Self-concept Clarity:

Buffering the Impact of Self-Evaluative Information

LinChiat Chang\textsuperscript{a}, Jean Guerrettaz\textsuperscript{a}, William von Hippel\textsuperscript{b}, Patrick J. Carroll\textsuperscript{a}, Robert M. Arkin\textsuperscript{a}

\textsuperscript{a}The Ohio State University, 1827 Neil Avenue Mall, Columbus, OH, 43210, USA
\textsuperscript{b}University of Queensland, St. Lucia, Queensland, 4072, Australia

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Robert M. Arkin
The Ohio State University
1827 Neil Avenue Mall, Columbus, OH 43210
(614) 292-2726
arkin.2@osu.edu

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Abstract
Two experiments examine the hypothesis that self-concept clarity (SCC) may buffer individuals against self-evaluative feedback and moderate the impact of evaluative information on self-esteem and self-promoting behaviors. In experiment 1 (N=122), when participants’ positive, compared to negative, selves were made salient they reported higher self-esteem and more positive affect. Importantly, this occurred only for those with low SCC; high clarity participants showed no differences. In experiment 2 (N=111), participants who received favorable social feedback engaged in more self-promotion behaviors than those who received unfavorable feedback, but again only if they were low in clarity. Low SCC participants’ self-views and behaviors were molded by whether they faced positive or negative evaluative information, while high SCC participants were relatively unaffected.

Keywords: Self-concept clarity; Self-esteem; Self-esteem stability; Self-promotion.
Introduction

It takes only a moment’s reflection to recall the extensive evaluative self-relevant information people encounter on a daily basis, and the degree to which people vary in how much they rely on it. One plausible consequence of over-reliance on such evaluative information is self-esteem instability (Baumeister, Heatherton & Tice, 1993; Greenier, Kernis & Waschull, 1995; Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993; McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981; Tice, 1991). Such instability can lead people to be more ego-involved in everyday events and perceive their self-worth as depending on those events, thus threatening their psychological well-being (Greenier et al., 1999).

Importantly, ambivalence about one’s self-concept also leads to increased susceptibility to environmental cues (DeMarree, Morrison, Wheeler, & Petty, 2011). Self-concept clarity (Campbell, 1990) reflects the degree to which a person’s self-concept is clearly defined, confidently held, temporally stable, and internally consistent (Campbell et al., 1996). Self-concept clarity is positively correlated with self-esteem stability (Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000), possibly because low clarity contributes to greater responsiveness to routine forms of evaluative information. An unclear self-concept may thus be a critical antecedent of self-esteem instability, susceptibility to evaluative information about the self, and diminished psychological well-being (Greenier et al., 1995).

The present investigation sought to examine whether self-concept clarity moderates the impact of evaluative information on self-esteem and esteem-related behaviors, such as self-promotion. Self-promotion involves behaviors intended to present the self in a positive light, and has been shown to be strategy used by people with high, but not low, self-esteem (Baumeister et
al., 1993; Tice, 1991). Because of the confidence and consistency self-concept clarity reflects, a person with greater clarity should be more resilient to transient evaluative feedback in their environments. People with clearly defined self-concepts would be expected to experience more stable self-esteem and show more stable self-promoting behaviors, which reflect a person’s self-esteem, in the face of evaluative information compared to those with less clear self-concepts.

Two experiments examine how self-concept clarity may moderate the impact of self-evaluative information on self-views. In both experiments, it was predicted that low SCC participants would manifest malleability in their self-esteem and the related behavior self-promotion as a function of evaluative information while high SCC participants would not.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants

122 participants (43 male, 79 female; \( M_{\text{age}} = 19.02, SD = 2.77 \)) at a large Midwestern university completed the study for credit in an introductory psychology course.

Procedures

Participants completed a measure of self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996) and global self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965) during prescreening.

Participants completed the lab portion in cubicles either alone or with 1 other person depending on enrollment in each session, and were randomly assigned to a valence condition. Participants in the positive condition first listed desirable characteristics they possessed, and then listed traits they like about themselves and would keep to be the person they want to be. Those in the negative condition first listed undesirable characteristics they possessed, and then listed traits
they do not like about themselves and would change to be the person they want to be. Thus, the content of the self-concept that was made most salient was the positive self for those in the positive condition, and the negative self for those in the negative condition.

Following the trait-listing task, participants were presented with 50 positive and 50 negative traits in a random order (von Hippel, Jonides, Hilton, & Narayan, 1993). Each word was presented individually and participants were instructed to indicate whether the trait was self-descriptive by pressing as rapidly as possible either a key labeled "me" or one labeled "not me" (see Markus, 1977). These response times to this set of traits reflect the accessibility of attributes in people's self-concepts (e.g., von Hippel, Hawkins & Schooler, 2001; von Hippel et al., 1993). Thus, reaction times were conceptualized as a proxy of participants’ momentary self-evaluations.

After six practice trials participants completed two blocks of the task, responding to each of the 100 words twice. For one block, the “me” key was pressed with the left hand; for the other, the “me” key was pressed with the right hand. The order of this presentation was counterbalanced and no differences emerged between initial placement of the “me” key on the left or the right.

A manipulation check tapped participants’ perceived positivity of the self-attributes they had listed (1=very negative; 9=very positive). Finally, participants completed measures of state self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) and mood (PANAS; Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988).

**Measures**

**Self-concept Clarity.** The 12-item measure of self-concept clarity (SCC; Campbell et al., 1996) was completed by participants during prescreening. Example items include “My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another”, “I seldom experience conflict between the different aspects of my personality”, and “In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I
Self-Concept Clarity

am”. Previous research has demonstrated that this scale has high internal consistency ($\alpha = .86$) as well as adequate test-retest reliability ($r = .79$ and $r = .70$). Participants responded to each item using a 5-point Likert scale ($1 = \text{Strongly disagree}, 5 = \text{Strongly agree}$), and scores were created by summing responses across all twelve items after reverse-scoring the negatively-worded items. Higher scores indicate higher self-concept clarity.

Chronic Self-esteem. The 10-item measure of chronic self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965) was also completed during prescreening. This questionnaire includes items such as “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself” and “I feel that I’m a person of worth”, with responses indicated on a 6-point Likert scale ($1 = \text{Disagree very much}, 6 = \text{Agree very much}$). A total score was created by reverse-scoring the negatively worded items and then summing across the responses to the ten items so that higher scores indicate higher chronic self-esteem. This scale is widely used in psychological research, with prior studies yielding reliability coefficients ranging from $\alpha = .72$ to $\alpha = .88$ and test-retest coefficients ranging from $\alpha = .50$ (for a one year time lapse) to $\alpha = .82$ (for a one week period) (Gray-Little, Williams, & Hancock, 1997).

State Self-esteem. The 20-item measure of state self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) includes items such as “I feel confident about my abilities”, “I feel displeased with myself”, and “I am pleased with my appearance right now”. These items were responded to on a 5-point Likert scale ($1 = \text{Not at all}, 5 = \text{Extremely}$). The scale has been fully validated in previous research, and has been shown to have high internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$). Scores were created by reverse-scoring the appropriate items and then summing responses across all twenty items. Higher scores reflect higher state self-esteem.
Mood. The 20-item positive and negative affect scale (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988) requires participants to indicate the extent to which they are currently feeling twenty different positive and negative emotions, such as enthusiastic, proud, upset, or distressed. Participants indicated their current feelings on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very slightly or not at all, 5 = Extremely). This measure of mood has been fully validated, and shown to have reliability indices ranging from $\alpha = .86$ to $\alpha = .90$ for positive mood items and $\alpha = .84$ to $\alpha = .87$ for negative mood items. A mood index was created by subtracting the sum of the negative mood scores from the sum of the positive mood scores on the PANAS. Higher values indicate more positive mood.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check

All analyses are conducted with alpha equal to .05. Participants who listed desirable self-attributes rated those traits more positive ($M=7.68$) than participants who listed undesirable self-attributes ($M=3.62$), $F(1,115)=224.00$, $p<.001$.

Reaction times

Because we were interested in participants’ automatic reactions to whether various traits were self-descriptive, and wanted to avoid their responses being influenced by desirability concerns, reaction times on the “me-not me” task were trimmed to remove outliers (responses above 2000 milliseconds). Five participants were excluded based on this cutoff value, leaving 117 participants in the analyses. The reaction times were then log transformed to reduce the typical skew in reaction time data (Ratcliff, 1993). Both the cutoff value for outliers and the log transformation were determined prior to any analysis of the data. In addition, SCC and self-esteem are often correlated near $r=.6$ (e.g., Campbell et al., 1996). Thus, to ensure the effects of
SCC were not attributable to global self-esteem all remaining analyses include two covariates: (a) the linear covariate of global self-esteem measured during prescreening, and (b) the interaction covariate of global self-esteem and salient self (positive or negative) (Yzerbyt, Muller, & Judd, 2004). Conducting the analyses without these covariates did not change the results.

Reaction times for all trait words were collapsed into four composite scores, representing “me” versus “not me” responses to the positive and to the negative traits. The present analyses focused on “me” responses to positive traits and “not me” responses to negative traits.

ANCOVAs revealed statistically significant main effects for both composites. Among those in the positive condition, for whom the desirable self was made salient, participants were faster to respond “me” to positive traits, $F(1,112)=6.20, p<.05$ (724 msec vs. 776 msec) and “not me” to negative traits, $F(1,112)=9.85, p<.01$ (759 msec vs. 832 msec), compared to when their undesirable self was salient in the negative condition.

Regression showed that the interaction of SCC and manipulated salient self (positive or negative) was not statistically significant for either “me” responses to positive traits, $b=.00, t(101)=.04, ns$, or “not me” responses to negative traits, $b=.00, t(101)=1.02, ns$. The accessibility of the content of participants’ self-concepts was affected by whether they wrote about a desirable or undesirable self, regardless of levels of clarity.

*Self-report dependent measures*

There was no statistically significant main effect of salient self on state self-esteem, $F(1,111)=1.84, ns$. However, participants who wrote about their desirable self did report more positive mood ($M=14.05$) than those who wrote about their undesirable self ($M=8.78$), $F(1,111)=5.87, p<.05$. The same regression analyses with SCC and salient self were performed
on the self-report measures of state self-esteem and mood. A statistically significant interaction emerged for state self-esteem, $b = -0.52$, $t(101) = -3.31, p < 0.01$ (Figure 1). Participants lower in SCC reported higher state self-esteem if their desirable self was salient, $b = 11.92$, $t(101) = 3.52, p < 0.01$, while there was no difference for those higher in SCC, $b = -5.96$, $t(101) = -1.63$, ns. The interaction is also statistically significant for mood, $b = -0.54$, $t(101) = -3.59, p < 0.01$. Participants with lower SCC showed more positive mood after writing about their desirable self, $b = 12.84$, $t(101) = 4.02, p < 0.01$. In contrast, there was no difference in mood among those with higher SCC, $b = -5.46$, $t(101) = -1.58$, ns.

Writing about desirable traits made the positive self more accessible for all participants. However, this salient content only impacted the affective responses of participants with lower SCC. Lower SCC individuals who wrote about their desirable characteristics reported higher self-esteem and more positive mood than those who wrote about their undesirable characteristics. In fact, after writing about their positive attributes the lower clarity individuals reported self-esteem and mood on par with those higher in clarity. No such differences emerged among higher SCC participants. Importantly, these results emerged even when the linear and interactive effects of global self-esteem were included as covariates.

Self-concept clarity is a structural component of the self (Campbell, Assanand, & Paula, 2003) that appears to influence the process by which people react to self-relevant feedback. The self-esteem and mood of higher SCC participants were not affected by the content of the self made accessible during the experiment, but both self-esteem and mood were influenced by the content information for lower SCC participants. The affective life of higher SCC individuals was determined by a different process than the affective life of lower SCC individuals. This finding
complements research on other structural variables showing, for example, that whether one’s self-concept is compartmentalized or integrated in part determines affective responses to positive and negative self-relevant information (e.g., Showers, 1992; Zeigler-Hill & Showers, 2007).

**Experiment 2**

Experiment 1 required participants in the negative condition to write about undesirable attributes they would change, and those in the positive condition to write about desirable traits they would keep. In this way, negative traits may be confounded with instability, positive traits with stability. In our own research, we have found it difficult to induce participants to write about non-superficial negative attributes. Framing the task of writing about undesirable self-traits in terms of attributes that could be changed was intended to make this manipulation less threatening, and therefore more likely to elicit personally meaningful negative responses.

Experiment 2 addresses this issue, providing a conceptual replication of experiment 1 using a different manipulation to examine the hypothesis that self-concept clarity moderates how people respond to evaluative information. As before, the manipulation was expected to produce statistically significant differences in self-views among low but not high SCC participants.

**Method**

**Participants**

111 students at a large Midwestern university with prescreening scores in the highest and lowest quartiles of self-concept clarity were recruited (55 participants with high SCC scores, 56 with low SCC scores). Participants received credit in an introductory psychology course.

**Procedures**
During prescreening participants completed the same measures of self-concept clarity and self-esteem used in the previous experiment. They arrived to the lab in groups of three or four and were given the following cover story:

Research has shown that many people who are successful in their careers usually have a useful network of personal friends. Having friends in the right places often provides a great deal of convenience in both business and professional transactions. Research has shown that such personal networks are usually formed when people attend college together. We are studying how undergraduates develop their personal networks in college. In simple words, we want to understand how college students form impressions of one another, and how they choose friends to form their personal networks for the future. So please feel relaxed and try to treat this as a normal social group.

Participants interacted in social groups for 15 minutes, and were subsequently led into individual cubicles. They completed impression ratings of each member in their social group, and a percentage rating of how much they would like to become better acquainted with each individual. The experimenter collected all responses, and pretended to compute each person’s average percentage rating. This average rating supposedly indicated the extent to which others in the social group liked each participant. Unknown to participants, the experimenter randomly assigned either high (80-100%) or low (40-60%) percentage ratings determined by adjusting participants’ own ratings of others in their social group by approximately 20%. For example, a participant who rated others an average of 70% would receive a rating of 90% (positive condition) or 50% (negative condition). Participants then completed a measure of “self-esteem feelings” (McFarland & Ross, 1982) to assess the positive of their working self-concepts.

Finally, participants wrote a short essay about themselves. They were told that their essays would be added to a social network database, where future participants would access and select people to form their social networks. These essays were coded on a 7-point scale (1=not at
all promoting, positive; 7=extremely promoting, positive) for the extent to which participants engaged in self-promotion (Jones & Pittman, 1982). Inter-coder agreement was satisfactory at $\kappa = .87, p < .001$. This self-promotion is assumed to reflect the positivity of participants’ current self-evaluations as well as serve as a behavioral manifestation of state self-esteem.

**Dependent Measures**

The 11-item measure of self-esteem feelings was drawn from McFarland and Ross’ (1982) mood adjectives measure, focusing on the self-esteem factor. Our measure consisted of a series of bipolar semantic differentials, including “I feel bad-I feel good”, “I feel ashamed-I feel proud”, “I feel smart-I feel foolish”, and “I feel inferior-I feel superior”. Responses were scored such that higher values indicate higher self-esteem. This measure has been used in previous research, and has been shown to have adequate reliability coefficients ranging from $\alpha = 84$ to $\alpha = .91$) (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995).

**Results and Discussion**

ANCOVAs, rather than regression, were used in the following analyses because quartiles were used to preselect participants in the present study, leading clarity to be a dichotomous variable (low or high) rather than a continuous one. ANCOVAs included two covariates: (a) the linear covariate of global self-esteem, and (b) the interaction covariate of global self-esteem and experimental condition.

**Manipulation check**

Participants in the favorable feedback condition correctly reported that they received higher ratings ($M=7.68$) than those in the unfavorable feedback condition ($M=2.72$), $F(1,101)=369.98, p < .001$. 
Measures of self-esteem feelings

Self-esteem feelings scores showed that participants who received favorable ratings reported a more positive salient self-concept ($M=60.53$) than those who received unfavorable ratings ($M=53.13$), $F(1,99)=20.10, p<.001$ (top panel of Table 1). The omnibus ANCOVA testing the interaction of SCC and experimental condition was not statistically significant. As with experiment 1, favorable feedback made the positive content of participants’ self-concepts more accessible, regardless of levels of SCC.

Self-promotion on database essay

There was a statistically significant interaction of SCC and experimental condition on self-promotion, (lower panel of Table 1). Planned contrasts revealed that, among low SCC participants, those who received favorable ratings projected a more positive self-image ($M=5.51$) than did participants who received unfavorable ratings ($M=4.50$), $F(1,101)=13.47, p<.001$. This difference did not emerge among high SCC participants ($M=5.30$ vs. $M=5.54$), $F(1,101)=.42, ns$. Because self-esteem was covaried these effects once again cannot be accounted for by global self-esteem.

These results parallel experiment 1 and provide evidence that behavioral reactions to self-evaluative information are also moderated by self-concept clarity. All participants in the social setting received information that they were seen as more or less desirable by others. However, only the self-promotion of low SCC participants reflected this feedback.

General Discussion

People routinely encounter self-evaluative information in everyday life. The present findings show that, for some, evaluative information can influence self-views and behaviors in
important ways. Yet for others, the same type of information has less impact. People with clearly defined self-concepts proved to be less affected by evaluative information and experienced more stable self-esteem and esteem-related behaviors compared to people with unclear self-concepts.

Implications for self-concept clarity

Two experiments show that people who lack well-defined self-concepts tend to rely on evaluative information in determining their positive and negative qualities. This vulnerability of low SCC individuals to negative information was demonstrated by heightened negative mood and more negative feelings about themselves (experiment 1), and diminished self-promotion (experiment 2). In contrast, high SCC individuals were buffered against negative evaluations, even when negative feedback registered at a cognitive level. To be an ingredient in psychological well-being, positive self-regard must be stable and resilient against the plethora of evaluative information, particularly negative information, embedded in daily social experience. The present findings suggest that this is true for individuals who enjoy self-concept clarity. Prior research has established a positive relationship between self-concept clarity and level of self-esteem (e.g., Baumgardner, 1990; Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996). However, the present results confirm that the moderating role of self-concept clarity remained after controlling for global self-esteem, showing that self-esteem cannot fully account for the effects of self-concept clarity.

Implications for stability of self-views

Kernis and colleagues (2000) have shown that people with stable self-esteem are more resilient to changing patterns of evaluative information. The present research shows that this relationship between evaluative information and self-esteem stability is moderated by self-concept clarity. Both affective (self-esteem, mood) and behavioral (self-promotion) measures
provided evidence that people with low clarity are more influenced by feedback than are people with high clarity. Importantly, these effects appear to be caused by structural features of the self (i.e., self-concept clarity) and not merely the content of the self that is accessible at a given time. 

*Implications for motives to enhance the self*

People with high self-esteem exhibit stronger motives to self-enhance, while those with lower self-esteem tend to be more motivated to self-protect (Baumeister et al., 1993; Tice, 1991). The current results show that self-enhancement can also be driven by self-concept clarity. In experiment 2, the only people who did not promote the self were those low in SCC who received unfavorable ratings. High self-esteem individuals may self-enhance because they believe they have a positive self-concept that is consistent and stable while those with low self-esteem may self-protect because they are lower in self-concept clarity (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996). Self-promotion may feel hazardous to low self-esteem individuals because they are neither clear nor confident in their self-concepts, and positive self-claims may be fleeting and seem indefensible. Future research should consider how clarity and esteem together can predict when people use these opposing strategies after receiving evaluative feedback.

*Limitations*

Experiments 1 and 2 utilize different selection criteria for participants. This stems from two different experimenters collecting data in two different terms with a smaller allocation of participant hours to the study using quartiles. While not ideal, there is no reason to believe this would impact the reliability of the results. Importantly, both methods can and have been used in psychological research to examine the influence of different levels of individual differences (e.g., Csank & Conway, 2004; Guerrettaz & Arkin, 2014).
A more conceptual limitation is that these results cannot speak to the moderating role of self-concept clarity when individuals engage in more extensive self-analysis. In the present investigation, participants can interact with the positive and negative information at a relatively superficial level by not thinking too carefully about the traits they list (experiment 1) or the social ratings (experiment 2). This may be particularly the case for high clarity individuals if such individuals are naturally less contemplative and more superficial in their thinking about the self. Future research should examine the role of clarity in situations involving more studied self-examination, where high clarity individuals may prove to be less fixed in their judgments and find their clarity penetrable (Guerrettaz & Arkin, 2014).

Conclusion

This is not the first program of research to suggest that structural components of the self-concept influence processes that guide reactions to self-evaluative feedback (Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2003). These structural features influence the way people process self-relevant information, and these different means of processing then uniquely affect self-evaluations and behavior. As the data illustrate, responses to self-evaluative feedback are moderated by clarity, and do not depend solely on the content of the self that is the most accessible. Perhaps the process by which clarity influences people’s reactions relies not on the accessible self-content, but on how someone’s beliefs about his or her clarity interact with self-relevant feedback in the environment.
References


Figure 1. State self-esteem
Table 1: Impact of Experimental Condition on Self-Esteem Feelings and Self-promotion in Essay

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*p<.10; *p<.05; **p<.01