

# Chapter 7

## Understanding Our Groups, Understanding Ourselves: The Importance of Collective Identity Clarity and Collective Coherence to the Self

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*Although we assume a constant striving for unity, we do not assume that the outcome of the striving is necessarily successful...If we accept definitions of ourselves as members of groups, it is just as necessary to maintain these definitions as to maintain definitions of ourselves as isolated individuals.*

Prescott Lecky (1945).

**Abstract** The multiple group identities we all maintain (gender, cultural, religious, or professional) are critical to both self-knowledge and self-understanding. However, consideration of self-concept clarity at the collective level is in its infancy. The current chapter introduces two constructs that are integral to collective self-concept clarity. First, “collective identity clarity” refers to one’s understanding of the norms and values of each of the individual groups to which they belong. Second, “collective coherence” refers to the process of integrating all of one’s distinct group identities in a coherent structure. We review research relevant to each of these two components, highlight evidence linking collective self-concept clarity to psychological well-being, and outline avenues for future study.

**Keywords** Self · Identity · Self-concept clarity · Group identity · Collective identity · Well-being

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Few ideas have been as quietly influential as Prescott Lecky's insight that self-consistency was a fundamental human motive (Lecky, 1945). His collected writings, *Self-Consistency: A Theory of Personality*, were groundbreaking in their reexamination of psychological topics as varied as habitual behavior, learning, emotional processes, and clinical disorders through the distinct lens of a person's quest for subjectively coherent selfhood. Lecky (1945) rebelled against the dominant schools of psychological thought during his career, rebuking both Freudian and Pavlovian accounts of human motives. In their place, he offered an elegantly simple idea: humans need to understand themselves as stable and predictable, and will continuously strive for consistency among their existing self-views and behavior. Thus, a full decade or more before Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, Roger's (1959) notions of self-congruence, Heider's (1960) balance theory, Swann's (1983) self-verification theory, or Higgins' (1987) self-discrepancy theory, Lecky (1945) had identified self-consistency as the primary driver of both behavior and self-evaluation and had posited that an individual's most fundamental goal was to craft and maintain a self that they subjectively understood to be coherent, temporally stable, and internally consistent. In other words, Lecky's all important "striving for unity" represented the pursuit of what Jennifer Campbell and her colleagues (1990, 1996; current volume) would later refine into the construct of self-concept clarity.

Equally important, Lecky (1945) understood that the self encompassed more than individual characteristics. In this, he echoed James (1890) in discussing how close relationships and group memberships were incorporated into and as important to the self as were individual characteristics and values. Social self-representations were largely neglected in the modern study of the self-concept until the seminal work of Markus and Kitayama (1991) describing interdependent self-construals as a self-system. Though the initial focus was largely on interdependent selves as a cultural variable, because humans are universally socialized in relationships and groups, all humans maintain an interdependent or social self-system that is as powerful but distinct from the independent or individual self system—the two systems are motivated by distinct values (e.g., Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999), gain esteem through different mechanisms (social reflection rather than comparison; Gardner, Gabriel, & Hochschild, 2002), and operate through different regulatory foci (Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000). However, research that explores self-concept clarity beyond the level of the individual self remains rare. How do our relationships and group memberships contribute to a clear, consistent, and coherent understanding of ourselves?

The interdependent self can be further subdivided into distinct relational and collective levels of self-representation (e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Cross, Hardin, & Swing, 2009), and the interplay of self-concept clarity within each of these levels is in its infancy. For example, research has begun to investigate how couples may form coherent relational identities, how relationships may boost clarity in the face of threat, and how relationship transitions influence self-concept clarity over time (see Slotter & Emery, this volume; McIntyre, Mattingly, & Lewandowski, this volume, for review). Similar initial forays have attempted to examine self-concept

clarity through the lens of the collective self, although there is a comparative dearth of empirical literature in the collective domain compared to the relational domain. As such, this chapter will be speculative rather than definitive, pulling together research that we see as potentially relevant for understanding the interplay between self-concept clarity and collective identities, and raising questions that we believe are ripe for future exploration.

The field currently lacks a definition of “collective self-concept clarity,” but given how the construct of self-concept clarity is defined at the individual level, a parallel construct at the collective level would require at least two critical components. The first component of collective self-concept clarity reflects the person’s understanding of the meaning of each of his or her distinct group identities (e.g., understanding “who we are” as Americans). We will refer to this component as “collective identity clarity” and define it as the degree to which one’s beliefs about the meaning, norms, values, and prescriptions of a given collective identity are clearly and confidently held. The second component of collective self-concept clarity reflects the person’s understanding of how their multiple group identities (e.g., American, female, scientist, Asian, etc.) fit together. We will refer to this component as “collective coherence” and define it as the degree to which an individual’s multiple collective identities are subjectively perceived as harmonious and/or complementary, allowing for a unified and coherent sense of self. Both components are needed to understand how collective self-concept clarity may contribute to individual, intragroup, and intergroup well-being.

The current chapter will review existing research relevant to each of these two components of collective self-concept clarity in turn as well as evidence linking collective self-concept clarity to well-being. We will additionally raise future research questions needed to both establish each component of collective self-concept clarity and illuminate how they might combine to contribute to general self-concept clarity.

## **Collective Identity Clarity: Understanding a Single Group Membership**

### ***Collective Identity Clarity and Individual Well-Being***

People can extend their identities beyond the individual level in multiple ways, including elements from their closest dyadic relationships (e.g., Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998) to their broadest identifications with all of humanity (McFarland, Brown, & Webb, 2013). The majority of a person’s social identifications, however, are maintained at a level of “optimal distinctiveness” wherein a person feels both included and unique. This balance is most commonly filled through identification at the group level and particularly in the context of groups that are large enough to engender a sense of belonging yet still maintain clear group

boundaries (i.e., in contrast to an outgroup; Brewer, 1991). Bearing this in mind, our discussion of collective identity clarity will focus on specific identifiable group memberships, whether small social groups or larger clearly delineated cultural or ethnic groups.

Just as having a clear sense of self in terms of one's traits and attributes has been associated with greater psychological well-being (Baumgardner, 1990; Campbell, 1990), one might expect that having a clear sense of self at the collective level would offer similar benefits. In line with these predictions, clarity regarding a single collective identity is associated with improved individual well-being. In one series of studies, Osborne and Taylor (2010) measured participants' clarity regarding their cultural group membership and found that those who reported higher levels of cultural identity clarity or "the extent to which beliefs about one's cultural group are clearly and confidently defined" (Osborne & Taylor, 2010, p. 883) also reported higher satisfaction with life, higher levels of self-esteem, and lower levels of negative affect compared to participants with lower levels of cultural identity clarity. These relationships between collective self-clarity in terms of one's cultural group membership and improved psychological outcomes were found for individuals from a variety of cultural groups including Anglophone Quebecers, Francophone Québécois, Chinese Canadians, Chinese Americans, and members of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation.

Interestingly, the relationship between cultural identity clarity and improved well-being was proposed to be mediated by increases in self-concept clarity at the individual level (Osborne & Taylor, 2010). Theoretically, the authors propose that clarity at the collective level precedes individual-level self-concept clarity by providing a reference group against which to evaluate personal qualities (Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kachanoff, 2015; Taylor & Osborne, 2010; Osborne & Taylor, 2010). In a subsequent experiment (Osborne & Taylor, 2012), cultural identity clarity was manipulated by asking participants to either reflect or write about a time when their cultural group provided them clear and consistent behavioral norms and guidelines (clear-consistent condition), provided them multiple competing norms and behavioral guidelines (clear-inconsistent condition), or did not provide any norms or behavioral guidelines at all (unclear condition), followed by measures of individual well-being. As expected, participants high in identification with their cultural group reported significantly higher levels of positive affect and self-rated competence in the clear-consistent as opposed to either the inconsistent or unclear conditions. Personal uncertainty mediated these effects, but only for participants high in cultural group identification; no significant differences in well-being were found among those who were not strongly identified.

Future work will be needed to replicate these results and definitively determine the mechanism by which collective identity clarity contributes to well-being. For example, while the authors' claim that collective identity clarity precedes individual-level self-concept clarity is one possibility, it is also possible that collective identity clarity leads to higher overall self-concept clarity simply by increasing clarity at one of the three levels of self (individual, relational, or collective; Brewer & Gardner, 1996). The boundary conditions of such work will also need to be explored, as

collective identities outside cultural groups have not been examined. Lastly, additional investigation should provide more detail about the relationship between collective identity clarity and the strength of one's personal identification with a group. While we view these as orthogonal constructs, they are likely to interact.

### *Collective Identity Clarity and Individual Understanding*

In addition to not being predicated on identification strength, collective identity clarity also does not require the group or beliefs regarding the group in question to be universally conceptualized, simple, and/or unchanging. Just as self-concept clarity at the individual level refers to the *subjective* clarity and consistency of one's individual traits and attributes (Campbell, 1990), collective self-concept clarity also relies on a *subjective* assessment of understanding a given group. Within a group, individual members may define or understand the group differently, though groups whose members share higher rates of consistency are likely to more easily lend themselves to higher levels of identity clarity on average.

The idea that people have individualized understandings of group norms is not a new one. Lapinski and Rimal (2005) distinguish between collective norms and perceived norms, for instance. In this framework, collective norms are those which truly emerge and exist at the collective level for a given group. One might consider these to be the objectively accurate norms. However, because group norms are transmitted with varying degrees of explicitness and consistency, the way that a given individual understands a group's collective norms may or may not entirely align with such an objective viewpoint. These personal understandings of collective norms are referred to as perceived norms, and they exist at the level of an individual group member.

From this perspective, one could speculate that clear perceived norms, as opposed to clear collective norms, are necessary to achieve collective identity clarity regarding a specific group. Two group members may hold very different beliefs about the norms of the same group, yet if both individuals are confident in their knowledge and perceive it to be a clear understanding of their group, they may both experience high levels of collective identity clarity. The degree to which members of a group vary in their understanding of group norms may differ between groups as a function of norm explicitness, enforcement mechanisms, etc. and could be investigated as a possible influence on the development and manifestation of collective identity clarity. Furthermore, the coexistence of multiple understandings of a given group that are simultaneously held with high subjective clarity and confidence by different members would likely have implications both for the individuals in question and for group-level outcomes. Beyond the benefits of a clear personal understanding of one's collective identity, it is possible that additional benefits of collective identity clarity accrue when that group understanding is shared with other group members. We would also expect that, regardless of whether individual-level benefits are based on perceived or collective norms, group-level initiatives should be more easily achieved when understandings are shared and held with a higher degree of consensus.

### *Collective Identity Clarity and Group Dynamics*

Collective identity clarity does not preclude the possibility of change in one's understanding of a group over time. While groups that can be understood with greater consistency across time may more easily lend themselves to sustained clarity, it should also be possible for a person to maintain high moment-to-moment collective identity clarity while still developing or deepening understanding of the identity in question. Just as individuals can create cohesive personal narratives combining multiple different (and even seemingly conflicting) self-aspects and acknowledging adjustment across the life span, so too can collective identity clarity exist despite complicated nuance and continual development of a group's concept (McAdams, 2001). This understanding allows for considerations of norm formation, alteration, and influence to play out as they are known to do in group settings (i.e., Hogg & Reid, 2006). While collective identity clarity does not prevent or preclude group-level changes, the dynamics of group influence and norms themselves are certainly related to the clarity of understanding one's collective identity. For example, one way that group expectations, values, and norms can be communicated is through prototypes and exemplars (Hogg & Reid, 2006). This may mean that groups with available examples of one or more highly prototypical members for reference may prove easier subjects for the development of collective identity clarity because behavioral norms are more readily apparent. It may also be that individuals with high collective identity clarity selectively allocate their attention and emphasis to items compatible with his or her confidently held perceived norms, creating a reinforcing process (cf. self-verification; Swann, 2011).

However, while prototypical members may readily highlight group norms, having multiple highly influential parties may also cause a decrease in collective identity clarity. In a group with multiple prototypical members or a highly visible and influential minority, the presence of conflicting cues may cause "an acute sense of identity threat and self-conceptual uncertainty, impermanence, and instability" (Hogg & Reid, 2006, p. 22). Either the challenging of a previous group norm or introduction of a new group norm that is perceived as misaligned with the current collective identity may cause schisms within the group (Sani, 2008). In such cases, a group may either attempt to reconstruct a unified identity through negotiation and resolution or split into multiple entities, each with its own distinct set of norms. Given that challenges to group norms inherently represent an identity threat at the collective level, they would surely have a significant effect on an individual's confidence and clarity regarding what his or her collective identity truly means. Maintaining a high level of collective identity clarity in these circumstances would require either finding a way to perceive the new and old group norms as compatible and coherent as a whole, updating one's group definition to exclude one set of the conflicting norms, or potentially changing one's identification altogether.

### *Collective Identity Clarity Development and Maintenance*

Individuals possess a variety of tools for coming to understand and maintaining a sense of meaning for their collective identities. Researchers Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, and Bámaca-Gómez (2004) propose a three-component model of ethnic identity development that includes identity exploration (the extent to which individuals are seeking knowledge about their identity), resolution (the extent to which they understand their identity), and affirmation (the extent to which they feel positively about their identity). Based on different combinations of exploration and resolution, they propose four types of resulting identities: diffuse (low exploration, low resolution), foreclosed (low exploration, high resolution), moratorium (high exploration, low resolution), and achieved (high exploration, high resolution). If we extend this classification to collective identities more generally, one might predict that both foreclosed and achieved identifications would be more likely to manifest collective identity clarity due to their high levels of resolution. However, achieved identifications might be predicted to be more stable across time because they have been more fully explored and therefore may more easily maintain collective identity clarity across time.

Importantly, affirmation, or the extent to which an individual feels positively toward his or her group, is orthogonal to clarity about one's identification. While collective identity clarity may help form a foundation from which to build positive views of one's group and collective self-esteem (it is likely difficult to feel positively about a group that one does not clearly understand), clarity does not necessarily lead to positivity. In other words, it is possible to have a clear sense of a collective identity that is either highly positive or highly negative, just as it is possible to have clear and stable individual-level self-beliefs that are positive or negative. Self-verification theory (Swann, 2011) proposes that individuals prefer verifying the identities they hold clearly regardless of their positivity or negativity. In line with self-verification theory, people prefer interacting with others who share their view of a given collective identity and thereby provide verifying feedback, particularly for those identities that are held strongly (Chen, Chen, & Shaw, 2004).

It may also be the case that different types of groups are easier to develop collective identity clarity for than others. Discrepancies may arise from different group contents, similarly to the way that individual characteristics in different domains are likely to be held with differing levels of self-concept clarity on average (Stinson, Wood, & Doxey, 2008), or from differences in group structure and perception. For example, collective identity clarity might be greatest for highly entitative groups with easily perceived group boundaries (Lickel et al., 2000). A perceived match between core group attributes and individual attributes may also contribute to an enhanced sense of collective identity clarity. In a way similar to the recent finding by Bleidorn et al. (2016) that city residents whose levels of personality traits of openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were a better match to the group-level characteristics of the city's population at large had higher self-esteem, it is likely that a closer match between an individual member's attributes and the



characteristics of a group overall would enhance both collective identity clarity and ease of identification. It may also be that although identification and clarity are not redundant, people are generally more likely to develop a clear understanding of collective identities that are more chronically salient or are considered central to one's overall self-concept. This may be cyclical, such that people are also more likely to increase the strength of their identification with groups for which they are able to develop and maintain higher levels of collective identity clarity versus those for which they are unable to do so. Past work has shown that individuals are likely to increase both their group-level identifications and perceptions of group entitativity following rejection and personal uncertainty (Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007; Knowles & Gardner, 2008), but to the best of our knowledge, this phenomenon has not been examined with collective self-concept clarity measures. It may be the case that clear collective identities provide more effective buffering of one's personal well-being than do unclear collective identities. Lastly, if feedback from others is influential, it may be easier to develop a sense of clarity for visible as opposed to non-visible group memberships (Goffman, 1963).

Overall, collective identity clarity appears to be a promising construct that remains underexplored. Initial examinations of cultural identity clarity provide evidence of predicted associations between clarity at the collective level and individual well-being outcomes. Future work should examine similar associations for other types of collective identities as well as examine a variety of additional outcome variables. For example, though collective identity clarity is tied to individual self-esteem, its implications for identification, collective self-esteem, self-presentation, and behavioral outcomes like commitment to pursue group-related goals have yet to be examined. Perceived agency in collective definition also provides a ripe area for future investigation, as this has been found to be associated with greater individual well-being (Taylor & Osborne, 2010) and would likely accelerate the development of collective identity clarity. Further research is needed to better understand both the antecedents and consequences of collective identity clarity.

## **Collective Coherence: Understanding How Multiple Collective Identities Combine**

### ***The History of Studying Multiple Collective Identities***

Maintaining collective identity clarity, a clear understanding of the meaning, norms, and values of the individual groups to which we belong, is only the first component of collective self-concept clarity. Collective self-concept clarity also requires understanding the impact of *multiple* collective identities for an individual's overarching sense of self-concept coherence. All of us maintain and manage multiple group identities, based on sources as diverse as nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, social class, political ideology, gender, sexual orientation, profession, and/or social



groups. It would not be unusual, for example, to meet someone who identifies as a woman, as a Christian, as an African American, as middle class, as a liberal, as a psychologist, and as a member of her rugby team. Although we naturally identify with multiple groups, maintaining such a large portfolio of collective identities presents a challenge to the pursuit of a unified self. Indeed, this challenge has been recognized since James (1890) astutely noted that every person had multiple “social selves” and that showing different sides of the self to different audiences could lead to internal discord.

The benefits and costs of maintaining multiple selves were first examined in the early 1990s. The social-cognitive perspective of the self as a knowledge structure implied that protective psychological benefits were provided by increased complexity and compartmentalization (e.g., Linville, 1987; Showers, 1992). In contrast, personality-based views of the self emphasized how self-fragmentation often led to poorer mental health (e.g., Block, 1961; Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993). For example, Linville (1985, 1987) argued that to the extent an individual’s spontaneous self-concept was composed of multiple domain-specific aspects (e.g., defining the self as a parent, at work, as a neighbor, as a friend, etc.) that were relatively non-overlapping in their attributes, he or she would have high self-complexity. Higher self-complexity was demonstrated to buffer the individual from the stress of failure in any individual domain. In contrast, Donahue et al. (1993) demonstrated that an individual’s level of self-concept differentiation, defined as high levels of unshared variance in personality characteristics across five different experimenter-chosen social roles, predicted higher levels of concurrent depression and lower levels of esteem.

It was during the timeframe of this debate that Campbell and colleagues (1990, 1996) introduced the construct of self-concept clarity. Rather than focusing on objective similarities among specific aspects of the self, self-concept clarity represented an emergent understanding of whether aspects of the self subjectively fit together into a coherent and consistent whole. Specifically, to the extent that an individual has beliefs about the self that are certain, internally consistent, and stable across time, that individual has high self-concept clarity. Self-concept clarity reflects the perceived structure of self-knowledge more than the content of self-knowledge. Importantly, it is the *subjective sense* of clarity rather than patterns in any specific structural features that is associated with higher self-esteem and emotional well-being. From a clarity perspective, the potential benefits of self-complexity versus the costs of self-differentiation may depend upon the individual’s subjective understanding of him or herself across roles. Indeed Campbell, Assanand, and DiPaula (2003) demonstrated that measures of self-complexity and compartmentalization were independent of measures of self-concept clarity—implying that multiple self-structures, varying in complexity, could lead to similar levels of self-understanding. Lutz and Ross (2003) showed that self-complexity and self-concept differentiation were similarly independent. In another demonstration of the nonredundant nature of self-differentiation and self-concept clarity, Diehl and Hay (2011) used cluster analysis to examine combinations of the two constructs, finding five clusters that were differentially associated with age and well-being. Finally, Pilarska (2016) recently

revealed that the negative impact of high self-concept differentiation on positive aspects of identity was fully mediated by lower levels of self-concept clarity. Taken as a whole, this work strongly implies that the maintenance of multiple “social selves” is only problematic to the extent that it impedes the establishment of a clear and coherent sense of the self as a unified entity.

The prior debate focused predominantly on the number and distinctiveness of multiple social roles, which are not identical to maintaining multiple collective identities. Self-concept differentiation is most commonly measured by having the participant either imagine themselves in a specific social context (e.g., for a professional role, the participant may be asked to imagine themselves in the workplace) or with a specific other or group of people (e.g., imagining interacting with colleagues). This type of measurement may encourage the reporting of a self-presentational persona (e.g., Leary & Allen, 2011) rather than an actual professionally based collective self. Indeed, when examining the association between self-concept differentiation and well-being, Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, and Ilardi (1997) reported that self-concept differentiation was associated with feelings of inauthenticity and that both negatively influenced mental health. Their work implies that self-concept differentiation, as typically measured, may reflect multiple distinct self-presentations at least as much as multiple distinct identities. An examination of how multiple collective identities contribute to self-concept clarity and well-being will require defining and measuring collective identities in a way that differentiates them from role-bound self-presentational personae. Although we are unaware of specific work that examines the relationship between the number or distinctiveness of collective identities and an individual’s level of self-concept coherence, numerous studies explore the distinctiveness of collective identities and related aspects of well-being. In fact, there are collective-level analogues of both self-complexity (e.g., Roccas & Brewer, 2002) and self-concept differentiation (e.g., Downie, Mageau, Koestner, & Liodden, 2006), and we would propose that adapting a construct borrowed from the multiculturalism literature, collective identity integration, may serve as a proxy for what we refer to as collective coherence (e.g., Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005).

### *The Benefits of Collective Coherence*

Roccas and Brewer (2002) introduced the construct of social identity complexity to refer to how an individual organizes and conceptualizes his or her multiple collective identities. In a way that parallels how self-complexity examines the overlap of traits across various social roles, social identity complexity examines the overlap of group membership and prototypes across a person’s various collective identities. From this perspective, low complexity occurs when a person perceives his or her multiple groups as similar in members and representation (e.g., Italian and Catholic—membership in both groups is common, and prototypes of the two groups are often overlapping), whereas high complexity occurs when the groups

are perceived as having little overlap in either (e.g., female and engineer—shared membership is uncommon, and prototypes are distinct). Higher social identity complexity lowers anxiety when membership in any specific ingroup is threatened (Ruvolo, 2004) as well as enhances intergroup tolerance (Brewer & Pierce, 2005), thus potentially boosting both individual and societal well-being. However, maintaining high social identity complexity may sometimes impede collective coherence. Because social identity complexity is determined by the subjective representation of identities, individuals with “objectively” non-overlapping identities (“female” and “engineer”) may simplify their identity, for example, by isolating their ingroup to the intersection (“female engineers”) or by choosing one or the other as the dominant identity. Simpler collective identity structures are preferred when feelings of uncertainty are either situationally evoked or chronically high (Grant & Hogg, 2012; Roccas & Brewer, 2002), implying that individuals may simplify the organization of their collective identities in pursuit of certainty or coherence.

The benefits of a more unified collective identity structure are also consistent with Downie et al. (2004, 2006) who examine a phenomenon akin to collective self-concept differentiation that they term “cultural chameleonism.” Cultural chameleonism refers to the ways in which multicultural individuals negotiate multiple cultural settings and is measured with items such as “How I present myself changes based on the cultural context of a particular situation.” It parallels self-concept differentiation in its emphasis on differing self-presentational behavior across cultural contexts instead of role contexts and comes to similar conclusions. Individuals lower in chameleonism, thus feeling as if they have a more unified self across cultural contexts, show better emotional well-being (Downie et al., 2004), as well as feel more authentic in their daily social interactions (Downie et al., 2006). Similar research has examined feelings of connection to different communities and demonstrated how simply feeling connected to two communities with opposing values (i.e., jail inmates who feel close connection to the community at large as well as the criminal community), even in the absence of differential self-presentation, is detrimental to well-being (Mashek, Stueweg, Furukawa, & Tangney, 2006).

Just as the level of self-concept clarity appears to resolve whether maintaining multiple distinct selves across roles is a boon or bane for individual well-being, a corresponding construct, collective identity integration, may share similar explanatory power. Benet-Martinez and Haritatos (2005) have found that multicultural individuals’ subjective perceptions concerning their multiple cultural identities’ closeness vs distance to one another, as well as beliefs about their conflicting vs harmonious nature, determine both bicultural competence and individual well-being. In other words, rather than any specific overlap between membership or representation of the distinct identities (e.g., Roccas & Brewer, 2002) and the consistency versus distinctiveness of behavior enacted in different cultural contexts (e.g., Downie et al., 2006), it is the person’s own beliefs concerning the compatibility of these identities that matter in determining how maintaining multiple collective identities influence well-being. Moreover, just as self-concept clarity reflects the

subjective perception of the coherence of the self across a combination of traits or roles, collective identity integration reflects the subjective perception of the coherence of one's combination of collective identities.

### *The Maintenance of Collective Coherence*

How does one maintain a subjectively integrated view of the self across multiple collective identities? What factors lead to an overall sense of collective coherence while still allowing identification with many distinct ingroups? We speculate on two complementary pathways to maintaining both overall coherence and multiple collective identifications; the first focuses on the stability of the representations of each collective self, and the second focuses on self-narratives, how the stories we tell “make sense” of the society of collective selves within each individual.

A successful collective self-structure needs to both allow for the flexibility of activating ingroup prototypic aspects of the self in appropriate collective contexts and allow the maintenance of a sense of stability across time and consistency within context. McConnell's (2010) multiple self-aspects framework (MSF) conceives of the self-concept as an associative network containing multiple and interlinked context-dependent selves. Each smaller “self” is associated with various traits and behaviors, such that when that specific “self” is activated, a person will represent and enact that “self” in a consistent manner. The MSF thus predicts consistency in behavior and self-knowledge when a social identity is activated and has been supported by multiple streams of experience. For example, Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady (1999) showed that activating Asian-American women's “female” vs “Asian” identities led to distinct patterns of performance in prototypically female (verbal) versus Asian (math) relevant tasks. Similarly, Hong, Morris, Chiu, and Benet-Martinez (2000) showed that priming Asian-American biculturals with culturally relevant symbols (e.g., a dragon versus Mickey Mouse) led them to both think and behave in a culturally consistent manner. Finally, in a relational rather than collective context, English and Chen (2007) demonstrated the coexistence of cross contextual variability in self-representations and behavior with strong temporal stability—in other words, individuals may think of themselves in highly distinct ways across relational contexts (with my best friend, with my father, with my romantic partner, etc.) but in consistent ways within these contexts across time. This combination of both variability and stability was magnified the more important the distinct relationships were to the self.

The MSF explains these types of phenomena through calling upon distinct and stable relational or collective self-representations that are activated within each relevant context. As such, the MSF allows for both the variability of the self across collective identities and the stability of the self-structure overall. From this standpoint, collective coherence would be an emergent property of the associative network as a whole—reflecting the stability and coherence of each collective identity, weighted by each collective identity's centrality. In this sense, collective “selves”

are treated similarly to any other “self” (e.g., role based, relationship based), and the stability and internal consistency of each smaller “self” contribute to the sense of coherence across the network more generally.

The second pathway through which multiple collective identities can be integrated into a coherent whole focuses on conscious “meaning making” rather than impressions of underlying self-structure. More specifically, we focus on the self as a narrative, a continuously evolving “life story” that connects diverse life experiences into a meaningful sequence (e.g., McAdams, 2001). Life stories encourage continuity of the self across time and explain how the self is consistent despite conflicting values, traits, or events (e.g., McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Life stories are particularly important in interpreting contradictory information about the self (e.g., a transgression that belies core values), because placing this information within a narrative sequence can allow for resolution of such conflicts through perceptions of growth (e.g., Mansfield, McClean, & Lilgendahl, 2010). Recent research highlights how life stories that focus on collective identities may result in collective coherence.

When multicultural individuals were asked to tell the story of their cultural identity development, markers of narrative coherence were positively associated with identity integration (Yampolsky, Amiot, & de la Sablonnière, 2013), implying that collective coherence includes being able to tell a sensible story about the development and interplay of multiple collective identities. Moreover, collective identities may each carry particular narrative features. Researchers have just begun to explore “master narratives,” defined as episodic similarities within specific groups (e.g., the “coming out” story for sexual minorities, the resisting prejudice story for African Americans, etc., McLean & Syed, 2016). In this context, we would predict that the extent to which there is overlap between a master narrative and one’s personal narrative, collective identification and coherence may follow. For example, if being gay is a core collective identity, the personal narrative will likely highlight “coming out” as an important turning point in the life story. As multiple collective identities carry distinct master narratives, we speculate that crafting a personal life story to include all of the narrative features important to one’s various collective identities may instill a sense of collective coherence. The “life story” of a gay Jewish New Yorker, for example, might highlight the Bar Mitzvah, the “coming out” story, and where he was/what he was doing on 9/11 as episodic features. By incorporating these master narratives and combining them with more idiosyncratic triumphs and tragedies, this individual would have crafted a coherent story of the self that is at once both personal and collective, in that it reflects his individual psychological experiences interwoven with events of shared significance for his ingroups.

Although the MSF takes a social-cognitive perspective in contrast to the personality-based perspective of narrative models of self, the accommodation of idiosyncratic and thus cross-culturally applicable models of selfhood is a shared strength of both. In allowing the individual to define his or her most important self-aspects, the MSF easily allows for cultural differences; in an independent cultural context, self-aspects in the MSF may be most closely represented by aspects of the individual self, but in an interdependent cultural context, the most important

self-aspects will be defined by relationships and groups (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This flexibility of the MSF allows for idiosyncratic self-structures, as does the representation of the self as a narrative. The stories through which we define the self are similarly idiosyncratic and can therefore be told through from any cultural perspective. Being applicable across cultures, both the MSF and the narrative model of self-representation allow for a broadening of the “self” in the exploration of self-concept clarity. Although individual-level self-concept clarity has been shown to be more strongly associated with well-being in individualistic or independent cultures (e.g., Campbell et al., 1996), collective coherence is likely to play a larger role in well-being for more interdependent or collectivist cultures.

## **Collective Self-Concept Clarity: Conclusions and Future Directions**

Consideration of self-concept clarity at the collective level is in its infancy. The current chapter has introduced two constructs that we believe are integral to any conception of collective self-concept clarity. One cannot clearly understand the self without understanding the individual groups to which we belong; “collective identity clarity” reflects this understanding. Similarly, one cannot clearly understand the self without making sense of how all our distinct group identities combine; “collective coherence” reflects the necessity of unifying a multi-identified self. While many aspects of both collective identity clarity and collective coherence remain currently unexplored, these constructs provide a framework with numerous future directions.

For example, does collective self-concept clarity have a greater impact for certain types of people as compared to others? One might anticipate that collective clarity would be most important for individuals who, either situationally or chronically, emphasize their collective levels of self. This might include those who are higher in interdependent self-construals, for instance, or those who may have often find themselves in situations where a particular collective identity is made salient. Other individual differences may also contribute, such as the need for cognitive closure or one’s tolerance of ambiguity.

Moreover, we believe the two constructs of collective identity clarity and collective coherence are separable but likely non-orthogonal. Future work should investigate the ways in which people seek to establish and maintain both collective coherence and identity clarity and the ways in which changes in each of these constructs relate to the other. For example, we would expect that higher levels of collective identity clarity should often assist with both pathways toward collective coherence. A clearer sense of group norms and values should lead to greater consistency in self-representation when interacting within those groups. Because we propose that this type of temporal consistency within ingroup contexts is a foundation of collective coherence, to the extent that collective identity clarity increases this



consistency, it should correspondingly increase collective coherence. Similarly, higher collective identity clarity should be associated with higher collective coherence to the extent that it is accompanied by a clearer and more accessible understanding of the distinct “master narratives” characterizing important ingroups and thus the higher likelihood of integrating those narratives into one’s personal life story. In some instances, however, increases in collective identity clarity could threaten collective coherence. When an altered or enhanced understanding of one collective identity leads to recognition of conflicts with other collective identities, collective coherence may suffer.

Striving for collective coherence may, in turn, influence collective identity clarity. Because the process of identity integration requires recognizing similar or complementary aspects of distinct identities, it may fine-tune one’s understanding of the meaning of each group membership, boosting collective identity clarity. Alternatively, the quest for collective coherence may sometimes reduce collective identity clarity. Consider the case of the female engineer who initially has high collective identity clarity for female and for engineer but struggles with integration; simplifying her identity by viewing her ingroup as existing only at the junction of the two will boost collective coherence due to jettisoning an obvious conflict, but will temporarily lower collective identity clarity as she seeks to understand the idiosyncratic meanings and norms of this “new” ingroup at the intersection.

It is worth noting that while we have highlighted two components that we believe to be central to self-concept clarity at the collective level, other factors are likely to play a role as well. For example, in addition to understanding the meaning of one’s group and establishing collective identity clarity, it might also help to have a specific understanding of oneself as a group member—the attributes that are most closely associated with that self-aspect and the role that one as an individual plays in the larger group structure. Note that additional influences such as this may also interact with the two factors we have already highlighted. For example, having a clear understanding of one’s role and function within a group may help form a concept of the group’s goals which would enhance collective identity clarity. Depending on the role that you occupy within a group, power structures and points of view may also lead to different concepts of the same group for different members. Additionally, one may be likely to join and develop a particularly high sense of collective identity clarity for groups that emphasize attributes similar to those that an individual already possesses, and these groups may in turn be easier to integrate into one’s overall sense of self leading to higher collective coherence. It should be noted, however, that a person does not necessarily choose to belong to all groups of which he or she is a member, harkening back to the interplay of individual-level influences and qualities of the group in question.

Social influences at every level (interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup) should also be explored for their role in the development of collective self-concept clarity. For example, what is the role of feedback from others in people’s understanding of themselves? We would expect that people who receive more consistent feedback and verification from others are likely to have higher levels of collective self-concept clarity and that inconsistent feedback should be most damaging when it is received



from ingroup members or close others. On an intergroup level, how might stereotypes or comparison groups impact one's understanding of a collective self?

While many of these questions relate to the internal experiences of the individual whose collective self-concept is being examined, one may also examine the implications of collective self-concept clarity for the way we present ourselves and are perceived by others. It is likely that people engage in self-presentational tuning to engender collective identity consistent feedback. Collective self-concept clarity may also impact the way we communicate about our group memberships, perhaps reflected in the labels we choose to use for ourselves. The way we refer to our groups and our confidence in doing so may, in turn, impact the way that others perceive us, including stereotyping.

Finally, self-concept clarity, though often studied as an individual difference variable, is also recognized as a developing and dynamic process. Individuals add new experiences and new self-knowledge, they change relationships and shift in roles, and each may require an updated self-view. Similarly, the addition of new group identities, as well as the integration and refinement of existing group identities, continues across the life span, presenting parallel challenges to self-conceptions and coherence. In the self's evolution, understanding Lecky's (1945) "constant striving for unity" would be incomplete without considering self-concept clarity at the collective level.

Collective self-concept clarity is critical to understanding the complete psychological experience of individuals seeking to maintain a coherent and meaningful sense of self. Including both collective identity clarity, or the understanding of an individual collective identity, and collective coherence, or the understanding of how all of one's collective identifications fit together, collective self-concept clarity has potential implications not only for the psychological well-being of individuals in question but also for behavior, social perception, and intragroup and intergroup functioning. It is our hope that this chapter has provided a generative introduction into this exciting area of self research, and we look forward to shared insights as the field moves forward.

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