

“You’ve Changed”: Low Self-Concept Clarity Predicts Lack of Support for Partner Change

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Abstract

People often pursue self-change, and having a romantic partner who supports these changes increases relationship satisfaction. However, most existing research focuses only on the experience of the person who is changing. What predicts whether people support their partner’s change? People with low self-concept clarity resist self-change, so we hypothesized that they would be unsupportive of their partner’s changes. People with low self-concept clarity did not support their partner’s change (Study 1a), because they thought they would have to change, too (Study 1b). Low self-concept clarity predicted failing to support a partner’s change, but not vice versa (Studies 2 and 3), and only for larger changes (Study 3). Not supporting a partner’s change predicted decreases in relationship quality for both members of the couple (Studies 2 and 3). This research underscores the role of partners in self-change, suggesting that failing to support a partner’s change may stem from self-concept confusion.

Keywords

self-concept clarity, self-change, support, close relationships, relationship quality

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It’s no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then.

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

People change throughout their lives. Experiences such as becoming a parent or retiring alter the self; aspirations for one’s ideal self spur progress toward those ideals; and throughout their life spans, people both gain and lose aspects of their self-concepts (Demo, 1994; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Mattingly, Lewandowski, & McIntyre, 2014; McIntyre, Mattingly, & Lewandowski, 2014). Relationships often catalyze both partners’ self-concept change (Mattingly et al., 2014; McIntyre et al., 2014), but people also pursue and experience self-concept change separately from their partners (Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2014).

Existing research has established that having a partner who supports individual self-change benefits relationship quality for the person who is changing (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Fivecoat, Tomlinson, Aron, & Caprariello, 2015; Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2010; Rusbult, Kumashiro, Kubacka, & Finkel, 2009). Much less is known about the partner’s experience of that change. What predicts whether a partner supports the individual’s change?

We hypothesized that individuals with lower self-concept clarity (SCC; Campbell et al., 1996), who lack a clear and coherent sense of who they are, would not support their partner’s change. Past research has found that people with low SCC resist their own self-change (Emery, Walsh, & Slotter, 2015). We predicted that those lower in SCC would anticipate having to change themselves as a result of their partner changing, and this would lead them to fail to support their partner’s change. In turn, we expected that not supporting their partner’s attempts to change would harm both their own and their partner’s relationship quality.

The Role of Partners in Self-Change

The self-concept consists of a range of self-aspects, including traits, preferences, goals, and social identities (James, 1890; Markus & Wurf, 1987; McConnell, 2011). Although people generally perceive stability in who they are over time

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(Demo, 1994), people's self-concepts are highly malleable (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Partners can play a key role in some of the major ways that people change. The relationships literature features two primary approaches to the role of partners in self-change: (a) progressing toward the ideal self via the Michelangelo phenomenon, and (b) self-expansion, adding new content to the self-concept. The Michelangelo phenomenon suggests that a supportive partner can help people strive toward their ideal selves (Drigotas et al., 1999; Rusbult et al., 2009). Partners can also support self-expansion, which often occurs in relationship contexts (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Slotter & Gardner, 2009).

Research on both of these types of self-change has identified specific strategies that partners can use to support self-change. Partners can engage in *perceptual affirmation*, seeing the goal striver in ways consistent with the change. If someone's ideal self is an artist, that person's partner may begin to think of the person as an artist. Partners can enact *behavioral affirmation*, eliciting the self-change through either positive responses to goal-related behavior or directly helping. If someone's ideal self involves becoming a talented cook, that person's partner might visibly enjoy a prepared meal or purchase new kitchenware (Drigotas et al., 1999; Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009). Finally, partners can use verbal support when providing feedback about individual self-expansion (Fivecoat et al., 2015). For example, a person's partner comments, "you're doing so well at this—don't give up!" if the person is feeling discouraged.

When a person's partner supports his or her self-change, that person experiences higher relationship satisfaction. People who receive behavioral affirmation feel more positively about their relationships, and active support from a partner for individual self-expansion promotes relationship satisfaction (Drigotas et al., 1999; Fivecoat et al., 2015). However, most research focuses only on the experience of the person who is changing, as opposed to factors predicting when a partner provides support.

Existing research has identified some individual differences in people's own experiences when their partners change (e.g., incremental theorists, who believe that people can change, are happier when their partners attempt self-improvement; Hui, Bond, & Molden, 2012). Most of this research examines either (a) changes that both members of the couple desire for the partner, or (b) changes that the individual desires in the partner. However, people can also change outside of their relationships, without their partner's influence—for example, picking up a new hobby or personal goal. Partners can help each other pursue their goals, and people who are committed to their relationships generally support their partner's goals, unless those goals threaten the survival of the relationship (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015; Hui, Finkel, Fitzsimons, Kumashiro, & Hofmann, 2014). But there are likely times when people do not support a partner's change, even when the change does not threaten the relationship. We propose that individuals

with low SCC will be threatened by a partner changing, leading them not to support that change, even when that change is positive.

SCC and Self-Change

SCC describes the extent to which someone has a clear and coherent sense of self, with a self-concept that is internally consistent and stable over time (Campbell et al., 1996). Although people differ in the objective content and structure of the self (McConnell, 2011), SCC is a subjective appraisal. That is, aspects of the self-concept can objectively conflict or fluctuate over time, but as long as people can make sense of these conflicts or changes, then high SCC is still possible. Achieving high SCC predicts both individual well-being outcomes and relationship quality (Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003; Lewandowski, Nardone, & Raines, 2010).

People with low SCC tend to resist self-change. Specifically, low SCC predicts less interest in self-expansion and less likelihood of self-expanding when encountering a potential romantic partner (Emery et al., 2015). Typically, when people are romantically interested in someone, they spontaneously incorporate aspects of that person's self-concept into their own self-concepts (Slotter & Gardner, 2009). Yet, even when highly interested in a potential partner, people with low SCC are less likely than their higher SCC counterparts to self-expand (Emery et al., 2015). For people with low SCC, self-expansion is risky. Theoretically, if people have stable self-concepts and clear understanding of who they are, then they are free to add new content to their self-concepts. Conversely, people who are unsure of who they are must prioritize understanding and stabilizing the self they already have; taking on new content might result in further confusion (Emery et al., 2015). As a result, people with low SCC may not support their partner's changes, due to concerns that if their partner is changing, they may have to change too.

Yet, not supporting a partner's change may harm the relationship. Several studies have identified effects of support for change on a partner's relationship quality (Brunstein, Dangelmayer, & Schultheiss, 1996; Drigotas et al., 1999; Fivecoat et al., 2015; Overall et al., 2010), and we attempted to replicate this effect. To our knowledge, only one study has identified a link between supporting a partner's change and a person's own relationship quality, in that people who affirm a partner's progress toward their ideal self tend to feel more positively about their relationships (Kumashiro, Rusbult, Finkenauer, & Stocker, 2007). It is unclear whether people who are happier with their relationships are more likely to affirm their partners, or whether affirming a partner increases relationship quality. However, supporting a partner in general bolsters a person's own relationship quality (e.g., Clark & Grote, 1998); thus, we expected that people who have supported their partners will feel better about their relationships.

Overview and Hypotheses

Across four studies, we tested the hypothesis that people with low SCC would not support their partner's attempts to change (Hypothesis 1; Studies 1a-3). We expected that this lack of support arises from the concern that their partner changing may require them to change, too (Hypothesis 2). Participants directly self-reported this expectation of self-change due to partner change in Study 1b, and we examined the overall magnitude of the partner's change as a proxy for expecting self-change in Study 3. For example, if one's partner decides to start eating more vegetables, it is unnecessary to adopt this change for oneself. However, if one's partner decides to become a vegan, it is much more likely that one will also have to change. In general, less support for a partner's change should predict lower relationship quality for both members of the couple (Hypothesis 3; Studies 2 and 3).

Study 1a

Study 1a was an initial test of the hypothesis that individuals with lower SCC are less likely to support their partner's change. We developed our measure of support for change based on behaviors identified in previous research. Work on the Michelangelo phenomenon suggests that partners can engage in *behavioral affirmation* or *perceptual affirmation* (Drigotas et al., 1999; Rusbult et al., 2009). Although these studies typically only measure the extent to which people engage in these positive behaviors, we were interested both in whether partners engage in (or do not engage in) positive behaviors, as well as whether partners engage in (or do not engage in) negative behaviors. Therefore, the scale included items assessing *behavioral resistance* (engaging in behaviors that actively resist the change) and *perceptual undermining* (seeming unaware of or remaining silent on the change). In addition to these support strategies based on the Michelangelo phenomenon, we created measures of verbal strategies based on work on support for partner self-expansion (Fivecoat et al., 2015). We refer to these strategies as *cheerleading* (active verbal support for the change) and *nay-saying* (active verbal resistance to the change). We conceptualized each of these strategies as facets of an overall measure of supportive behavior.

In this study, we assessed the extent to which the participant believed their partner viewed the change positively. We aimed to show that any effects of SCC on support for the change emerged above and beyond perceived positivity. We did not necessarily expect that SCC would be associated with the perception of how positively the partner viewed the change (i.e., just because people do not want their partners to change does not mean that they cannot recognize whether a change is positive or negative).

Participants and Procedure

We recruited 75 participants (41.3% male, 58.7% female; age $M = 32.49$, $SD = 10.43$) from Amazon's Mechanical

Turk (MTurk).¹ All were currently in a romantic relationship (2.7% dating casually, 28.0% dating seriously, 10.7% about to live together or be engaged, 22.7% engaged or living together, 36.0% married or in a committed lifelong partnership; relationship duration $M = 7.28$ years, $SD = 8.22$; 84.0% identified as heterosexual).

Participants were asked to "think about the most recent important change your partner has experienced in his or her sense of who he or she is. For example, this could be a time when he/she felt that an aspect of his or her personality had changed, or he or she started to pursue a new personal goal, or he or she picked up an important new interest, or he or she had a career transition. Please note that this change should NOT be about your relationship (e.g., please don't pick moving in with you or having children)." After writing a paragraph describing the change, participants completed measures of positivity of the change, their response to the change, and SCC.

Measures

SCC. Participants completed the SCC scale (Campbell et al., 1996; 12 items; $\alpha = .92$, $M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.27$; for example, "In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am"; 7-point scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; see supplemental materials for full wording of all measures in this and subsequent studies).

Support for change. Participants were asked how they had responded to the change, rating 6 possible types of constructive or destructive support measures (7-point scale: 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*); see Appendix S.B in supplemental materials for factor analysis. For each item, we listed the behavior and provided examples (e.g., "I engaged in supportive behaviors. For example, if your partner had decided to pursue art, you might have found art classes for your partner to take, displayed your partner's paintings on the wall, or offered to cook dinner so that your partner would have time to paint"). Consistent with other studies assessing support (e.g., Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004), we averaged the three constructive items (behavioral affirmation, cheerleading, and perceptual affirmation; $\alpha = .80$; $M = 5.72$, $SD = 1.17$), the three destructive items (behavioral resistance, nay-saying, and perceptual undermining; $\alpha = .85$; $M = 2.24$, $SD = 1.41$), and subtracted the destructive score from the constructive score to create an overall index of support ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 2.31$; range = -3.00 to 6.00).

Positivity of change. Participants were asked, "How positive or negative does your partner consider this change to be?" (7-point scale: 1 = *very negative*, 7 = *very positive*; $M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.86$).

Results

All variables were standardized prior to analysis to facilitate interpretation ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$).

Are people with low SCC less likely to support their partner's change? As hypothesized, SCC was positively associated with the overall index of support ($r = .48, p < .001$; 95% confidence interval [CI] = [.28, .63]).² This effect remained ($\beta = .47, p < .001$; 95% CI = [.27, .67]) when controlling for perceived positivity of the change from the partner's perspective ($\beta = .17, p = .098$; 95% CI = [-.03, .37]). SCC was not associated with perceived positivity of change ($r = .04, p = .72$; 95% CI = [-.19, .27]).

Discussion

Study 1a provided initial evidence for a link between SCC and support for partner change, which was robust beyond how much people believed their partner viewed the change as positive or negative. Perceived positivity of the change from the partner's perspective marginally predicted people's own support for it.

Study 1b

In Study 1a, we found that individuals with low SCC are less likely to report having supported a partner's change. Study 1b tests our proposed mechanism for this effect. Expecting that a partner's change will result in self-change should account for the association between low SCC and lack of support for a partner's change. Moreover, in Study 1a, we assessed how positively people thought their partners felt about the change. In Study 1b, we assessed how positively people felt themselves about the change. Finally, given that the sample size in Study 1a was relatively small, we recruited a larger sample in Study 1b to afford more precise effect size estimates.

Participants and Procedure

We aimed to recruit approximately 200 usable participants; 197 individuals from MTurk constituted the final sample (40.6% male, 59.4% female; age $M = 34.78, SD = 11.33$).³ All were currently in a relationship (4.6% dating casually, 19.8% dating seriously, 5.6% about to live together or be engaged, 17.3% engaged or living together, 52.8% married or in a committed lifelong partnership; relationship duration $M = 8.09$ years, $SD = 7.71$; 88.3% identified as heterosexual).

Participants wrote "a sentence or two about the biggest way that your partner is currently changing. Note that this should NOT be a shared change (e.g., you moved in together)—It should be a change that your partner is experiencing as an individual." They then completed measures of expected self-change, positivity, support for change, and SCC.

Measures

SCC. Participants completed the same measure of SCC as in Study 1a ($\alpha = .92$; $M = 4.69, SD = 1.24$).

Expected imposed self-change due to partner change. After reporting on the biggest way their partner was changing, participants rated the extent to which this change would be imposed on them (one item; "To what extent might you have to change as an individual as a result of your partner's change?"; $M = 3.89, SD = 1.89$) on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *a lot*).

Support for change. Participants completed the same measure of support for change as in Study 1a, adapted for forecasted support. Specifically, participants rated how they were planning to respond to the change "over the next week or two" (7-point scale: 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). We combined the three constructive items ($\alpha = .81$; $M = 5.63, SD = 1.30$), the three destructive items ($\alpha = .73$; $M = 2.01, SD = 1.18$), and subtracted the destructive score from the constructive score to create an overall index of support ($M = 3.62, SD = 2.09$; range = -3.33 to 6.00).

Positivity of change. Participants reported their agreement with the statements that "Overall, this change is positive" and "Overall, this change is negative." These items were correlated ($r = -.82, p < .001$), so we reverse-scored the negativity item and averaged them to create a composite measure of perceived valence of the change ($M = 5.26, SD = 1.89$).

Results

All variables were standardized prior to analysis ($M = 0, SD = 1$).

Replicating Study 1a. As in Study 1a, we tested our primary hypothesis that individuals with lower SCC would be less likely to support their partner's changes. As expected, SCC was positively associated with forecasted support for a partner's change ($r = .15, p = .04, 95\% CI = [.01, .28]$).

Does SCC predict expected self-change? Next, we examined the association between SCC and expecting imposed self-change due to the partner's change. We hypothesized that people with low SCC would expect that they would have to change as a result of their partner changing. Individuals with low SCC were indeed more likely to expect that self-change would be imposed on them ($r = -.14, p = .04$; 95% CI = [-.27, -.004]). Consistent with Study 1a, SCC was not associated with perceived positivity of the change ($r = .09, p = .20$; 95% CI = [-.05, .23]). However, perceived positivity was associated with support for the change ($r = .46, p < .001$; 95% CI = [.34, .56]). Thus, although individuals with lower SCC expected that they would have to change, they did not necessarily view the change itself as less positive than did individuals with higher SCC.

Using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013), we examined whether expecting imposed self-change due to a partner's change mediates the association between SCC and

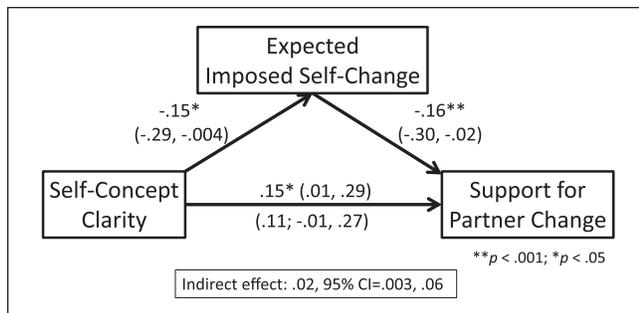


Figure 1. Belief that a partner's change will result in imposed self-change mediating the association between SCC and forecasted support for a partner's change in Study 1b. Note. Parentheses represent 95% CIs. SCC = self-concept clarity; CIs = confidence intervals. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

forecasted support for change (Figure 1). The mediation analysis was significant. Individuals with lower SCC believed that they would have to change if their partner changed, which helped to explain their lower forecasted support over the coming week to a change that their partner was experiencing. Moreover, the reverse mediation pathway—whether expected imposed self-change mediates the association between supporting a partner's change and SCC—was not significant (indirect effect = .02, 95% CI = [−.002, .06]).

Discussion

People with lower SCC were more likely to believe that they would have to change as a result of their partners changing. Expecting self-change mediated the association between SCC and forecasted response to a partner's actual change. People with lower SCC forecasted less support for their partner's change, which was explained by expecting that they would have to change as a result of their partner changing. In Study 1a, we found that SCC was not associated with people's perception of how positively their partner viewed the change. In Study 1b, we showed that SCC was not associated with how positively or negatively people viewed their partner's change themselves.

Study 2

Studies 1a and 1b found a link between low SCC and not supporting a partner's change, both retrospective (Study 1a) and forecasted (Study 1b). Study 2 examined this effect over a 1-month time period to establish evidence for the direction of the association between SCC and support for a partner's change. We also investigated whether having supported a partner's change was associated with the partner's relationship quality and the supporter's own relationship quality.

Participants

Participants completed two online surveys 1 month apart. We aimed to recruit as many participants as possible over two academic quarters. In total, 172 individuals completed the Time 1 survey, and 156 individuals (91%) completed the Time 2 survey. In the final sample, we only included couples in which both individuals completed both the Time 1 and Time 2 surveys. We also excluded four individuals who broke up between Time 1 and Time 2, as well as three couples in which one person did not write about a change. This left 59 couples (118 individuals) in the final sample (49.2% male, 50.0% female⁴; age $M = 19.59$, $SD = 1.45$; 4.0% dating casually, 86.3% dating seriously, 5.6% about to live together or be engaged, 4.0% engaged or living together; relationship duration $M = 1.51$ years, $SD = 1.30$; 89.8% identified as heterosexual).⁵

Procedure

Couples were recruited from flyers around a Midwestern university campus and through individuals in introductory psychology classes who indicated that their partner was willing to participate in studies. Participants completed the study in exchange for either US\$8 or course credit; both members of the couple had to agree to participate to enroll in the study. On signing up, each member of the couple received a link to the survey via email; 1 month after completing the first survey, they received a link to the second survey over email.

At Time 1, participants were asked to “write a sentence or two about the biggest way that your partner is currently changing. Note that this should NOT be a shared change (e.g., you moved in together)—it should be a change that your partner is experiencing as an individual.” Participants completed measures of SCC, support for change, and relationship quality. At Time 2, participants were reminded of the change they had written about at Time 1 (“Four weeks ago, you indicated that the biggest way your partner was changing was: _____”) and then answered the same questions as at Time 1.

Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, all measures were assessed on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

SCC. Participants completed the same measure of SCC as in previous studies at Time 1 ($\alpha = .88$; $M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.10$) and Time 2 ($\alpha = .92$; $M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.20$).

Support for partner change. At Time 1, participants were asked, “To what extent is your partner responding in the following ways to this change?” At Time 2, participants were asked, “To what extent did you respond in the following

ways to your partner's change in the last four weeks?" (7-point scale: 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). They then completed the same six-item measure of support as in previous studies. As in Study 1b, we created the averaged constructive behaviors (Time 1: $\alpha = .75$; $M = 5.49$, $SD = 1.11$; Time 2: $\alpha = .83$; $M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.19$) and destructive behaviors (Time 1: $\alpha = .47$; $M = 1.78$, $SD = 0.87$; Time 2: $\alpha = .71$; $M = 1.85$, $SD = 0.92$) to create a composite index of support (Time 1: $M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.72$, range = -1.67 to 6.00 ; Time 2: $M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.77$, range = -3.00 to 6.00).

Relationship quality. Participants rated their relationship satisfaction (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; five items; for example, "I feel satisfied with our relationship") and commitment (Rusbult et al., 1998; seven items; for example, "I want our relationship to last a very long time") at Time 1 (satisfaction: $\alpha = .91$; $M = 6.07$, $SD = 0.90$; commitment: $\alpha = .89$; $M = 5.98$, $SD = 1.08$) and Time 2 (satisfaction: $\alpha = .90$; $M = 6.08$, $SD = 0.88$; commitment: $\alpha = .91$; $M = 5.94$, $SD = 1.15$).

Results

All variables were standardized prior to analyses ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$). We tested our hypotheses using multilevel modeling to account for nonindependence between partners.

Does SCC predict support for partner change? First, we examined whether SCC predicts support for partner change, but not vice versa (Figure 2). We hypothesized that individuals with lower SCC would be less likely to support their partner's changes. Controlling for support for partner change at Time 1, SCC predicted support for partner change at Time 2 ($b = .16$, $p = .04$; 95% CI = $[.01, .31]$). However, as expected, support for partner change at Time 1 did not predict SCC at Time 2, controlling for SCC at Time 1 ($b = -.05$, $p = .27$; 95% CI = $[-.15, .04]$). SCC predicted changes in support over time, but support did not predict SCC.

Associations between support for change and relationship quality. Next, we examined associations between support over the previous month at Time 2 and relationship quality at Time 2. We hypothesized that more support would be associated with higher relationship quality for both members of the couple. In these analyses, we controlled for relationship quality at Time 1. We first entered partner satisfaction at Time 1 and support for partner change at Time 2 into a model predicting partner satisfaction at Time 2. Both partner satisfaction at Time 1 ($b = .72$, $p < .001$; 95% CI = $[.59, .84]$) and support for partner change at Time 2 ($b = .16$, $p = .01$; 95% CI = $[.04, .28]$) predicted partner satisfaction at Time 2. When people had supported their partner's change over the month, their partners experienced increases in satisfaction over the month. We then predicted partner commitment at Time 2 from partner commitment at Time 1 and support for

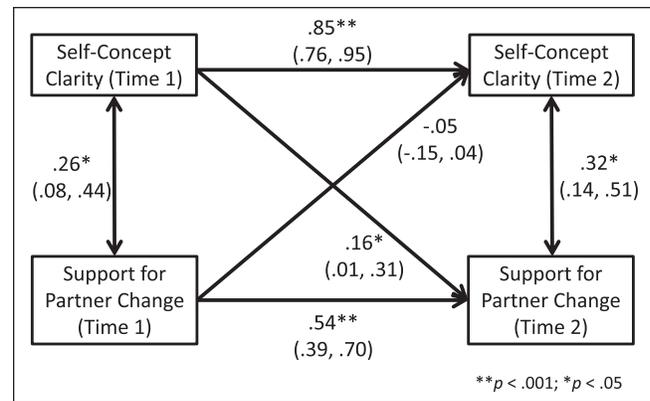


Figure 2. Cross-lagged effects of SCC at Time 1 on support for partner change 4 weeks later at Time 2 in Study 2. Note. Parentheses represent 95% confidence intervals. SCC = self-concept clarity.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

partner change at Time 2. Although partner commitment at Time 1 was strongly associated with partner commitment at Time 2 ($b = .84$, $p < .001$; 95% CI = $[.74, .94]$), support for partner change at Time 2 was not associated with changes in partner commitment ($b = .05$, $p = .36$; 95% CI = $[-.05, .15]$).

Next, we examined effects of support on changes in a person's own satisfaction and commitment over that month. We predicted actor satisfaction at Time 2 from actor satisfaction at Time 1 ($b = .69$, $p < .001$; 95% CI = $[.56, .82]$) and support for partner change at Time 2 ($b = .17$, $p = .009$; 95% CI = $[.04, .30]$). When people had supported their partner's change, they experienced increases in satisfaction over that month. Likewise, an analysis predicting actor commitment at Time 2 from actor commitment at Time 1 ($b = .78$, $p < .001$; 95% CI = $[.68, .88]$) and support for partner change at Time 2 ($b = .16$, $p = .001$; 95% CI = $[.06, .26]$) revealed that when people supported their partner's change during the month, their commitment increased. Overall, we largely found evidence for our hypothesis that both members of the couple would experience higher relationship quality when the partner's change was supported.

Discussion

Study 2 established that individuals with lower SCC were less likely to report 1 month later that they had supported their partner's change. Moreover, low levels of support for a partner's change were associated with decreases in partner satisfaction, actor satisfaction, and actor commitment (but not partner commitment) across the month.

Study 3

Study 2 provided evidence for the direction of the association between SCC and support for partner change over 1 month. Study 3 examined this effect over 9 months, enabling us to

examine whether these effects emerge over a longer time span. Moreover, Studies 1a, 1b, and 2 had focused on one specific change. This meant that people's support responses were based only on the change they listed at the beginning of the study. In Study 3, we examined total amount of partner change. We considered the magnitude of partner change as a proxy for expected self-change. As discussed previously, if a partner's change is small, then the individual is unlikely to have to change. However, if a partner changes substantially, then it is much more likely that the individual may have to change as well. We expected that individuals with lower SCC would be less likely to support larger changes, which in turn would harm their relationship quality.

Participants

This study was part of a broader examination of relationship processes. To qualify, participants were required to have been in a relationship for at least a year, and we aimed to recruit as many participants as possible before the end of the academic year. The study consisted of four surveys (an intake questionnaire and three follow-up waves). Ultimately, 95 participants were included in the current analyses (76.8% female, 23.2% male; age $M = 21.81$, $SD = 3.73$; 0.5% dating casually, 89.2% dating seriously, 5.8% engaged, 4.2% married; relationship duration $M = 2.35$ years, $SD = 1.44$; 87.4% identified as heterosexual). Of the 120 participants who signed up, 114 completed the Wave 1 follow-up; 111 completed the Wave 2 follow-up; and 110 completed the Wave 3 follow-up, which took place in the lab. Of the 110 who completed the final wave, 15 participants had broken up with their partners, leaving 95 participants included in the current analyses. In addition, participants were asked to bring their partners with them to the Wave 3 follow-up in the lab. Of the 95 participants in intact relationships who came to the final lab session, 90 brought their partners. Thus, 90 partners also participated at this final session (75.6% male, 23.3% female; age $M = 22.74$, $SD = 3.18$; 90.0% identified as heterosexual).⁷

Procedure

Participants were recruited through postings in listservs and Facebook groups; flyers on a Midwestern university campus; announcements in classrooms, fraternities, and sororities; and advertisements in student newspapers, newsletters, and on Facebook. Those eligible received a link to the intake questionnaire via email and completed it online. Three months later, they received a link to the Wave 1 follow-up questionnaire. Three months after completing the Wave 1 questionnaire, they received a link to the Wave 2 follow-up questionnaire. Finally, 3 months after completing the Wave 2 questionnaire, participants came into the lab with their partners to complete the Wave 3 follow-up. Participants received US\$60 at the end of the study.⁸ Partners who attended the final lab session received US\$20 compensation.

Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, all measures were assessed on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

SCC. At intake, participants completed the same measure as in previous studies ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.07$). At each follow-up wave, participants completed a one-item measure ("In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am"; Wave 1: $M = 5.81$, $SD = 1.13$; Wave 2: $M = 5.75$, $SD = 1.05$; Wave 3: $M = 5.44$, $SD = 1.29$).

Partner change. At each wave, participants were asked, "In the past 3 months, how much has your partner changed outside of your relationship (i.e., NOT as a result of you or your relationship)?" (Intake: $M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.51$; Wave 1: $M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.58$; Wave 2: $M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.63$; Wave 3: $M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.56$; 7-point scale: 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *a lot*).

Support for partner change. At Waves 1 to 3, participants were asked to "think about the ways that your partner changed as a person in the past 3 months (e.g., changes in his or her personality, personal goals, interests, career transitions, etc.). How did you respond?" Participants rated the extent to which they had engaged in the same six behaviors as in previous studies (7-point scale: 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). As in previous studies, we subtracted the destructive behaviors (Wave 1: $\alpha = .74$; Wave 2: $\alpha = .70$; Wave 3: $\alpha = .85$) from the constructive behaviors (Wave 1: $\alpha = .80$; Wave 2: $\alpha = .79$; Wave 3: $\alpha = .89$) to create an overall support index (Wave 1: $M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.68$; Wave 2: $M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.48$; Wave 3: $M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.77$).

Relationship quality. Participants reported their relationship satisfaction and commitment at each wave with the same measures as in Study 2 (Satisfaction—Intake: $\alpha = .82$, $M = 6.07$, $SD = 0.64$; Wave 1: $\alpha = .90$, $M = 6.02$, $SD = 0.87$; Wave 2: $\alpha = .90$, $M = 6.03$, $SD = 0.98$; Wave 3: $\alpha = .90$, $M = 6.00$, $SD = 0.90$. Commitment—Intake: $\alpha = .87$, $M = 6.29$, $SD = 0.75$; Wave 1: $\alpha = .85$, $M = 6.31$, $SD = 0.72$; Wave 2: $\alpha = .86$, $M = 6.25$, $SD = 0.84$; Wave 3: $\alpha = .91$, $M = 6.24$, $SD = 0.87$).

Results

We anticipated that lower SCC would predict less support for a partner's change, especially for larger amounts of change. This lack of support should in turn predict reduced relationship quality for both members of the couple. To test this hypothesis, we examined SCC at intake, partner change and support for partner change across Waves 1 and 2, and relationship quality for actor and partner at Wave 3. All variables were standardized prior to analysis ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$).

Does SCC predict support for partner change? As in Study 2, we examined whether SCC predicts supporting a partner's

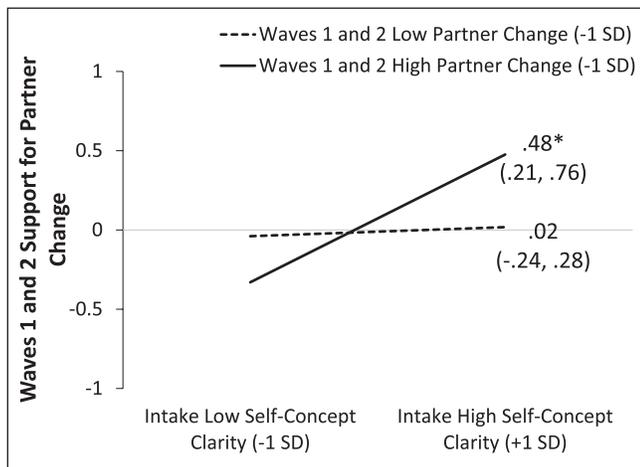


Figure 3. SCC at intake predicting support for partner change across Waves 1 and 2, moderated by amount of external partner change at Waves 1 and 2 in Study 3.

Note. Parentheses represent 95% confidence intervals. SCC = self-concept clarity.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

change, but not vice versa. We conducted lagged analyses using multilevel modeling, with wave nested within individual. First, we predicted support for partner change at each wave from SCC and support for change at the previous wave. Both previous SCC ($b = .19, p = .001; 95\% \text{ CI} = [.08, .31]$) and previous support ($b = .55, p < .001; 95\% \text{ CI} = [.44, .67]$) were associated with support for partner change. Next, we predicted SCC at each wave from SCC and support for change at the previous wave. Although previous SCC was associated with wave-level SCC ($b = .56, p < .001; 95\% \text{ CI} = [.44, .67]$), previous support was not ($b = .09, p = .13; 95\% \text{ CI} = [-.03, .20]$). Thus, SCC predicted later support for a partner's change, but support for partner's change did not predict later SCC.

Does amount of change moderate this association? Next, to build toward the full model tested in this study, we examined whether amount of partner change moderates the association between lower SCC and lack of support for a partner's change. Recall that amount of change is a proxy for the amount that people might have to change if their partners change, and that we are ultimately testing whether SCC at intake predicts support for partner change across Waves 1 and 2, moderated by amount of change at these waves. In turn, support for change should predict actor and partner relationship quality at Wave 3.

To test the moderational component of this model, we entered SCC at intake, the average of partner change at Waves 1 and 2,⁹ and their interaction into a simultaneous regression predicting average support for partner change at Waves 1 and 2 (Figure 3). SCC was positively associated with supporting a partner's change ($\beta = .25, p = .01; 95\% \text{ CI} = [.05, .45]$). Partner change was not associated with support

($\beta = -.04, p = .73; 95\% \text{ CI} = [-.24, .17]$). As expected, these effects were qualified by a significant interaction ($\beta = .26, p = .01; 95\% \text{ CI} = [.05, .41]$). Simple slope analyses revealed that when people perceived that their partners had changed more at Waves 1 and 2, SCC at intake predicted support for the change at Waves 1 and 2 ($\beta = .48, p = .001, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.21, .76]$). However, when the change was smaller, SCC at intake was not related to support for the change at Waves 1 and 2 ($\beta = .02, p = .88, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-.24, .28]$). Thus, as expected, SCC predicted support for change when the change was larger, but not when the change was smaller.¹⁰

Does support for partner change predict relationship quality?

We then turned to both actor and partner relationship quality.¹¹ We first predicted partner satisfaction from actor support for the partner's change averaged across Waves 1 and 2. Having supported a partner's change at Waves 1 and 2 predicted greater partner satisfaction at Wave 3 ($\beta = .26, p = .02; 95\% \text{ CI} = [.06, .52]$); however, this association was no longer significant when controlling for actor satisfaction at Wave 3 ($\beta = .17, p = .13; 95\% \text{ CI} = [-.05, .42]$). Actor support for a partner's change across Waves 1 and 2 predicted higher partner commitment at Wave 3 ($\beta = .40, p < .001; 95\% \text{ CI} = [.24, .70]$); this association did remain significant when controlling for actor commitment at Wave 3 ($\beta = .27, p = .01; 95\% \text{ CI} = [.07, .57]$). Partners who had received support for their change reported higher commitment when they had received support for their change, over and above any effect of the actor's commitment level.

Next, we examined actor relationship quality.¹² People who supported their partner's change across Waves 1 and 2 were more satisfied with their relationships at Wave 3 ($\beta = .35, p = .001; 95\% \text{ CI} = [.14, .49]$), an effect that remained when controlling for partner satisfaction at Wave 3 ($\beta = .29, p = .005; 95\% \text{ CI} = [.08, .43]$). The effect also remained when controlling for actor satisfaction at intake ($\beta = .21, p = .02; 95\% \text{ CI} = [.03, .35]$), suggesting that having supported a partner's change predicts increases in relationship satisfaction. Similarly, having supported a partner's change across Waves 1 and 2 was associated with higher commitment at Wave 3 ($\beta = .46, p < .001; 95\% \text{ CI} = [.22, .53]$). This effect remained when controlling for partner commitment at Wave 3 ($\beta = .36, p = .001; 95\% \text{ CI} = [.13, .46]$) and when controlling for actor commitment at intake ($\beta = .31, p = .001; 95\% \text{ CI} = [.10, .40]$)—having supported a partner's change at Waves 1 and 2 was associated with increases in commitment.

Moderated mediation models. Finally, we tested four moderated mediation models examining whether SCC, moderated by amount of external partner change across Waves 1 and 2, predicts support for that change at Waves 1 and 2, which in turn predicts relationship quality outcomes. Using model 7 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013), we first tested partner relationship satisfaction as an outcome. The

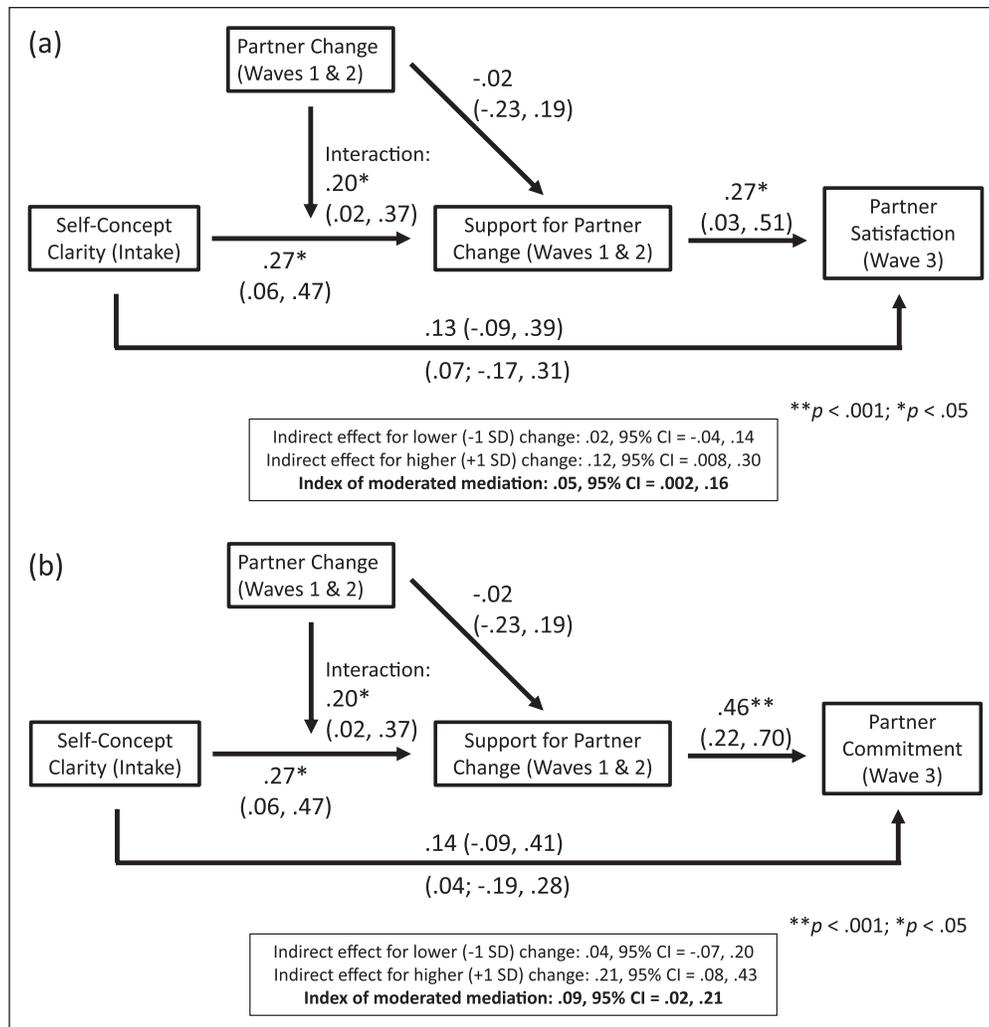


Figure 4A and 4B. Moderated mediation in Study 3 testing whether SCC at intake, moderated by partner change at Waves 1 and 2, predicts support for those changes at Waves 1 and 2, which in turn predicts partner relationship quality.

index of moderated mediation was significant (see Figure 4A). Whereas the indirect effect was not significant for lower (-1 SD) amounts of partner change, it was significant for higher ($+1$ SD) amounts of partner change. This finding suggests that SCC at intake predicts partner satisfaction at Wave 3, mediated by support for partner change at Waves 1 and 2, but only when people perceived that their partners had experienced greater change at Waves 1 and 2. Similarly, for partner commitment as an outcome, the index of moderated mediation was significant (see Figure 4B). The indirect effect for lower (-1 SD) amounts of partner change was not significant; however, the indirect effect was significant for higher ($+1$ SD) amounts of partner change.

Next, we examined actor relationship quality. The index of moderated mediation was significant for actor satisfaction as an outcome (see Figure 4C). Whereas the indirect effect was not significant for lower (-1 SD) amounts of partner change, it was for greater partner change. Finally, the index

of moderated mediation was significant for actor commitment as an outcome (see Figure 4D). The indirect effect was not significant for lower (-1 SD) amounts of partner change, but it was for higher ($+1$ SD) amounts of partner change. Overall, these findings indicate that SCC predicts support for partner change, which in turn is associated with both actor and partner relationship quality outcomes; however, this effect only emerges when partners experience more substantial changes.¹³

Discussion

Extending findings from Studies 1 to 2, Study 3 showed that low SCC predicted less support for a partner's change 3 months later; however, support did not predict later SCC. Individuals with low SCC only failed to support their partner's change when the change was larger. Lack of support for a partner's change, in turn, predicted lower actor and partner

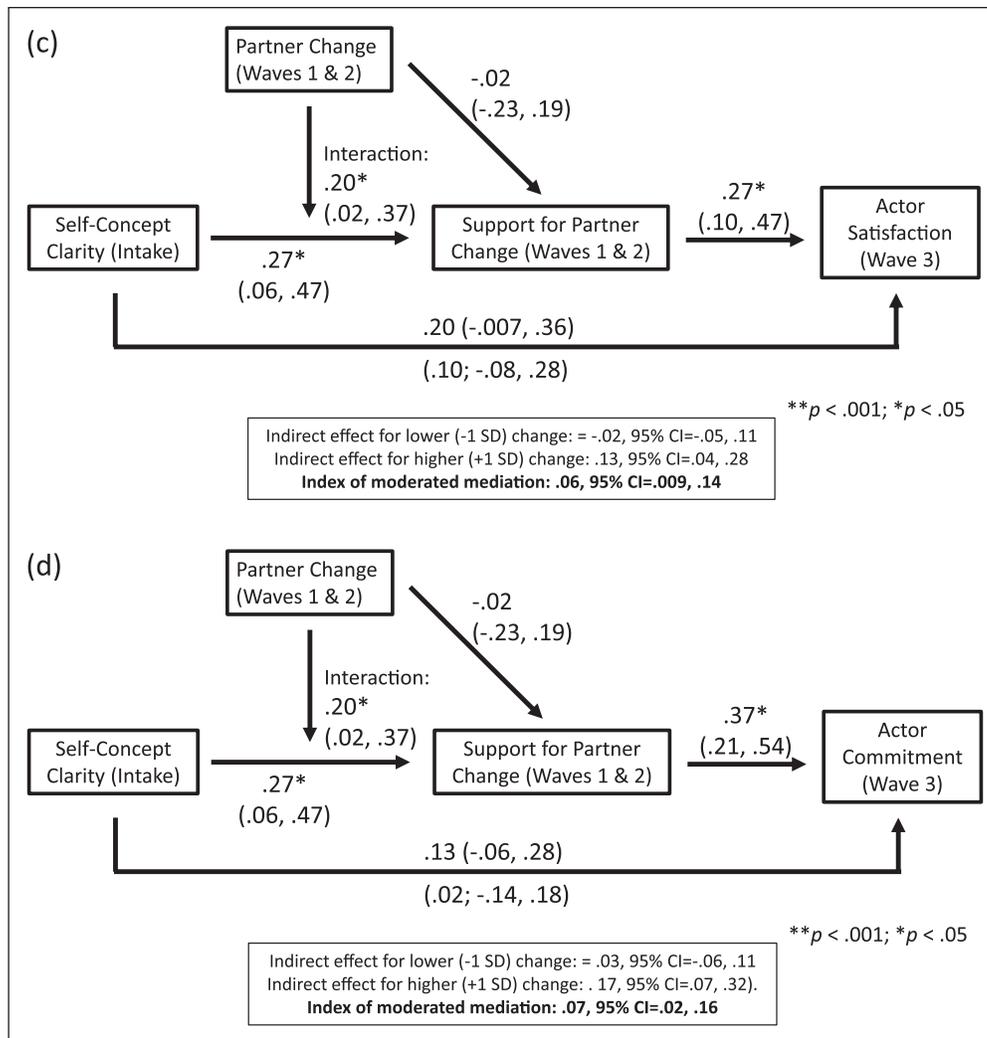


Figure 4C and 4D. Moderated mediation in Study 3 testing whether SCC at intake, moderated by partner change at Waves 1 and 2, predicts support for those changes at Waves 1 and 2, which in turn predicts actor relationship quality.

relationship quality 3 and 6 months later. This study suggests that lower SCC predicts less support for a partner's change, with ramifications for both the partner's relationship satisfaction and commitment and the individual's own satisfaction and commitment.

General Discussion

Although people may change alongside their partners once they enter a relationship (Aron et al., 1991; Mattingly et al., 2014; McIntyre et al., 2014; Slotter & Gardner, 2009), they do not necessarily stop changing as individuals. Even after they begin a relationship, people may continue striving toward their ideal selves or adding new content to their self-concepts (Drigotas et al., 1999; Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2014). Partners can play an important role in supporting these individual changes (Drigotas et al., 1999; Fivecoat

et al., 2015), but what predicts a partner's support for change?

Across four studies, individuals with low SCC, who lack a clear and coherent sense of who they are (Campbell et al., 1996), reported lower support for their partner's change. This effect emerged for retrospective (Study 1a) and forecasted (Study 1b) support. The belief that they would have to change as a result of their partner changing accounted for this association (Study 1b). Low SCC predicted less support for a partner's change 1 month later, but support for a partner's change did not predict SCC (Study 2). Across 3-month intervals, lower SCC at the previous wave predicted subsequent lack of support, but support did not predict SCC (Study 3). Moreover, low SCC only predicted less support for smaller changes (Study 3). Lower support for a partner's change in turn predicted decreases in both actor and partner relationship quality (Studies 2-3). When we meta-analyzed the effect of SCC on

support for a partner's change, a significant effect emerged across studies ($\beta = .21$, $SE = .04$, $z = -5.80$, $p < .001$).¹⁴

Implications and Future Directions

This research highlights the interdependent nature of self-change—members of a couple mutually influence each other (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), and one partner's change affects both people in the relationship. This research complements a growing literature examining the role of individual differences in people's reactions when their partners fail at self-change, people's skill at helping their partners change, and people's tendency to attempt to change their partners (Jayamaha, Antonellis, & Overall, 2016; Kammrath & Peetz, 2012; Kumashiro et al., 2007).

This work adds a missing component to the research on the role of partners in self-change—the experience of the person who must decide whether or not to support the change. These studies suggest that when a person does not support a partner's change, this lack of support is not necessarily because the person is mean-spirited or uncaring. Rather, people may fail to support a partner's change because their own self-concepts are unclear. People with low SCC are less supportive of their partner's change because they fear that they may have to change too, which potentially risks further self-concept confusion (Emery et al., 2015). This research is also the first to our knowledge to highlight the effect of supporting a partner's change on relationship quality for both members of the couple over time and to examine commitment as an outcome. When a person does not support their partner's change, their own satisfaction and commitment suffers in addition to their partner's.

The mechanism proposed in these studies highlights a direction for future research: Do people with low SCC actually experience self-change when their partners change, or are their fears unfounded? Perhaps their self-concepts do not actually change, and they fail to support their partner's change and corrode their relationship quality for nothing. Alternatively, not supporting the change may be a valid defense against a real possibility of self-change and self-concept disruption. Although the present research cannot answer this question, it would be interesting to know what happens if a partner persists in change.

Relatedly, if people with low SCC do add new content to their self-concepts, does this change result in further self-confusion? Is change actually harmful for the self-concepts of people with low SCC? From a theoretical perspective (Emery et al., 2015), it seems likely that it is, but future research should test this prediction. It would be fascinating if taking on a partner's change destabilizes the self-concepts of people with low SCC and harms their individual well-being but enhances relationship well-being. If so, a partner changing would present an interdependence dilemma (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), forcing a choice between what might be best for the individual and what might be optimal for their relationships.

These studies focused largely on how a chronic individual difference (SCC) predicts support for change. Future research should continue to explore both the individual differences and situational aspects of change that result in supporting a partner changing. For example, goal incompatibility might lead a person to undermine a partner's change. There may also be situational elements related to a partner's change that could destabilize the self, even if a person does not have low SCC. If a person must move across the country due to a partner's job changing, this move would likely result in a period of self-instability for everyone, regardless of SCC. Future research should explore how situational elements of change and dynamics between partners predict supporting a partner's change.

Strengths and Limitations

To the best of our knowledge, this is among the first research to identify individual differences in who is likely to support a partner's change (but see Kumashiro et al., 2007). This research fills a theoretical gap in existing research on the Michelangelo phenomenon (Drigotas et al., 1999; Rusbult et al., 2009) and support for individual self-expansion (Fivecoat et al., 2015). Moreover, the longitudinal studies with couples (Studies 2-3) provided directional evidence for these effects over 1 and 9 months, as well as their dyadic nature.

All of the current studies relied on either forecasted or retrospective reports of support for change (including the longitudinal studies, as participants reported their responses to change over the previous month or 3 months). Although we believe that these processes unfold over time and might be difficult to capture within a live interaction, behavioral data would enable more nuanced analyses of combinations of support strategies. Specifically, are there some types of strategies that enable people to withhold support for their partner's change without damaging their relationship? Imagine that someone's partner takes up painting. A person could praise the quality of the work, but then point out that the partner cannot paint today, because they have plans with friends. This combination of cheerleading and behavioral resistance might appear sufficiently supportive that the partner does not experience declines in relationship satisfaction and commitment, but nonetheless prevents the partner from following through on the change.

Relatedly, in our scale measuring support for a partner's change, we only included one item for each of the types of constructive or destructive behaviors. We listed several examples under each category of response, because we were interested in assessing the broad family of constructive or destructive responses to a partner's change. However, future research might benefit from measuring subtypes of each response separately to parse out which types of behaviors are especially likely under threat. Likewise, we assessed amount of partner change and expecting to change through one-item measures. We recognize that these tend to be less reliable and valid than scales. It would also be valuable for future research to determine whether certain

domains of change (e.g., change to personality compared with changes in goals) are especially threatening.

Future research should also explore how partners of people with low SCC can buffer the extent to which change seems threatening. In particular, communication about the change might moderate support for that change. If the partner of a person with low SCC assures that person that he or she would not be expected to change, would this be sufficient to prevent an unsupportive response? We suspect that it might not, given the association between SCC and expectation of having to change in Study 1b. Moreover, we were surprised to find that relationship duration and marital status did not moderate the effects of SCC on support for a partner's change. However, perhaps there are other moderators or circumstances under which a person with low SCC would support a partner's change. Future research would benefit from exploring what, if any, strategies might reassure people with low SCC when their partners change, as well as whether there are any circumstances under which people with low SCC are not threatened by change.

Conclusion

When people in relationships pursue self-change, their partner's support is consequential. This research examined an individual difference predicting support for a partner's change. Individuals with low SCC do not support their partner's changes, in part because they expect that they will have to change themselves as a result. However, failing to support a partner's change harms relationship quality for both the person changing and the person who does not support that change. Given that, as Alice noted, people are not the same from one day to the next, it is inevitable that people's partners will change at some point in their relationship. Whether people support that partner's change seems to depend on whether they feel confused about who they are.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. We initially received responses from 83 individuals; however, we removed responses from those who did not write about a change, who wrote about relational changes ($n = 2$), or who reported not having done the study carefully ($n = 6$). Given the

small number of exclusions, we were unable to test for differences in self-concept clarity (SCC) or other variables of interest between those included and excluded. See Appendix S.A in supplemental information for additional attrition information in Studies 1a and 1b.

2. See Table S1 in supplemental materials for correlations between SCC and each scale item. In this and subsequent studies, we explored whether low SCC is more strongly associated with actively engaging in destructive behaviors or with failing to engage in constructive behaviors. When differences emerged, low SCC was more consistently associated with engaging in destructive behaviors than withholding constructive behaviors. See Table S2 in supplemental materials. In Studies 1a and 1b, we tested whether perceived positivity of the change moderated the association between SCC and support for partner change. It was not a significant moderator (see Appendix S.C in supplemental materials). We also examined whether gender, marital status, or relationship duration moderated our effects. However, we did not find any consistent patterns of moderation across studies.
3. Because we anticipated some participant exclusion, we aimed to recruit approximately 250 participants initially. We received responses from 244 individuals and excluded responses from individuals who did not write about a way that their partner was changing or wrote about relational changes (e.g., "we got married"; $n = 47$). Those excluded did not significantly differ from those included on SCC, $F(1, 242) = 2.37, p = .13$ (included $M = 4.94, SD = 1.27$; excluded $M = 4.64, SD = 1.22$). Note that based on the effect size of SCC on supporting partner change from Study 1a, we calculated using G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) that we would need a sample size of at least 46 individuals ($1 - \beta > .95$) to detect an effect.
4. One participant selected "none of the above" as their gender.
5. Recall that based on the power analysis conducted after Study 1a, this sample size was sufficient to detect an effect for our primary hypothesis (see Note 3). Participants in the final sample did not differ from those excluded on relationship satisfaction at Time 1, $t(165) = 0.68, p = .50$; relationship commitment at Time 1, $t(166) = 0.80, p = .43$; support for partner change at Time 1, $t(166) = 1.29, p = .20$; age, $t(163) = 0.49, p = .63$; or relationship duration, $t(166) = -0.02, p = .99$. There was a marginal difference in SCC at Time 1, $t(166) = -1.97, p = .05$, such that those excluded had marginally higher SCC ($M = 4.73, SD = 1.05$) than those included ($M = 4.37, SD = 1.11$). In addition, we examined whether any of the dependent measures differed based on participation for credit or for payment. There were no differences at Time 2 on satisfaction, $t(110) = 0.13, p = .90$; commitment, $t(110) = -0.25, p = .80$; support for change, $t(110) = 0.18, p = .54$; or SCC, $t(115) = 0.05, p = .96$.
6. Although the alpha for destructive behaviors was relatively low, and would have been improved by dropping perceptual undermining ($\alpha = .75$), we retained this item to keep the measure consistent across studies.
7. Recall that based on the power analysis conducted after Study 1a (see Note 3), this sample size was sufficient to detect an effect for our primary hypothesis. This is a conservative estimate, because this study features four waves of data.
8. At the end of each questionnaire, participants completed a manipulation of their relationship lay beliefs in which they

read brief descriptions of relationship research and then were asked to apply this research to their own relationship. All hypothesis tests yielded identical results when controlling for which essay topic participants completed.

9. All significance tests yielded identical conclusions when we examined only Wave 1 or only Wave 2.
10. Another possible approach to these analyses was to examine the effect of SCC at intake on support for partner change across Waves 1 to 3, moderated by amount of partner change across these waves. We conducted this alternative analysis using multilevel modeling, with wave nested within person. The interaction effect remained significant in this model ($b = .11, p = .02$; 95% confidence interval [CI] = [.02, .21]).
11. In these and subsequent analyses, we restricted the sample to couples in which both members participated at the final wave, as we were examining actor and partner relationship quality outcomes. Thus, five participants were excluded.
12. An alternative approach to these analyses was to examine the lagged effect of support on actor's relationship quality. Controlling for satisfaction at the previous wave ($b = .62, p < .001$; 95% CI = [.51, .72]), support at the previous wave marginally predicted subsequent support ($b = .08, p = .08$; 95% CI = [-.01, .17]). Controlling for commitment at the previous wave ($b = .87, p < .001$; 95% CI = [.81, .94]), support at the previous wave marginally predicted commitment ($b = .04, p = .10$; 95% CI = [-.007, .09]).
13. We reran all analyses selecting for only participants who gave responses above a "1" on the 7-point scale at each wave rating the extent to which their partner was changing (i.e., excluding people who gave a "not at all" response). Nearly all significance tests yielded identical conclusions, with the exception of the interaction effect using multilevel modeling (see Note 10); the effect of support on actor satisfaction, controlling for previous actor satisfaction; and the moderated mediation effect on partner satisfaction. Thus, two of the satisfaction effects became nonsignificant when these participants were excluded, and all effects on commitment remained. In addition, we examined whether inclusion of other in the self (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) moderated the effect of SCC on support; IOS was not a significant moderator.
14. In conducting the meta-analysis, we weighted the beta from each study by the inverse of its variance to yield a meta-analytic beta. We took the square root of the reciprocal of the sum of the weights to yield a meta-analytic standard error. Finally, we divided the meta-analytic beta by the meta-analytic standard error to yield the z score (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, & Rothstein, 2009).

Supplemental Material

Supplementary material is available online with this article.

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