moderated the effect of self-concept content change on self-concept clarity. Specifically, among people viewed the role transition less positively, greater self-change predicted reduced self-concept clarity; however, for people who viewed the role transition more positively, self-change was unrelated to self-concept clarity (Slotter & Walsh, 2016). Role transition type (entry or exit) did not moderate the effects, suggesting that both role entries and exits, broadly construed, can influence people's self-concept clarity depending on their construal of the event.

Overall, research on social role changes suggests that both entering a new social role and exiting a social role can undermine self-concept clarity. This effect is attenuated when the individual feels positively about the change. This research tends not to find differences between types of role changes. However, a large body of research has focused specifically on romantic relationship transitions as perhaps one of the most substantial role transitions that people undergo. Examining this particular role transition has enabled researchers to investigate more clearly the circumstances under which role transitions do and do not disrupt self-concept clarity, as well as the mechanisms through which this disruption occurs.

## **Self-Concept Content, Clarity, and Romantic Relationship Transitions**

Of the social roles that people fill in their adult lives, relationships with romantic partners in particular powerfully shape people's sense of themselves (e.g., Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Evidence for the impact of romantic partners on the self is abundant in multiple fields, and numerous theoretical perspectives

underscore the importance of relationships to the self-concept (e.g., Agnew & Etcheverry, 2006, Andersen & Chen, 2002; Aron, 2003; Kumashiro, Rusbult, Wolf, & Estrada, 2006). Thus, various lines of identity research focus on the role that romantic relationships play in shaping people's sense of self (e.g., Slotter & Gardner, 2009, 2012a, 2012b; Slotter & Lucas, 2013; Slotter, Lucas, Jakubiak, & Lasslett, 2013), including their self-concept clarity (e.g., Sbarra, Boals, Mason, Larson, & Mehl, 2013; Slotter et al., 2010). Research on the associations between self-concept clarity and broad relationship processes is reviewed elsewhere in the current volume; as the present chapter focuses on how social role transitions influence self-concept clarity, we now turn our attention to how transitioning into and out of these central romantic bonds relates to self-concept clarity.

### ***Self-Concept Content, Clarity, and Relationship Initiation***

Surprisingly, research on entering a new relationship and self-concept clarity is sparse. However, experiencing low self-concept clarity can interfere with processes that typically occur in fledgling relationships. When people begin a new relationship, or even when they are romantically interested in someone new, they self-expand, taking on attributes from that individual and incorporating them into their own self-concepts (Aron et al., 1995; Slotter & Gardner, 2009). People will even self-expand with a person they have not actually met – just reading in an online dating profile that a potential partner is artistic will make people consider themselves to be artistic, too (Slotter & Gardner, 2009). Self-expansion promotes relationship quality and persistence (Mattingly et al., 2014; McIntyre, Mattingly, & Lewandowski, 2014). However, when people are experiencing low self-concept clarity, they are less interested in self-expanding, and they are less likely to actually self-expand when encountering a potential romantic partner (Emery et al., 2015). People with low self-concept clarity resist self-expanding even when they are highly interested in a potential romantic partner. Therefore, it appears that low self-concept clarity may interfere with relationship formation processes; however, more research is certainly needed in this domain. That said, when people do have a clear sense of who they are, entering into a relationship results in changes to people's self-concepts that benefit their relationships and oftentimes themselves (e.g., Aron, 2003; see Slotter & Gardner, 2012a for an exception).

### ***Self-Concept Content, Clarity, and Relationship Dissolution***

Despite the potential benefits of entering into relationships, many relationships end. In the United States alone, nearly two million adults divorce every year, and the end of dating relationships is even more common (e.g., Tejada-Vera & Sutton, 2010). Losing a marriage or a dating relationship is typically a highly distressing

experience (e.g., Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003; Sbarra, 2006; Sbarra & Ferrer, 2006), particularly among people whose relationships have lasted longer (Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998) or among people whose relationships are an important aspect of who they are (Smith & Cohen, 1993).

Relationship dissolution predicts emotional distress, partly because transitioning out of relationships profoundly disrupts people's identities. Most obviously, people lose the self-defining social role of being "coupled" and have to redefine themselves as a singular "I" rather than a dyadic "we" (e.g., Agnew, 2000; Boals & Klein, 2005). However, beyond this broad change in identity, the specific attributes that make up the content of people's self-concepts change when a relationship ends. Participants asked to either recall a recent breakup of a dating relationship or forecast the future end of an ongoing dating relationship reported that they had changed or would change aspects of their self-concept that covered a wide variety of domains, including appearance, values, friends and social interactions, activities, and goals for the future (Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010). These changes occur through self-concept constriction. When people recall the end of a recent dating relationship or are experimentally primed to imagine the end of a current dating relationship, they describe their self-concepts using fewer unique self-descriptors than do people whose relationships remained intact either in reality or in their imaginations (Lewandowski et al., 2006). Indeed, after the end of a romantic relationship, people report jettisoning a variety of different attributes from their self-concepts, especially when those attributes were acquired or developed due to their relationship with their now ex-partner (Slotter, Emery, & Luchies, 2014). For example, one may stop thinking of oneself as a "runner" after the end of a relationship in which one took up running 5 k's to spend time with one's partner. These changes to the content of the self after breakup all contribute to people's self-concept clarity. More general self-concept content change recalled after a previous relationship dissolution predicts lower levels of current self-concept clarity, controlling for current self-esteem (Slotter et al., 2010).

Overall, self-concept clarity tends to decrease when a relationship ends. In a 6-month study of college freshmen in dating relationships, those whose relationships ended experienced a drop in self-concept clarity at the time of the dissolution, as well as a continued reduction in self-concept clarity in the weeks following the end of the relationship (Slotter et al., 2010). This effect emerged after controlling for how rejected participants felt by the end of their relationship. In contrast, participants who did not experience a breakup showed increases in self-concept clarity over the course of the study (Slotter et al., 2010). Moreover, a breakup predicted reduced self-concept clarity over the course of the study, but that reduced self-concept clarity did not predict an increased likelihood of breakup, suggesting a temporal pathway running from relationship dissolution to lowered self-concept clarity, rather than the reverse (Slotter et al., 2010). Similarly, in coded social media posts, having recently experienced the end of a romantic relationship was associated with reduced self-concept clarity, compared to having experienced other life events that did not involve a social role transition or no life event at all (Slotter et al., 2010). This disruption in self-concept clarity after breakup may be due to changes in the

specific content of the self-concept. The extent to which people think the attributes that constitute the content of their self-concept changed when recalling a dating breakup, or will change when imagining one, negatively predicts their current self-concept clarity (Slotter et al., 2010; Slotter & Gardner, 2012b). This suggests that experiencing greater identity change after the loss of a relationship is related to people's perceived disruption in self-concept clarity.

Recent research has further investigated how changes in specific aspects of the self-concept predict self-concept clarity after relationship dissolution. In one study (Slotter et al., 2014), couples discussed for 5 min how their current relationship had changed each of them. These interactions were then coded for the extent to which each partner's self-content change was (a) due to the relationship partner (i.e., the person would not have changed in the ways they did if they had never met their partner) and (b) psychological or physical effort invested in the change. Six months later, each partner's self-concept clarity and status of the relationship were assessed. Among couples who had broken up during the course of the study, but not intact couples, an interaction between partner-induced self-change and self-change effort emerged. Specifically, experiencing higher levels of partner-induced self-change that also required higher effort was associated with less self-concept clarity at the end of the 6-month study among people whose relationships had ended. This suggests that changes that occurred to the content of peoples' selves during their relationships that were (a) due to their partner and (b) difficult or engaging predicted greater disruption to self-concept clarity in cases where the relationship ended.

However, this association between disruption in self-concept content and reduced self-concept clarity is more nuanced than it might appear at first glance. Although greater overall self-concept content change during a relationship is associated with reduced self-concept clarity after the end of a relationship, and greater general perceived self-concept content change after the end of a relationship is correlated with lower levels of self-concept clarity, not altering specific content of the self after the end of a relationship may also be detrimental for self-concept clarity. After engaging in a visual imagery task imagining the end of their relationships, people who retained specific attributes in their self-concepts that they had added to their self-concept due to their relationship with their partner exhibited reduced self-concept clarity; this association did not emerge for people who imagined their relationships continuing into the future (Slotter et al., 2014). In other words, it appears that jettisoning self-attributes that specifically are tied to the relationship is adaptive for self-concept clarity after the end of a relationship; some types of self-concept constriction therefore may be adaptive.

Overall, then, the end of a romantic relationship often damages self-concept clarity, and the change in the self-concept content that occurs after the end of a relationship certainly contributes to this impact, but the nature of this association is still under investigation. The current state of the findings suggests that large amounts of overall self-change predict instability in self-concept clarity. However, retaining particular attributes gained during a relationship, especially if they originated due to the relationship with the partner and required effort to attain, is detrimental to self-concept clarity. One interpretation to reconcile these findings is that large amounts

of self-change over multiple domains of the self disrupt people's self-concept clarity after the end of a relationship, but people should jettison specific attributes that came from their former partners in order to maintain self-concept clarity. These findings generally indicate that self-concept change after the end of a relationship is a double-edged sword – maladaptive in large quantities but beneficial under specific circumstances.

Work on loss and rediscovery of self further illustrates how changes in specific content to the self determine the effects of breakup on self-concept clarity (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). As part of this research, the authors created the Loss of Self and Rediscovery of Self scale (LOSROS) to assess whether people had lost their sense of identity (loss subscale, e.g., “I do not know who I am”) or rediscovered their sense of identity (rediscovery subscale, e.g., “I have regained my identity”) after a life event, such as the end of a romantic relationship. Although the authors do not discuss whether the LOSROS is a measure of content or clarity change, the LOSROS scale seems most like a measure of change to self-concept clarity, as it focuses on people's subjective sense that they know who they are. In line with the research discussed above (Slotter et al., 2010), the end of a dating relationship generally predicted loss of self (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). However, the amount of self-expansion people experienced while the relationship was ongoing moderated this association. People who had experienced more self-expansion in their former relationships – they had added new content to their self-concepts – reported feeling loss of self after breakup. In contrast, when the relationship had not provided self-expansion, dissolution was not associated with loss of self. This is consistent with research discussed above (Slotter et al., 2014) suggesting that when people retain content in their self-concepts that they had acquired from their partners during the relationship, they experience lower self-concept clarity after breakup. We return to the interplay between these findings in the future directions.

### ***Moderators of the Association Between Relationship Dissolution and Self-Concept Clarity***

In addition to post-dissolution self-concept content change and self-expansion during the relationship, several individual difference and relationship factors moderate the association between relationship dissolution and self-concept clarity. People who experience high dispositional levels of anxiety about their romantic relationship (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003) typically report lower levels of self-concept clarity when recalling the end of a recent romantic relationship, mediated through elevated perceptions of self-concept content change (Slotter & Gardner, 2012b). Perhaps surprisingly, responsibility for initiating the breakup does not predict self-concept clarity (e.g., Slotter et al., 2010, 2014). However, people who report more love for an ex-partner also report more self-concept confusion on the LOSROS scale after the end of a relationship than do people who express less residual love (Mason, Law, Bryan, Portley, & Sbarra, 2012).



Situational factors can also moderate the association between breakup and self-concept clarity. Participating in a measurement-intensive laboratory procedure, compared to the same procedure only at the beginning and end of the study, predicts less loss of self on the LOSROS scale among participants whose dating relationships had ended within a 6-month period (Larson & Sbarra, 2015). In the measurement-intensive condition, participants completed a series of tasks, including a stream-of-consciousness speaking task about their breakup, survey measures, and a Stroop task, every 3 weeks over a 9-week period. In the control condition, participants completed the same tasks only at the first and last session of the study. Similarly, writing about the end of one's marriage with a focus on creating a coherent narrative, rather than simply writing about the event with no further instructions or engaging in a control writing task, predicts less loss of self among recently divorced people (Sbarra et al., 2013). These lines of work suggest that people reflecting on their now defunct relationship in specific ways can actually benefit self-concept clarity.

In addition to the moderators above, which rely largely on self-reports, several studies have examined physiological factors that moderate the effect of relationship dissolution on the subjective sense of the self as clear and cohesive. When reflecting on their relationship history and their experience with a recent breakup, love for an ex-partner interacted with corrugator supercillii activity in predicting people's post-breakup loss of self (Mason et al., 2012). Corrugator supercillii activity, which manifests as movement of the forehead region directly above the eyebrows and is typically measured via facial electromyography (EMG) as it is rarely visible to the naked eye, occurs when people are experiencing negative emotions (e.g., Cacioppo, Petty, Losch, & Kim, 1986). Participants who expressed high levels of love for their ex-partner exhibited greater loss of self, as noted above. However, across varying levels of love for the ex-partner, elevated corrugator activity predicted greater loss of self. The authors interpreted this to indicate that higher levels of negative emotionality after their breakup, even in the absence of love for their ex-partner, were related to greater difficulty viewing their self-concepts clearly and coherently. They noted that the best outcome scenario of the self-concept occurred when people expressed less love for their ex and exhibited less corrugator muscle activity (Mason et al., 2012).

Other work has examined the interactive roles of attachment avoidance and heart rate variability, as an index of emotional self-regulatory efforts, in predicting self-concept disturbance after a divorce. People high in attachment avoidance, who often feel uncomfortable with high levels of closeness in their relationships (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003), tend to cope surprisingly well with romantic breakup (Fraley & Bonanno, 2004). Researchers have theorized that this is because they are able to deactivate distressing thoughts and feelings (Fraley & Bonanno, 2004). Additional empirical work has shown that avoidant people have enhanced ability to regulate their emotions, measured as increases in respiratory sinus arrhythmia during a stressful task (RSA; see Hagemann, Waldstein, & Thayer, 2003 for a discussion of RSA and emotion regulation); this in turn predicts reduced depressive symptomology after a relationship dissolution (Fagundes, Diamond, & Allen, 2012). These

findings extend to identity clarity after divorce (Sbarra & Borrelli, 2013); highly avoidant people who exhibit increasing RSA while mentally reliving a recent divorce in the lab, indicating strong emotion regulation efforts, experience reductions in their post-divorce self-concept disruption – measured as less loss of self and greater rediscovery of self on the LOSROS scale – over a 3-month period. However, highly avoidant people who exhibit decreasing RSA during the same task, indicating poor emotion regulation efforts, experience no reduction in self-concept disruption. It is worth noting that this work also examined attachment anxiety, which was positively associated with self-concept disruption but not a predictor of worsening disruption over time.

Taken together, losing a romantic relationship often predicts low self-concept clarity or perceived loss of self. Changes in the content of the self due to relationship dissolution largely drive this loss of self-concept clarity; however, exactly what types of content change – specific and localized versus general and broad – which predict low self-concept clarity still requires additional clarification. Additionally, the way people manage emotional bonds and stressful circumstances, as well as the characteristics of their dissolved relationships, alters the impact of relationship dissolution on self-concept clarity.

## **Social Role Transitions, Self-Concept Clarity, and Well-Being**

Despite these findings, why should people care about how social role transitions influence self-concept clarity? Understanding how transitions into and out of important social roles alter self-concept clarity is a crucial task for researchers, as self-concept clarity predicts important well-being outcomes. This is true in general (e.g., Campbell et al., 1996), but self-concept clarity also is related to people's well-being in the wake of social role transitions, including exiting a romantic relationship.

Both role entries and exits can be stressful events in people's lives (e.g., Hertel, current volume, Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Even when the outcome of a transition is objectively positive, the transition itself may predict heightened anxiety, depression, and general distress (Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Jetten, O'Brien, & Trindall, 2002). Perhaps, the reductions in self-concept clarity that are sometimes associated with role transitions contribute to the distress that people experience. Indeed, reductions in self-concept clarity mediate the association between stressful life events and reduced psychological well-being (Ritchie, Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Gidron, 2011).

Although associations between self-concept clarity and well-being should generalize across a variety of social role transitions, most existing research has examined the well-being consequences of changes in self-concept clarity associated with the specific transition of exiting a romantic relationship. Overall, reduced self-concept clarity after the end of a romantic relationship predicts well-being decrements in the

form of elevated emotional distress. Lower self-concept clarity when recalling the end of a dating relationship predicts emotional distress among undergraduates (Slotter et al., 2010). Along the same lines, lower self-concept clarity as coded from online blog entries predicts more negative emotions in those entries. In the longitudinal study featured in the same research, steeper declines in self-concept clarity after the end of a romantic relationship predicted higher levels of nonclinical depressive symptomology at the conclusion of a 6-month period. These effects emerged controlling for participants' reports of how rejected they felt by the end of their relationship. Furthermore, these declines in self-concept clarity mediated the direct association between breakup status and depressive symptomology (Slotter et al., 2010). This longitudinal work argues for a temporal pathway wherein reduced self-concept clarity predicts elevated depressive symptomology over time.

Other research converges on this point. Greater loss of self after a marital separation, as measured on the LOSROS scale, correlates with higher levels of nonclinical depressive symptomology (Sbarra & Borelli, 2013). Research in undergraduate samples has demonstrated that feelings of self-concept clarity loss, but not the loss of the relationship itself, predict elevated nonclinical depressive symptomology after the breakup of a dating relationship (Drew, Heesacker, Frost, & Oelke, 2004). People in the measurement-intensive condition in the study described previously reported less loneliness and less negative emotional intrusion regarding their breakup than people engaged in their control condition; the reduced self-loss reported by people in the measurement-intensive condition mediated this effect (Larson & Sbarra, 2015). Moreover, it appears that it is self-concept clarity that predicts enhanced psychological well-being and not psychological well-being that predicts enhanced self-concept clarity. Specifically, in a longitudinal study of people whose dating relationships had recently ended, less loss of self and greater rediscovery of self in any given week, measured via the LOSROS scale, predicted greater psychological well-being the subsequent week (Mason et al., 2012). However, psychological well-being in a given week did not predict loss and rediscovery of self the subsequent week.

Taken together, the loss of self-concept clarity that people experience after social role transitions, including the loss of a romantic relationship, contributes to the amount of psychological disturbance people experience in the wake of the event. Furthermore, across several lines of research, the disruption people experience to self-concept clarity mediates the direct association between social role transitions and well-being. Thus, increasing our understanding of how shifts in the roles that people fill in their lives impact self-concept clarity, and how this relates to their psychological health, is a crucial task for researchers moving forward. Specifically, future research should seek to examine factors that increase or decrease people's risk of psychological distress after an identity-disrupting role transitions with the long-term goals of both identifying people at the highest risk for well-being decrements and intervening to prevent those well-being decrements.

## Unresolved Issues and Directions for Future Research

As research moves forward on the consequences of social role transitions for self-concept clarity, including romantic relationship transitions, a number of unresolved issues emerge as directions for future research. In this section, we suggest the areas of future research that we believe would be the most fruitful and theoretically interesting to investigate with the aim of addressing some of the unanswered questions. Although perhaps not an exhaustive list, the avenues for future research we describe would provide a better understanding of how social roles alter self-concept clarity and how these changes influence people's well-being.

### *Unresolved Issue 1: Expanding Our Consideration of Role Transitions*

The current chapter focused on how social role transitions impact self-concept clarity, with a primary focus on the influence of romantic relationship transitions (specifically dissolution) on self-concept clarity, simply because there is more existing research on romantic relationship transitions and self-concept clarity than on other transitions. However, future research should examine the impact of other types of social role transitions on the self-concept. As discussed elsewhere in the current chapter, recent work has begun to examine how other role transitions (i.e., loss of group memberships, transitioning to parenthood, etc.) relate to self-concept clarity, especially reduced self-concept clarity, but this work is limited. Thus, future work should examine whether romantic relationship transitions are just another case of role transition that disrupts the self or whether romantic relationship transitions are special in some way. As discussed, people's self-concepts, including self-concept clarity, are profoundly impacted by their romantic relationships while they are ongoing (e.g., Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Aron, 2003), such that our romantic relationships constitute some of the most fundamental emotional bonds that we have as adults (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Reis & Collins, 2004; Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997) and that we experience reduced self-concept clarity and elevated distress when our romantic ties dissolve (e.g., Davis et al., 2003; Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999; Sbarra, 2006). We would argue that the romantic relationship transitions may be, if not unique from other role transitions that impact the self, then events that are especially likely to impact self-concept clarity. However, future research should investigate this idea.

## ***Unresolved Issue 2: The Interplay Among Self-Concept Content Change, Self-Concept Clarity, and Self-Esteem***

Although changes to self-concept clarity in the wake of social role transitions, specifically romantic transitions, are fairly well-understood, there are places where this work could benefit from future investigation. Specifically, research could use clarification with considering self-concept content change and its relationship to self-concept clarity at the broad level of overall amount of self-content disruption versus the localized level of specific attributes after the end of a relationship. Some of the studies discussed in this chapter focus on broad levels of overall self-content change (e.g., Slotter et al., 2010) and find that higher levels of content change after the transition of ending a relationship predict reduced self-concept clarity. However, other work (e.g., Slotter et al., 2014) demonstrates that keeping specific relationally driven attributes after the end of a relationship also predicts reduced self-concept clarity, even though keeping attributes should represent less change to the self. How do we reconcile these findings?

As suggested earlier, perhaps the answer lies in the level of analysis. Broader self-change can represent greater upheaval to the overarching structure of the self, whereas jettisoning one or two specific attributes may not. Similarly, broad self-change could represent changes in attributes that people possessed prior to their now defunct relationship or added to their self-concepts through their own individual efforts, whereas, to date, the work on specific attribute rejection has focused on attributes added to the self-concept during the ex-relationship due to the ex-partner. Another potential explanation might be that broader self-concept change is confusing due to the sheer amount of upheaval occurring within the content of the self-concept. In contrast, jettisoning specific attributes may be more like pruning a houseplant – healthy in the long run as it allows for further growth. If people retain specific attributes from an ex-partner, this retention may contribute to reduced self-concept clarity, as it may be distressing to possess aspects of their identities that remind them of a defunct relationship. Future research investigating these nuances would add and further illuminate how the content of the self and self-concept clarity interface following relationship transitions.

An additional issue to explore here is how self-concept content and clarity after role transitions relate to self-esteem. In many of the studies discussed in the current chapter, the effects of role transitions on subsequent self-concept clarity and associated well-being outcomes emerged while controlling for participants' dispositional levels of self-esteem. This is important as self-concept clarity and self-esteem, although theoretically and empirically distinct, are often modestly correlated (e.g., Campbell, 1990). Despite the efforts of researchers to account for this correlation when examining these constructs, not all studies do. Future research should endeavor to more consistently examine self-concept clarity beyond the effects of self-esteem and should even consider potential areas where self-concept clarity and self-esteem might moderate each other's effects on individual outcomes, including psychological and physical well-being.

### ***Unresolved Issue 3: Expanding Our Understanding of Moderators***

The moderators of the association between role transitions and self-concept clarity constitute another unresolved issue that emerged throughout the current chapter. As discussed earlier, some factors, such as attachment anxiety or self-expansion opportunities in the ex-relationship, did alter the associations between the transition of the end of a relationship and self-concept clarity. However, some potentially sensible moderators did not emerge. Most notably, no gender differences emerged in the studies reviewed here. Research demonstrates that women often place more weight on their dyadic bonds, such as romantic relationships, whereas men place greater importance on their collective, or group, bonds (Gabriel & Gardner, 1999). Thus, the lack of gender differences is somewhat unexpected in the association between romantic relationship dissolution and self-concept clarity. Similarly, the effects discussed emerged similarly across different types of relationships (dating vs. marital). Finally, responsibility for initiating the end of the relationship did not moderate how the transition related to self-concept clarity. These effects suggest that the impact of the specific role transition of relationship loss is a fairly general one at least with regard to some personal and relational factors. Future research should expand the investigation into whether there are particular people for whom or particular circumstances under which role transitions such as the end of a relationship exert an especially powerful effect on their self-concept clarity.

### ***Unresolved Issue 4: Better Understanding Well-Being Outcomes***

Additionally, future research should expand the investigation into how self-concept clarity changes post-transition relate to well-being. Simply put, the existing research on how changes to self-concept clarity predict well-being after role transitions has focused almost exclusively on people's reports of emotional distress or dysfunction. Indeed, much of the research on the consequences of role transitions, relationship loss, specifically, focuses on the negative emotional sequelae of the event (e.g., Davis et al., 2003; Sbarra & Ferrer, 2006), so it is not surprising that identity-based research also focuses on the role of identity disruption in these negative emotional reactions. However, role transitions, specifically relationship loss, can also sometimes be associated with positive identity changes, such as feelings of rediscovered identity and identity growth (e.g., Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). Perhaps, when the identity changes associated with a role transition are positive, the emotional well-being consequences would also be positive. Future research should investigate this idea.

Furthermore, the field should examine the influence of role transitions and self-concept clarity on well-being beyond the typically employed self-report measures of psychological or affective well-being. Specifically, people's physical health can

also suffer after the transition of romantic relationship loss (e.g., Rook & Zettel, 2005; Williams & Umberson, 2004). Thus, future research should investigate whether the changes that occur to self-concept clarity after role transitions relate to physical as well as emotional well-being. This further investigation would also have the added benefit of including outcome measures that move beyond self-reports of well-being to incorporate physiological markers of stress and health. As the field moves forward, we should endeavor to incorporate more of these physiological markers, such as cortisol reactivity, skin conductance, or perhaps even neurological assessments like fMRI, as objective measures of the distress people experience in wake of social role transitions.

### *Unresolved Issue 5: Understanding Temporal Trajectories*

The field also ought to gain a clearer and more cohesive understanding of the time courses and trajectories associated with self-concept clarity and well-being after a social role transition. Among the studies reviewed here, only a few examined trajectories of self-concept clarity after romantic relationship transitions, and none examined self-concept clarity trajectories after other types of role transitions (e.g., Mason et al., 2012; Slotter et al., 2010). Even the studies that examine the time course of reduced self-concept clarity do so over short periods of time – typically a few weeks or a couple of months. Although these studies have certainly added to our understanding of how selves change after a specific role transition, broader longitudinal scopes would bring additional understanding to these processes as well as examining longitudinal trajectories of self-concept clarity, including self-concept clarity recovery, after other types of role transitions. Beyond understanding the trajectories of self-concept clarity, understanding how these trajectories relate to well-being over longer periods is an open question. Reduced self-concept clarity predicts reduced well-being in the immediate aftermath of a role transition, but perhaps, over the longer term, reductions in self-concept clarity represent individuals going through a necessary process to restructure their identities and may be related to enhanced well-being outcomes. It would be interesting to examine not only longer periods of time post-transition but some amount of pre-transition time as well. Examining the time course of self-content change and self-concept clarity across multiple related role entries and exits (e.g., relationships or jobs) would provide a more cohesive understanding of how self-concept clarity changes when people's roles change.

Furthermore, the vast majority of existing research on the self-concept clarity after a relational loss, as well as role transitions more generally, treats role transitions as a discrete event. Some work examines emotional recovery after the end of a relationship from a temporal process perspective (e.g., Sbarra & Ferrer, 2006); however, little work in the psychological literature examines whether role transitions themselves function as a process that unfolds over time as well (e.g., Lee & Sbarra, 2013). Treating role transitions as discrete events rather than processes may

not be an accurate characterization of how these transitions occur. Future research should examine this aspect of role transitions.

Examining the effects of self-concept clarity after role transitions across developmental periods or stages would also be fruitful for future research. Most of the existing research discussed in the current chapter focuses on changes in self-concept clarity after role transitions in college-aged adults or during middle adulthood (e.g., Light & Visser, 2013; Slotter & Walsh, 2016; Slotter et al., 2010, 2014). As self-concept clarity tends to increase and become more stable as individuals age (e.g., Light & Visser, 2013), examining how social role transitions impact self-concept clarity across the life span is an important task. Recent work does show that role limitations based on health concerns negatively predict self-concept clarity in older adults (Lodi-Smith et al., 2017). However, more substantial research into self-concept clarity changes and their association with well-being in older, as well as younger, people would be illuminating.

### *Unresolved Issue 6: Beginning Again*

Related to the understanding of trajectories of self-concept clarity in the wake of social role transitions, specifically romantic relationship dissolution, existing research typically treats any particular relationship as independent from other relationships people may have had in their lifetimes. Given that most people, at least in industrialized Western societies, will have multiple dating, or even marital, relationships within their lifetimes, examining relationships as independent of one another seems to be a key limitation of the existing work on romantic processes. Essentially, little to no research has examined how people begin again after a relationship ends. How long do we take to be on our own between our romantic relationships? And how do our romantic choices over time influence our identities?

One line emerging research on how people transition from one relationship to the next focuses on the nature of rebound relationships. Rebound relationships are defined as a new relationship that is initiated shortly after the end of another relationship (Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2015). Colloquially, the general perception of rebound relationships is that they have negative consequences for people and represent misguided attempts to recover emotionally and move on after a breakup or divorce (Lue, 2011; Meyer, 2012). Rebound relationships can take different forms, ranging from casual sexual partners to new monogamous relationships (Barber & Cooper, 2014; Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2015); however, the research on why people become involved with new romantic partners of any kind and the consequences of these relationships for people is only just emerging.

Generally speaking, the findings on the relational and emotional consequences of rebound relationships are mixed, suggesting that these relationships may be beneficial for individuals in some cases and harmful in others (Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2015; Spielmann, Joel, MacDonald, & Kogan, 2012; Spielmann, MacDonald, &



Wilson, 2009; Wolfinger, 2007). A central uninvestigated question, however, centers on how the amount of time that people take to be single between romantic relationships influences people's self-concepts. An emerging line of research investigating this question builds off work demonstrating that people are less likely to engage in new self-expansion if they were experiencing low trait or state self-concept clarity (Emery et al., 2015) and that new relationships entail high levels of self-expansion and change (e.g., Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Andersen & Chen, 2002; Slotter & Gardner, 2009). Thus, we posited that getting involved in a new relationship quickly after the end of a different relationship would negatively influence people's self-concept clarity, compared to people who wait longer to become re-involved. Moreover, re-involvement may be detrimental for longer for people whose selves were more strongly impacted by their relationships while ongoing.

Across several studies, research in our laboratory has found that rebound relationships have negative consequences for people's identities, but these consequences depend on how quickly people get re-involved after the end of a relationship and how malleable their self-concepts are in relationships in general (Slotter & Emery, 2017). Starting a new relationship extremely quickly after a breakup or divorce – within 1 to 3 weeks – predicted less self-concept clarity. Waiting slightly longer before getting re-involved – between a month and 5 months– only predicted less self-concept clarity among people whose self-concepts tended to be more malleable in romantic relationships. Thus, the amount that people change during relationships may impact how they are able to regulate their self-concept clarity from one relationship to the next and perhaps as they transition from one social role to another more generally (e.g., Mason et al., 2012; Slotter et al., 2010).

Of course, there are numerous open questions regarding how people start over after the end of a romantic relationship or after other sorts of role transitions. The work discussed in this section represents an initial attempt at understanding how we navigate our lives from one social role to the next; however, there are many directions for future work to clarify both areas of research. For example, researchers would benefit from investigating whether people tend to prefer certain temporal dating patterns – to remain single for a while between relationships, to date casually, to quickly jump into a new monogamous relationship, etc. – and whether these preferences predict different self-concept relevant outcomes. Other directions for future research might include looking at other role transitions, such as transitioning from one job to another quickly or with more time in between, to establish whether the effects that describe rebound romantic relationships also accurately capture other sorts of rapid transitions between related social roles. Finally, future work should examine whether people are aware of how they handle role transitions such as the loss of a relationship. Are people making conscious choices to transition between social roles? To what extent do people control these choices? If people are aware of their patterns, it may suggest points of intervention that may be useful in interrupting maladaptive processes. If people are not aware of or cannot control patterns, it would provide fascinating insight into the ways that our social roles can alter how we see ourselves, even to our detriment, without our awareness.

## Conclusions

People experience a myriad of social role changes throughout their lifetimes – leaving one relationship and beginning a new one, having children, changing jobs, and eventually retiring. Although research examining how these transitions affect people's understanding of themselves is relatively nascent, it suggests that the self-concept is especially vulnerable to disruption during these role upheavals. Much of this work has focused on how romantic relationship dissolution affects self-concept clarity. It is our hope that future research will continue to investigate these questions, as well as expanding the scope of inquiry to other types of role transitions, in order to establish when and how people succeed at rebuilding their identities as adults.

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