

The importance of self concept clarity



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It is widely acknowledged within psychology that the self is multi-faceted and composed of many different dimensions. Therefore, it seems inapt that the study of the self has, until recently, largely been dominated by just one dimension; self-esteem (Linville & Carlston, 1994, p. 13). Self-esteem is a very important aspect of the self. It affects a person's choices, mood, social relationships, and psychological well-being. However, psychology must strive for a complete, comprehensive understanding of the self and as such, must place greater emphasis on other equally important properties of the self. Some such properties include self-awareness, self-complexity, self-reflection, and self-regulation. This paper will focus specifically on one dimension; self-concept clarity (SCC).

Self-concept clarity can be defined as the degree to which an individual feels that the content of their self-concept (i. e. their self-knowledge) is well-defined, comprehensible, "consistent, and temporally stable" (Campbell et al, 1996, p. 1). It is argued that self-concept clarity is as important as self-esteem in understanding the self-concept, influencing human thought, feelings and behaviour in its own unique way.

SCC is valuable in that it provides a structural analysis of the self. It also correlates with self-esteem and both influence some similar outcomes. However, SCC is also important in that it is a unique and separate property of the self: It has benefits which self-esteem does not and influences certain outcomes which self-esteem cannot. The correlations between self-esteem and SCC, along with their distinctive, individual elements, are best viewed when examining literature on psychological well-being. High SCC also offers a wider range of behavioural resources amid aversive situations. This is best

observed when examining coping styles. In addition, SCC has theoretical utility, and can account for the seeming paradox of the self, where the self-concept is both stable and changeable. Each merit of SCC listed above will be discussed throughout this paper in an attempt to highlight the importance of SCC in the study of the self-concept.

The first significant contribution SCC research makes to the study of the self is its recognition of the self as multidimensional. It offers a structural analysis of the self-concept as opposed to the evaluative analysis provided by self-esteem research. Self-concept clarity is one of several structural features of self-organisation. It helps organise individuals' self-evaluations and self-beliefs. Low self-concept clarity arises when people experience a mixture of positive and negative self-beliefs, leading to self-concept confusion, which in turn has several negative consequences (Leary & Tangney, 2003, p. 54-56). While one form of analysis is not better than another, the structural analysis offered by SCC literature, combined with the evaluative analysis of self-esteem, improves one's overall understanding of the self-concept.

SCC has consistently been shown to correlate strongly with self-esteem. Campbell (1990) found that individuals with low self-esteem generally have lower self-concept clarity than those with high self-esteem (Campbell, 1990, p. 1). To illustrate this point, one study demonstrated how low-self-esteem participants showed a longer reaction time than high self-esteem participants on lexical decision tests, where word pairs containing one self-relevant word and one non-self-relevant word were presented (Campbell, 1990, p. 6).

In addition, it has been shown that those of high self-esteem hold stable, clear, positive self-beliefs. However, contrary to expectations, those with low self-esteem do not hold fixed, clear negative self-beliefs. Instead, they take a neutral stance on the self and are uncertain how to regard the various dimensions of their self-concept (Campbell & Lavelle, 1993). As self-esteem and self-concept clarity are strongly correlated and interact in important ways, it would be deficient to focus only on self-esteem. Self-concept clarity is clearly important.

Self-esteem also influences the relationship between self-concept clarity and other constructs. Neslek and Plesko (2001) showed that self-concept clarity is sensitive to daily life events, but that this relationship is mediated by both self-esteem and mood (Neslek & Plesko, 2001, p. 9). For example, if a college student found out they passed their end-of-year exams they are likely to be in a good mood and to experience an increase in self-esteem. Their self-concept clarity would be altered as a result. Here, self-esteem acts only as one of two mediators. The key outcome is a change in self-concept clarity.

The importance of self-concept clarity as a property of the self becomes increasingly evident when one examines its implications removed from self-esteem. SCC has much to offer the self, independent of self-esteem. Most self-concept clarity research to date has emphasised SCC's independent contribution to the self-concept by focusing on psychological well-being. Research on social phobia demonstrates that those who suffer from social phobia hold neither a positive nor negative perception of the self. Instead, they generally hold more neutral self-perceptions and demonstrate low

certainty and consistency in these perceptions. It is this uncertainty regarding the self which leads to self-concept confusion and, in turn, social phobia (Moscovitch et al, 2009, p. 4).

Wilson and Rapee (2006) found that, compared to non-clinical participants, those with social phobias demonstrated slower reaction time patterns in choosing self-descriptive traits from a list of adjectives than when they were engaged in a self-irrelevant task involving trait words. Thus, low SCC is a precondition for the development of social phobia (Wilson & Rapee, 2006, p. 18).

Low self-concept clarity has also been found to correlate with numerous psychological attributes which indicate poor functioning and are a potential threat to psychological well-being. Campbell and colleagues (1996) showed SCC to be correlated positively with constructs such as chronic self-analysis and ruminative self-focused attention, and negatively correlated with neuroticism (Campbell et al, 1996, p. 1). Therefore, someone with self-concept confusion may suffer from high neuroticism, chronic self-analysis, and a tendency to ruminate on aspects of the self, all of which have been shown to negatively impact psychological well-being. Thus, SCC is an essential self-property.

Smith and colleagues (1996) emphasise the value of self-concept clarity through the exploration of coping styles. Self-esteem has been linked to coping styles in that low self-esteem individuals employ a narrow range of fixed, inflexible coping behaviours when faced with negative situations. However, Smith and colleagues argue that self-concept clarity is a more

important component of the self-concept in this regard, as it can help explain the link between self-esteem and coping styles. More importantly, however, self-concept clarity influences both active and passive coping styles in its own unique way, independent of self-esteem. Those with high SCC engage in more active coping styles while those with low SCC prefer passive coping methods (Smith et al, 1996, p. 21). Take, for example, an obese man who is told he has diabetes and is at risk of heart disease. If he has high SCC he may make an effort to alter his circumstances through diet changes and increased exercise. In contrast, someone with self-concept confusion may continue their bad habits and deny the potential risks.

Thus, it is clear that self-concept clarity is important not only because of its independent contributions to the self-concept. It is also valuable in that it offers a wider range of behavioural resources to those of high self-concept clarity when faced with aversive situations. This occurs because those with high SCC process self-relevant information more readily than those with self-concept confusion, and this information provides more behavioural options from which to choose (Smith et al, 1996, p. 3-4).

The importance of self-concept clarity in offering a wider expanse of behavioural options has also been demonstrated in relation to decision-making behaviour. One study by Setterlund and Niedenthal (1993) used the concept of prototype matching to explore the impact of self-concept confusion on decision-making strategies (Setterlund and Niedenthal, 1993, p. 2). Prototype matching involves comparing one's own self-attributes with those of the typical individual connected with a given situation. This enables people to choose what they believe to be the best situation in which to

express their own identity (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993, p. 9). For example, in deciding which school to send their children too, a parent may ask themselves where their friends, family members, or other potentially similar others would send their children.

It was found that those with low-self esteem were poor at predicting how likely they were to fit into a given situation (i. e. their prototypicality). This occurs because their uncertainty and lack of confidence in their self-knowledge makes social comparison difficult (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993, p. 9). Thus, those with low SCC have less choice available when making a decision as they ignore strategies related to the self such as prototype matching (Campbell et al, 1996, p. 13). Taking the above example, a parent with low SCC may find their decision harder than someone with high SCC as they would be unsure which individuals in their lives they most resemble.

Research on the self-concept has indeed come a long way from the time when it centred almost solely on self-esteem. Self-concept clarity research has undoubtedly added to the store of knowledge on the self. However, as this research is relatively new, it has some improvements to make. The main downfall of SCC research is that assumptions are often made about SCC based on self-esteem research. This occurs simply because a strong correlation between self-esteem and self-concept clarity has consistently been demonstrated. For example, Smith and colleagues assume that self-concept clarity and social support are related “ given the powerful relationship between self-esteem and self-concept clarity” (Smith et al, 1996, p. 6). Original studies designed specifically to measure the relationship between self-concept clarity and social support are necessary in order to

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lend more credibility to the evidence promoting the value of self-concept clarity.

One must also consider self-concept clarity research in terms of cultural relativity and its power to generalise to various cultures. Self-concept clarity research to date has mainly been carried out in the Western world, a predominantly individualistic culture which emphasises the self, independence, and the importance of being unique and differentiating oneself from others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 1). Collectivist cultures may differ in terms of the importance of self-concept clarity as such cultures place less importance on the self and more importance on the social group and an individual's ability to blend in with their group (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 1). Campbell and colleagues found that Japanese students (i. e. a collectivist culture) have lower self-concept clarity than Canadian students. Japanese student scores also demonstrated less correlation between self-esteem and self-concept clarity. (Campbell et al, 1996, p. 10). Further research should be done to determine the extent to which one can generalise from self-concept clarity research, and indeed research on most properties of the self-concept.

Despite such limitations, it is evident from the aforementioned research that self-concept clarity has immense theoretical utility (Campbell et al, 1996, p. 13). It can help explain many relationships between psychological constructs and behaviours, such as self-concept clarity and coping styles. SCC provides strong support for the idea of the self-concept as multidimensional and offers a structural explanation of the self-concept. Self-concept clarity is just as important as self-esteem in terms of understanding the self-concept, as it

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correlates with self-esteem, mediates the relationship between self-esteem and certain behaviours, and is in turn mediated by self-esteem in other ways, such as SCC change due to daily experiences. Most notably however, self-concept clarity influences human thoughts, feelings and behaviour independent of self-esteem. One such method is the expansion of one's range of behavioural options in a given situation, such as coping strategies in aversive circumstances.

Future research on the self-concept will benefit from SCC research which expands from a focus on clinical matters such as social phobia to more typical, everyday behaviours such as reasoning, planning, judgements, and other cognitive topics. Finally, the entire field of research on the self-concept will benefit from a view of the self as a network of interconnected properties, rather than focusing the majority of attention on self-esteem. This account of self-concept clarity highlights the importance of just one of a wide range of self-properties which need to be brought to the fore in self-concept research.