

## The Role of Self-concept Clarity in Relationship Quality

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*Previous research has linked self-concept clarity to positive outcomes (Campbell et al., 1996), but has not systematically explored its potential positive association with relationship quality. The current set of studies hypothesizes that self-concept clarity will positively correlate with relationship satisfaction and commitment, and that inclusion of other in the self and self-esteem will mediate the association. Study 1 examined correlations between self-report measures from 199 undergraduates, while Study 2 randomly assigned 78 undergraduates to either engage in a self-concept clarity or self-concept confusion manipulation. As hypothesized, in both studies, higher self-concept clarity was associated with higher relationship satisfaction and commitment. Inclusion of other in the self and self-esteem mediated the association between self-concept clarity and relationship quality measures (the only exception was for self-esteem and commitment in Study 1). These results demonstrate how a person's self-concept relates to romantic relationship quality.*

**Keywords:** Self-concept clarity; Self-esteem; Inclusion of other in self; Individual differences; Relationship satisfaction; Commitment.

A study of exceedingly happy people revealed that all but one of the happiest 10% were currently involved in a romantic relationship (Diener & Seligman, 2002). Clearly, romantic relationships are an important part of our lives. Similarly, one's self-concept (i.e., the totality of beliefs one has and can describe about one's self) permeates nearly all of life's experience (Leary & Tangney, 2003). Thus, it seems natural to examine the confluence of these concepts (Aron, 2003). It is important to explore a variety of factors that may influence relationship quality because they may consequently help improve relationships. Self-concept clarity is a construct that has remained largely unexplored in the context of romantic relationships. Self-concept clarity involves a person's maintenance of a distinct, cohesive, and consistent conception of their characteristics (Campbell, 1990). The purpose of this paper is to determine the potential influence of self-concept clarity on relationship satisfaction and commitment.

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*Relationship Satisfaction and Commitment*

One of the most common methods of measuring relationship quality is the investment model, which involves the related constructs of satisfaction, investment, quality of alternatives, and commitment (Rusbult, 1983). These constructs correlate with one another, but are distinct (Le & Agnew, 2003). Satisfaction involves an individual's evaluation of the relationship as a whole, the perceived positive or negative affect that one experiences within the relationship, and overall how the relationship gratifies the individual's overall needs (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986). In contrast, commitment involves an affective attachment to one's partner, a conative motivation to persist, and a cognitive decision to remain within the relationship (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). Commitment also has been characterized as a long-term orientation and a perceived obligation toward the relationship (Adams & Jones, 1997).

A wide variety of variables, including remaining within the relationship (Rusbult, 1983), trust (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), relationship closeness (Miller, 1997), partner forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998), and pro-relationship behaviors, such as accommodation and willingness to sacrifice for the partner (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999) have been associated with satisfaction and commitment.

Predictors related to the self have been associated with satisfaction and commitment. Most notably, this has been in the context of the overlap between romantic relationship partners' self-concepts. One way this occurs is through cognitive interdependence, whereby mental representations of partners become integrated into their sense of self (Agnew et al., 1998). As partners' cognitive interdependence increases and they regard their partners as part of themselves, commitment increases (Agnew et al., 1998). Cognitive interdependence has also been associated with the experience of more positive emotions within the relationship (Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995).

One of the primary means of measuring cognitive interdependence is through inclusion of other in the self. This is a form of relationship closeness that focuses on the extent to which one's self-concept is interconnected or overlaps one's partner's self-concept (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). In cases of high inclusion of other in the self, the overlap is so great that partners have a difficult time distinguishing between their own traits and their partner's traits (Mashek, Aron, & Boncimino, 2003). This process results in the incorporation of a relationship partner's characteristics within one's sense of self, thereby enhancing the self (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). These changes to the self, known as self-expansion, produce gains in abilities, resources, and perspectives that increase feelings of competency and self-efficacy (Aron & Aron, 1996). Due to this process, inclusion of other in the self should have positive implications for relationships. In fact, research has established that inclusion of other in the self positively correlates with relationship satisfaction (Agnew et al., 1998; Aron & Aron, 1996), commitment (Agnew et al., 1998), and relationship longevity (Aron et al., 1992).

*Self-concept Clarity*

Previous research has established that the self-concept plays a role in the perception of relationship quality (Aron & Aron, 1996). Measures of the self-concept remain largely unexplored in the context of relationship quality. One such difference, self-concept clarity, involves the level of clarity, consistency, stability, and confidence in

one's self-concept (Campbell et al., 1996). Individuals with high self-concept clarity have more consistent self-beliefs, are less likely to change their self-descriptions over time or endorse mutually exclusive self-descriptive traits such as careless and careful (Campbell, 1990).

Not surprisingly, self-concept clarity has benefits for psychological adjustment. Differentiation of the self (i.e., low self-concept clarity), coincides with maladjustment in the form of low self-esteem, high neuroticism and depression (Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993). Self-concept clarity also negatively correlates with depression and anxiety (Bigler, Neimeyer, & Brown, 2001). Research that links an individual's self-concept clarity with romantic relationships is sparse. However, one study examined how clearly a person viewed their partner's self-concept and found that greater clarity of the partner's self predicted greater relationship quality (Gurung, Sarason, & Sarason, 2001). Although not the focus of their study, these researchers also found that self-concept clarity was positively correlated with dyadic adjustment, a measure that focuses on satisfaction. Unfortunately, the reasons for the association, and any potential association with commitment were left unexamined.

Self-concept clarity's positive influence on relationships is not automatically evident since some research finds that self-concept clarity can relate to negative personal outcomes. A longitudinal study found that individuals high in self-concept clarity were more likely to be perfectionists who had inflexible and specific requirements for the self (Campbell & Di Paula, 2002). Perfectionism has been associated with increased stress, depression, unrealistically high self-standards, and self-punishment when one has not achieved goals (Hewitt & Flett, 1993). This may be especially problematic due to perfectionism's negative correlation with dyadic adjustment (Flett, Hewitt, Shapiro, & Rayman, 2003).

The structure or clarity of the self-concept can be independent of the content of the self-concept, which may explain why high self-concept clarity is not a guarantee of positive outcomes (Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2000). Whereas self-concept clarity involves the cognitive component of the self, self-esteem focuses on self-views based upon evaluations of the self (Rosenberg, 1965). For example, individuals could hold very clear and highly articulated negative self-beliefs, or very unclear and poorly articulated positive self-beliefs. Instead, self-concept clarity may produce positive outcomes independent of self-evaluations.

The association between self-concept clarity and self-esteem has been well established (Baumgardner, 1990; Bigler et al., 2001; Campbell, 1990; Campbell & Lavalley, 1993; Campbell et al., 1996). Specifically, those with high self-concept clarity derive a positive attitude toward the self from highly articulated beliefs about the self (Campbell & Lavalley, 1993; Campbell et al., 1996). Empirical results show that those with low self-esteem are less certain when describing their own attributes (Baumgardner, 1990), less confident in their self-descriptions (Campbell, 1990), and have less stability in their ratings over time (Baumgardner, 1990; Campbell, 1990).

Thus, the psychological benefit of self-concept clarity may lie within its well-established relation to self-esteem. In fact, self-esteem positively correlates with psychological well-being (e.g., Diener, 1984; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004), and with relationship satisfaction (e.g., Hansson, Jones, & Carpenter, 1984; Rosenberg, 1965). In the context of relationships, there is a strong positive correlation between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction (Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988). Further, low self-esteem coincides with

lower overall marital happiness (Hawkins & Booth, 2005), and a greater likelihood of sabotaging one's own relationship (Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001).

### *The Present Study*

A great deal of past research has focused on the predictors of relationship quality. Some research has examined the role of the self in relationship satisfaction and commitment as it relates to self-esteem (e.g., Hendrick et al., 1988), and cognitive closeness (e.g., Agnew et al., 1998) in determining relationship quality. However, the influence of self-concept clarity on relationships quality has been largely unexplored. Specifically, we are not aware of any other study that focuses on one's own self-concept clarity in the context of relationship quality, nor could we identify any study that examined self-concept clarity as it related to inclusion of other in the self. We address the dearth of research in this area by examining the role of self-concept clarity in relationship satisfaction and commitment through their direct association, as well as the potentially mediating roles of self-esteem and inclusion of other in the self.

### *Self-concept Clarity and Relationship Outcomes*

The established role of the self-concept in romantic relationships suggests that the self-concept could contribute to relationship quality (Aron & Aron, 1996). Specifically, a construct such as self-concept clarity that involves stability of the self-concept should benefit relationships. In light of this, we predicted that self-concept clarity would positively correlate with relationship satisfaction and commitment.

### *Mediation of Self-concept Clarity's Association with Satisfaction and Commitment*

In addition to predicting the association of self-concept clarity with relationship satisfaction and commitment, we also suggested several mediators of the path.

*Inclusion of other in the self.* A person with high self-concept clarity should experience greater relationship satisfaction and commitment, in part, because of inclusion of other in the self. Individuals with greater self-concept clarity who hold a clear and consistent view of the self should be more stable and should present the self more clearly to others; characteristics that have been associated with lower levels of neuroticism (Campbell et al., 1996). Further, research also suggests that partners who are less neurotic (i.e., more stable) are more desirable (Figueredo, Sefcek, & Nelson, 2006).

Inclusion of the other in the self is a largely dyadic process in which inclusion is greater with a desirable partner (Aron & Aron, 1996). Higher self-concept clarity may relate to greater inclusion of other in the self because a person with a clear and consistent self-view can more judiciously seek out aspects of the partner to add to their sense of self. By holding a clear view of the self, the high self-concept clarity individual can avoid the situation where greater inclusion of other in the self may result in loss of identity or loss of freedom (Mashek & Sherman, 2004). Instead of threatening the self, self-expansion can occur whereby the included elements can augment the self by increasing the individual's sense of efficacy and ultimately

promoting relationship quality (Aron & Aron, 1996). We hypothesized that self-concept clarity would positively correlate with inclusion of other in the self and that inclusion of other in the self would mediate the association between self-concept clarity and relationship satisfaction, as well as the association between self-concept clarity and commitment.

*Self-esteem.* Until now, self-concept clarity has not been linked to relationship quality. Past research has established a link between self-concept clarity and self-esteem (e.g., Baumgardner, 1990), and has linked self-esteem with relationship quality (e.g., Hansson et al., 1984). However, greater self-concept clarity may not independently promote relationship satisfaction and commitment. For example, regardless of how confidently they are held, if a person has negative self-esteem relationship quality may suffer. For example, those with low self-esteem have a tendency to undermine their relationship by misperceiving their partner's love (Murray et al., 2001). Thus, those who hold clear and certain views of the self should have higher relationship satisfaction and commitment to the extent that the self-views are positive. We hypothesized that self-concept clarity would positively correlate with self-esteem and that self-esteem would mediate the association between self-concept clarity and relationship satisfaction, as well as the association between self-concept clarity and commitment.

## Study 1

### *Method*

#### *Participants*

Participants in this study consisted of a convenience sample of 199 undergraduates (47 males, 147 females, 5 non-response) from the Psychology Department's online participant pool at a small private university in the Northeastern United States. Ages ranged from 18 to 30 ( $M = 18.96$ ). We did not collect information on year in school. Of those indicating ethnicity, 88.4% were Caucasian, 1.0% Asian American, 2.5% African American, 5.0% Hispanic American, and 3.0% Other. Participants were required to be in a current relationship, varying from dating exclusively (88.9%), dating casually (9.0%), and engaged (2.0%). Mean relationship length was approximately 19 months (range = 1–81 months). Participants received course credit for taking part in the study.

#### *Measures*

Groups of 4–8 participants completed a questionnaire packet that asked about individual differences, their relationship, as well as a short demographic questionnaire (gender, age, ethnicity, current relationship status, and relationship length).

*Self-concept clarity.* A 12-item scale developed by Campbell et al. (1996) was used measure the clarity and cohesiveness of the characteristics within the self-concept. Self-concept clarity was measured on a scale of: *strongly disagree* (1), *disagree* (2), *neither agree nor disagree* (3), *agree* (4), and *strongly agree* (5). Example items included, "In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am," and "I seldom experience conflict between the different aspects of my personality." Cronbach's alpha = .86.

*Self-esteem.* This 10-item scale assesses participants' global self esteem, or satisfaction with the self (Rosenberg, 1965). Participants responded on a 4-point scale: *strongly disagree* (1), *disagree* (2), *agree* (3), and *strongly agree* (4). Example items included, "On the whole I am satisfied with myself," and "I feel I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others." Cronbach's alpha = .88.

*Inclusion of other in self (IOS).* This scale measures the cognitive overlap between an individual and their partner (Aron et al., 1992). A series of increasingly overlapping circles from two separate circles to two circles that overlap almost completely captures this phenomenon. Participants were instructed to circle the scenario that best described their relationship. In a sample in romantic relationships, Aron et al. (1992) reported alternate-form reliability of .95 and test-reliability over 2 weeks of .85. The scale has demonstrated predictive and construct validity as a general measure of closeness and has been widely used in relationship research.

*Relationship satisfaction.* This measure assesses participants' perception of their relationship (Rusbult et al., 1998). Example items included, "I feel satisfied with our relationship", "My relationship is close to ideal", and "Our relationship makes me very happy." Participants were asked to: "Indicate how you feel for each item" on a scale of 0 through 8, 0 being "do not agree at all" and 8 being "agree completely." Cronbach's alpha = .92.

*Commitment.* This measure assesses participants' sense that the relationship will continue indefinitely (Rusbult et al., 1998). Example items included, "I want our relationship to last for a very long time", "I want our relationship to last forever", and "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner." Participants were asked to: "Indicate how you feel for each item" on a scale of 0 through 8, 0 being "do not agree at all" and 8 being "agree completely." Cronbach's alpha = .92.

## *Results and Discussion*

### ***Self-concept Clarity, Satisfaction, and Commitment***

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among key variables are shown in Table 1. As shown in the table, our hypotheses regarding self-concept clarity were supported. There was a positive correlation between self-concept clarity and the proposed mediators: self-esteem and IOS. As hypothesized, there was a significant association between self-concept clarity and relationship satisfaction and commitment such that those with high self-concept clarity were more likely to report higher levels of relationship satisfaction and commitment. In addition, the proposed mediators, inclusion of other in the self and self-esteem were significantly positively correlated with satisfaction and commitment.

### ***Mediation of Self-concept Clarity's Association with Satisfaction and Commitment***

In order to test whether we had met the conditions for mediation as delineated by Baron and Kenny (1986), we conducted a series of three mediation analyses to determine if the relation of self-concept clarity to relationship satisfaction and commitment was mediated by inclusion of other in the self and self-esteem. As seen in Table 1, those with high self-concept clarity are more likely to report greater relationship satisfaction and commitment. Further, self-concept clarity was

**TABLE 1** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Key Variables (Study 1)

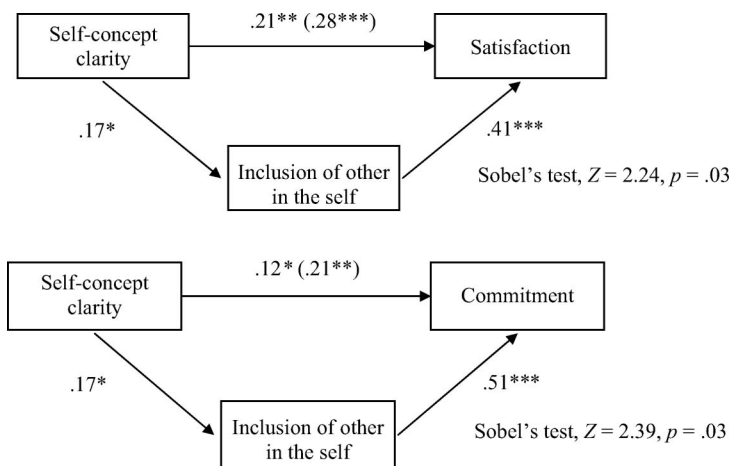
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Self-concept clarity	3.51 (0.68)				
2. Inclusion of other in self	.17*	4.86 (1.57)			
3. Self-esteem	.62**	.17*	3.31 (0.48)		
4. Satisfaction	.28**	.44**	.32**	6.28 (1.49)	
5. Commitment	.21**	.53**	.19**	.64**	6.67 (1.63)

Notes:  $N = 198-99$ . Higher scores indicate a greater magnitude of each variable. Means and standard deviations appear on the diagonal. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

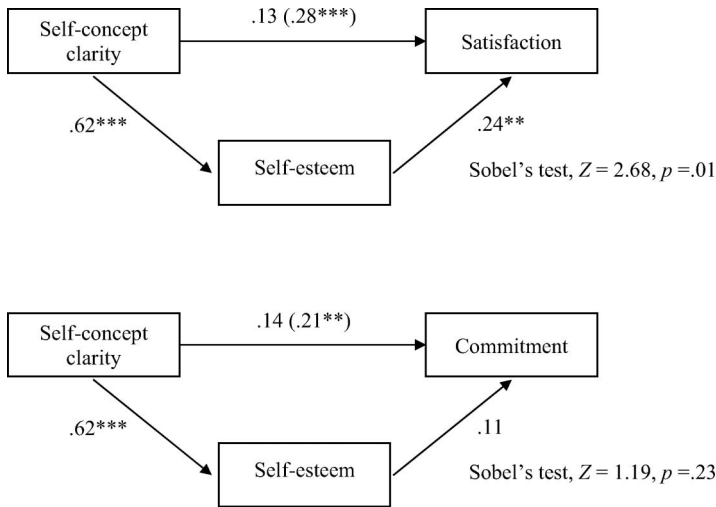
significantly associated with the hypothesized mediators. These steps were consistent through each of the following mediation analyses.

*Inclusion of other in the self.* As seen in Figure 1, the beta between inclusion of other in the self and relationship satisfaction was .41,  $t(194) = 6.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $sr^2 = .42$ . The beta for self-concept clarity in this regression was reduced to .21, and remained significant,  $t(194) = 3.26$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $sr^2 = .23$ . This supports the hypothesis that inclusion of other in the self mediates self-concept clarity's effect on relationship satisfaction.

A parallel analysis with commitment revealed that the beta between inclusion of other in the self and commitment was .51,  $t(194) = 8.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $sr^2 = .52$ . The beta for self-concept clarity in this regression was reduced to .12, and remained



**FIGURE 1** Mediation of self-concept clarity's association with satisfaction and commitment by inclusion of other in the self (Study 1). Reported values are standardized betas. The betas in parentheses represent the direct effects of self-concept clarity on satisfaction (or commitment). The betas not in parentheses represent the association between self-concept clarity and satisfaction (or commitment) controlling for the mediator. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



**FIGURE 2** Mediation of self-concept clarity's association with satisfaction and commitment by self-esteem (Study 1). Reported values are standardized betas. The betas in parentheses represent the direct effects of self-concept clarity on satisfaction (or commitment). The betas not in parentheses represent the association between self-concept clarity and satisfaction (or commitment) controlling for the mediator. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

significant,  $t(194) = 1.96, p = .052, sr^2 = .14$ . This supports the hypothesis that inclusion of other in the self mediates self-concept clarity's effect on commitment.

*Self-esteem.* As seen in Figure 2, the beta between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction was .24,  $t(195) = 2.76, p = .01, sr^2 = .19$ . The beta for self-concept clarity in this regression was reduced to .13, and was not significant,  $t(194) = 1.50, p = .14, sr^2 = .11$ . This supports the hypothesis that self-esteem mediates self-concept clarity's effect on relationship satisfaction.

A parallel analysis with commitment revealed that, contrary to the hypothesis, the beta between self-esteem and commitment was .11,  $t(195) = 1.20, p = .23, sr^2 = .09$ . The beta for self-concept clarity in this regression was .14, and was not significant,  $t(195) = 1.57, p = .12, sr^2 = .11$ . This fails to support the hypothesis that self-esteem mediates self-concept clarity's effect on commitment.

## Study 2

In Study 2, we sought to replicate the basic results from Study 1; that self-concept clarity relates to relationship satisfaction and commitment. We hoped to extend these findings by experimentally manipulating participants' self-concept clarity to determine its influence on satisfaction and commitment.

### Method

#### Participants

Participants in this study consisted of a convenience sample of 78 undergraduates (21 males, 57 females) from an upper level psychology course at a large public



university in the Northeastern United States. Ages ranged from 18 to 36 ( $M = 21.69$ ). Of the sample, 2.5% were college freshman, 11.4% were sophomores, 55.7% were college juniors, college seniors comprised 22.8%, and 6.3% were in their fifth year of college. Of those indicating ethnicity, 51.9% were Caucasian, 25.3% were Asian, 5.1% were Hispanic or Latino, 3.8% were African American, and 12.7% were Other. All participants were in a current romantic relationship. Most of the sample were dating exclusively (83.6%), 8.9% were dating casually, 2.5% were engaged, 1.3% were married, and 2.5% indicated Other. Mean relationship length was approximately 25 months (range = 1–76).

### **Measures**

Participants completed a questionnaire packet that included a self-concept questionnaire (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993), measures of relationship satisfaction and commitment, self-concept clarity, self-esteem, and inclusion of other in the self. Participants also completed a short demographic questionnaire parallel to Study 1.

*Self-concept questionnaire.* Participants rated 30 personality traits based on how much each trait was descriptive of the self (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993). Participants made ratings on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *does not describe*, 7 = *describes very well*). Example traits included, “open-minded,” “friendly,” “logical,” and “insecure.”

*Relationship satisfaction.* This was identical to the measure used in Study 1 (Rusbult et al., 1998). Alpha in current study = .92.

*Relationship commitment.* This was identical to the measure used in Study 1 (Rusbult et al., 1998). Alpha in current study = .83.

*Self-concept clarity.* This was identical to the measure used in Study 1 (Campbell et al., 1996). Alpha in current study = .97.

*Self-esteem.* This was identical to the measure used in Study 1 (Rosenberg, 1965). Alpha in current study = .92.

*Inclusion of other in self.* This was identical to the measure used in Study 1 (Aron et al., 1992).

### **Design and Procedure**

Participants in a large lecture hall class engaged in a randomly assigned self-concept manipulation, and then completed follow-up measures. The self-concept manipulation followed the procedure described by Setterlund and Niedenthal (1993). At the beginning of class, participants completed the self-concept questionnaire. Afterward, a research assistant placed trait adjectives in the Part 2 questionnaire packet labeled Condition 1 (self-concept confusion) or Condition 2 (self-concept clarity) and returned the packets to the participants. Participants in the self-concept confusion condition received three adjectives in Part 2 that they indicated were not descriptive of them in Part 1. Participants in the self-concept clarity condition received three adjectives in Part 2 that they indicated were very descriptive of them in Part 1. At the end of class (approximately 2 hours later), all participants described three times when they displayed behaviors relevant to each of the adjectives in

their packet. For example, in the self-concept clarity condition, if a participant indicated that they were highly open-minded, they described three times they acted open-minded. Upon completion of the self-concept clarity manipulation, participants completed measures of satisfaction, commitment, self-esteem, and inclusion of other in the self.

### Results and Discussion

#### Manipulation Check

To determine the self-concept manipulation's efficacy in creating differences in self-concept clarity, we conducted a *t*-test for independent means comparing the self-concept confusion and self-concept clarity conditions on a follow-up measure of self-concept clarity. Means and standard deviations for the two experimental conditions were: self-concept confusion ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ), self-concept clarity ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ). The analysis was significant and had a moderate effect size;  $t(76) = 5.89$ ,  $p < .001$ , effect size ( $\eta_p^2$ ) = .31, such that those in clarity condition reported higher self-concept clarity compared to those in the confusion condition.

#### Self-concept Clarity, Satisfaction, and Commitment

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for key variables are shown in Table 2.

*Satisfaction.* We conducted a regression analysis in which the dependent variable was relationship satisfaction and the independent variable was experimental condition (dummy coded with 1 = *clarity* and 0 = *confusion*). The regression yielded a beta of .32,  $t(76) = 9.85$ ,  $p < .001$ , effect size ( $\eta_p^2$ ) = .32, indicating that those with high self-concept clarity are more likely to report greater relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was higher for the self-concept clarity condition ( $M = 5.94$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ), than for the self-concept confusion condition ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ).

*Commitment.* We conducted a regression analysis in which the dependent variable was relationship commitment, and the independent variable experimental condition. The results yielded a beta of .28,  $t(76) = 9.96$ ,  $p < .001$ , effect size

**TABLE 2** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Key Variables (Study 2)

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Self-concept clarity	1.51 (0.50)				
2. Inclusion of other in self	.23*	4.85 (1.35)			
3. Self-esteem	.39***	.22*	3.16 (0.71)		
4. Satisfaction	.32**	.45***	.66***	5.52 (1.29)	
5. Commitment	.41***	.41***	.53***	.85***	5.75 (1.35)

*Notes:*  $N = 78$ . Higher scores indicate a greater magnitude of each variable. Means and standard deviations appear on the diagonal. Self-concept clarity in this study represents the experimental condition of self-concept clarity vs. confusion. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

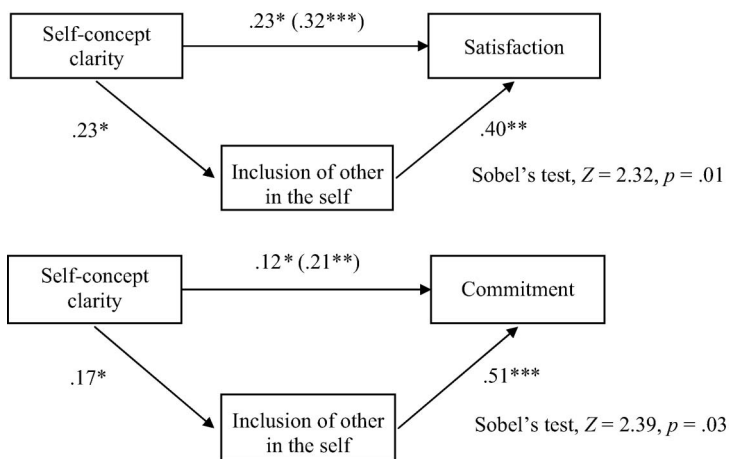
( $\eta_p^2$ ) = .28, indicating that those with high self-concept clarity are more likely to report greater relationship commitment. Relationship commitment was higher for the self-concept clarity condition ( $M = 6.15$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ), than for the self-concept confusion condition ( $M = 5.38$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ).

### **Mediation of Self-concept Clarity's Association with Satisfaction and Commitment**

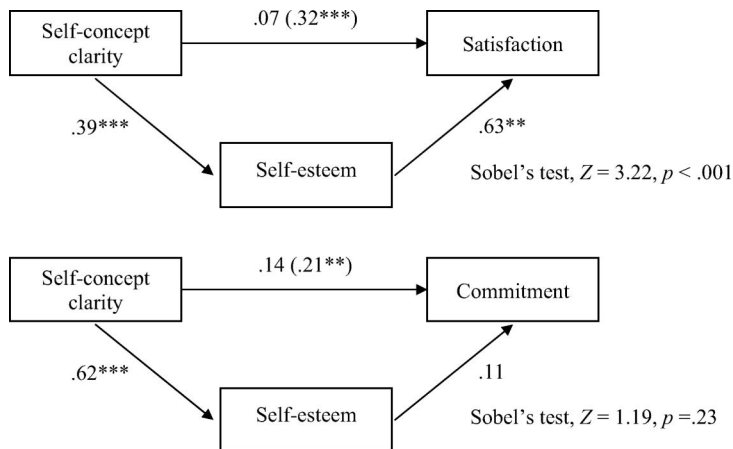
In order to test whether we had met the conditions for mediation as delineated by Baron and Kenny (1986), we conducted a series of three mediation analyses to determine if the relation of experimental condition (self-concept clarity vs. self-concept confusion) to relationship satisfaction and commitment was mediated by inclusion of other in the self and self-esteem. As seen in Table 2, those with high self-concept clarity are more likely to report greater relationship satisfaction and commitment. Further, self-concept clarity was significantly associated with the hypothesized mediators. These steps were consistent through each of the following mediation analyses.

*Inclusion of other in self.* As seen in Figure 3, the beta between inclusion of other in the self and relationship satisfaction was .40,  $t(75) = 3.91$ ,  $p = .00$ ,  $sr^2 = .15$ . The beta for self-concept clarity in this regression was reduced to .23, and remained significant,  $t(75) = 2.22$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $sr^2 = .05$ . This supports the hypothesis that inclusion of other in the self mediates self-concept clarity's effect on relationship satisfaction.

A parallel analysis with commitment revealed that the beta between inclusion of other in the self and relationship commitment was .36,  $t(75) = 3.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $sr^2 = .12$ . The beta for self-concept clarity in this regression was reduced to .20, and was no longer significant,  $t(75) = 1.91$ ,  $p = .06$ ,  $sr^2 = .03$ . This supports the hypothesis



**FIGURE 3** Mediation of self-concept clarity's association with satisfaction and commitment by inclusion of other in the self (Study 2). Reported values are standardized betas. The betas in parentheses represent the direct effects of self-concept clarity on satisfaction (or commitment). The betas not in parentheses represent the association between self-concept clarity and satisfaction (or commitment) controlling for the mediator. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



**FIGURE 4** Mediation of self-concept clarity's association with satisfaction and commitment by self-esteem (Study 2). Reported values are standardized betas. The betas in parentheses represent the direct effects of self-concept clarity on satisfaction (or commitment). The betas not in parentheses represent the association between self-concept clarity and satisfaction (or commitment) controlling for the mediator. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

that inclusion of other in the self mediates self-concept clarity's effect on relationship commitment.

*Self-esteem.* As seen in Figure 4, the beta between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction was .63,  $t(75) = 6.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $sr^2 = .34$ . The beta for self-concept clarity in this regression was reduced to .07, and was no longer significant,  $t(75) = 0.78$ ,  $p = .24$ ,  $sr^2 = .004$ . This supports the hypothesis that self-esteem mediates self-concept clarity's effect on relationship satisfaction.

A parallel analysis with commitment revealed that the beta between self-esteem and relationship commitment was .49,  $t(75) = 4.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $sr^2 = .20$ . The beta for self-concept clarity in this regression was reduced to .09, and was no longer significant,  $t(75) = 0.88$ ,  $p = .38$ ,  $sr^2 = .006$ . This mediation supports the hypothesis that self-esteem mediates self-concept clarity's effect on relationship commitment.

## General Discussion

The purpose of this set of studies was to examine the role of self-concept clarity in relationship satisfaction and commitment through their direct associations, as well as the potential mediating roles of self-esteem and inclusion of other in the self. As hypothesized, in Study 1 self-concept clarity was positively correlated with relationship satisfaction and commitment. In Study 2, those who engaged in a self-concept clarity manipulation subsequently reported higher relationship satisfaction and commitment compared to those in the self-concept confusion condition. Inclusion of other in the self and self-esteem (the only exception was for self-esteem and commitment in Study 1) mediated the association between self-concept clarity and relationship quality measures. Taken together, these findings suggest that a person's self-concept clarity positively influences relationship satisfaction and commitment.

### *Self-concept Clarity, Satisfaction, and Commitment*

Previous research has established that individuals' self-concepts change due to the relationships that they form with close others (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). The present findings suggest that individual differences (Study 1) and manipulated states (Study 2) in self-concept clarity influence relationship satisfaction and commitment. Though not the focus of the study, research has identified a positive correlation between self-concept clarity and dyadic adjustment (Gurung et al., 2001). The present findings replicate those results for relationship satisfaction in a new measure, and extend the results by establishing a positive correlation between self-concept clarity and commitment.

Study 1, however, cannot rule out the possibility that greater relationship satisfaction and commitment promote greater self-concept clarity. Study 2's experimental manipulation of self-concept clarity and its subsequent influence on relationship satisfaction and commitment helped establish the directionality of the association. Self-concept clarity benefits may be due to an added sense of stability in the relationship. Previous research suggested that greater clarity about a partner's self-concept benefits relationships (Gurung et al., 2001). In the present context, greater self-concept clarity should make it easier for one's partner to have greater clarity about the self, resulting in greater stability and relationship quality. For example, individuals with low self-concept clarity, who have uncertainty about their own traits, may be unable to reliably share information about the self with their partner. Inconsistency, particularly in the form of self-disclosure, may inhibit relationship development and lead to lower satisfaction and commitment (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

The present findings also establish that self-concept clarity has a positive influence on relationships. This contrasts with previous research that linked self-concept clarity to perfectionism (Hewitt & Flett, 1993), and perfectionism to less satisfaction (Flett et al., 2001). However, the present findings regarding the benefits of self-concept clarity for romantic relationships extend previous research on the general benefits of self-concept clarity (e.g., Donahue et al., 1993).

### *Mediation of Self-concept Clarity's Association with Satisfaction and Commitment*

In addition to establishing the basic association between self-concept clarity and relationship satisfaction and commitment, we also found support for inclusion of other in the self as a mediator. Both studies supported our hypothesis that higher self-concept clarity was associated with higher inclusion of other in the self. This suggests that a person's ability to clearly describe the self in a consistent and stable fashion may facilitate inclusion of others in the self. The present findings also argue against the possibility that those who have lower self-concept clarity would have higher inclusion of other in the self as a means of counteracting their own uncertainty regarding the self.

Another possibility is that greater self-concept clarity may promote greater inclusion of other in the self because a clear self provides a more stable frame of reference for interacting with and assimilating the external environment. This would allow individuals with greater self-concept clarity to incorporate aspects of the other in the self without subsequent self-confusion or loss of identity. While it was not possible to test this possibility in the present study, future research should explore this possibility in greater detail.

Inclusion of other in the self's role as mediator is not surprising given that it represents how relationship partners' self-concepts relate to one another; an experience that positively correlates with relationship satisfaction and commitment (Agnew et al., 1998). This is also consistent with previous research showing that cognitive closeness based on greater clarity of the partner's self-concept positively correlated with satisfaction and commitment (Steiner-Pappalardo & Gurung, 2002).

We also expected self-esteem to mediate the association between self-concept clarity and relationship satisfaction and commitment. In Study 1 and Study 2, self-esteem fully mediated self-concept clarity's association with relationship satisfaction. The nature of the mediation suggests that self-esteem is a more important influence on relationship satisfaction than self-concept clarity. The evaluative nature of self-esteem may help explain its importance for relationship satisfaction. Self-esteem involves a positive or negative assessment of the self. Similarly, relationship satisfaction involves a positive or negative assessment of the relationship. Some have suggested that an overall positive view of oneself can lead to a positive view of the relationship that should increase satisfaction (Gagne & Lydon, 2004). Those with high self-concept clarity may feel positively about the relationship to the extent they feel positively about the self. These findings extend past research suggesting that self-concept clarity coincides with high self-esteem (Baumgardner, 1990) and that high self-esteem coincides with relationship satisfaction (Hendrick et al., 1988).

Self-esteem's hypothesized mediation of the link between self-concept clarity and commitment was supported in Study 2, but not in Study 1. The different results may be due to differences in the nature of self-esteem (trait vs. state) between the studies. Study 1 measured trait self-esteem using an individual-difference measure that asked participants to generalize from many different experiences. In Study 2, the manipulation was focused on the participant's present state, rather than generalized feelings. This may have increased the salience of the participant's self-esteem, resulting in a greater influence on commitment. In fact, the correlation between self-esteem and commitment in Study 1 was ( $r = .19, p < .01$ ) while in Study 2 it was ( $r = .53, p < .001$ ).

On the other hand, the positive feelings associated with high self-esteem could lead to more commitment as a means of promoting additional positive feelings through the relationship (Stafford, 2003). This seems especially likely following the Study 2 manipulation where participants listed and reflected upon mostly positive traits (all but two of the traits were positive) that were either descriptive or not descriptive of the self (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993). As a result, we cannot rule out the possibility that the procedure may have manipulated self-esteem along with concept clarity. However, the established connection between self-concept clarity and self-esteem suggests the inherent difficulty in clearly distinguishing the two constructs (e.g., Baumgardner, 1990; Campbell, 1990). Future research should focus on self-concept clarity manipulations that are more independent from self-esteem.

### *Strength and Limitations*

The main strength of this set of studies was the novel approach to understanding relationship satisfaction and commitment by incorporating individual differences and manipulated states related to the self-concept. To our knowledge, this is the first set of studies to systematically examine how a person's own self-concept clarity relates to their romantic relationship. In addition, this research helps elucidate

the role of self-concept clarity by examining potential mediators. Although the list of potential mediators is numerous, and we by no means consider our examination exhaustive, our study tests two mediators that come from strong theoretical backgrounds.

A few limitations of the study should also be noted. First, the use of a college sample may not allow the results to generalize to married relationships. In fact, the additional investments (e.g., combined finances, children, etc.) associated with marriage should increase commitment (Rusbult, 1983) and could reduce the influence of self-concept clarity, relative to the findings from the present sample. In addition, early in relationships the self-concept undergoes many changes due to the relationship's novelty (Aron et al., 1991). However, more established married couples may experience fewer reasons for self change, making the stability of the self-concept less important. Second, the present samples were predominantly female. Although there were more females, we did have a sizable amount of males ( $n = 70$  across two studies). Further, this distribution is comparable to previously published work in this area (e.g., Agnew et al., 1998; Campbell et al., 1996). Finally, although fairly common in research on relationship satisfaction and commitment (e.g., Agnew et al., 1998), and in previous research dealing with self-concept clarity (e.g., Campbell et al., 1996), the studies rely on self-report to measure relationship quality, self-esteem, and self-concept clarity (in Study 1). It is possible that participant's provided a biased view of their self-concept and relationship. However, other research suggests that self-report is common in personality work (Jones & Nisbett, 1987) partly because the participant is in a privileged position to know about their own self-concept (Hofstee, 1994).

#### *Future Directions and Implications*

These studies represent an important first step toward understanding the role of self-concept clarity in romantic relationships making it incumbent upon future research to untangle the mechanisms through which self-concept clarity benefits relationships. For example, Study 1's findings suggest the possibility that those with greater self-concept clarity do a better job of selecting relationship partners, and that this skilled selection may lead to greater relationship quality. In both studies, it is also possible that the accuracy of self-concept information may moderate self-concept clarity's benefits such that high self-concept clarity is most helpful when it is accurate. For example, holding a very clear, but unfounded, view of the self would seem to inhibit the quality of one's relationships.

This present set of studies represents the first known link between self-concept clarity and inclusion of other in the self and, based on the present results, bears further examination. For example, inclusion of other in the self is generally considered a positive experience leading to gains in the self (Aron et al., 1992). For those with high self-concept clarity this seems likely. However, for those with low self-concept clarity, the process of inclusion of other in the self may result in taking on too many of the partner's qualities, and ultimately may result in a loss of one's own self.

The positive influence of self-concept clarity on romantic relationships has potential implications for therapeutic contexts. For those experiencing low relationship satisfaction and commitment, therapists could use techniques to help clients improve self-concept clarity perhaps through introspection (Hixon & Swann, 1993), or through an exploration of other sources of self-knowledge (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1995).

### Conclusion

The purpose of these studies was to explore how self-concept clarity influences relationship satisfaction and commitment. Results indicate that greater self-concept clarity coincides with greater relationship satisfaction and commitment. Also, consistent with predictions, these associations were mediated by inclusion of other in the self, and, in the case of relationship satisfaction, self-esteem. These results demonstrate how a person's self-concept clarity plays a role in the quality of their romantic relationship.

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