



## Self-concept clarity: A longitudinal study of Hong Kong adolescents

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### ABSTRACT

This is a longitudinal study of the level and normative stability of self-concept clarity and its possible causal relationship with self-esteem. The participants were Hong Kong Chinese adolescents aged 12–21 years. Self-concept clarity was found to be a fairly stable construct over a period of one year. As expected, self-concept clarity associated positively and moderately with self-esteem. Both directions of causal flow gained support but that from self-esteem to self-concept clarity was found to be the stronger.

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary views of conceptions of the self have drawn a distinction between two components: content and structure (Campbell et al., 1996). The former refers to an individual's conceptions of who or what he or she is (the knowledge sub-component, often termed domain-specific self-concepts) and feelings towards oneself (the evaluative sub-component, often termed self-esteem) whereas the structural component refers to the organization and hierarchical ordering of the domain-specific self-beliefs and/or self-views. Over the past two decades, extensive research has focused on the content of the self but insufficient attention has been paid to the structural aspect of the self (Campbell, Assanand, & DiPaula, 2003).

### 1.1. Research on self-concept clarity

The structure of the self generally refers to how the contents of the self are organized. Research on structure has been scattered and most findings are only loosely linked (Bigler, Neimayer, & Brown, 2001; Campbell et al., 2003; Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002; Steffgen, DaSilva, & Recchia, 2007). There are several notions, however, that appear to be basic to an understanding of self-structure. These include the ideas of pluralism, unity, differentiation and integration (see Campbell et al., 2003 for further discussion). Underlying these various structures is the notion of self-concept clarity: "the extent to which the contents of an individual's self-concept are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent

and temporally stable" (Campbell et al., 1996, p. 141). That is, the degree to which a person is aware of the content differentiation, integration, pluralism and integration of their self-concept. Anchored to this conceptualization, Campbell et al. (1996) constructed a self-reporting measure known as the Self-Concept Clarity Scale. Previous studies using this scale showed that scores were internally consistent and reliable over time (computed by test-retest reliability). Evidence was also found to support its convergent and divergent validity. The scale also predicted psychological well-being and adjustment (Bigler et al., 2001; Campbell et al., 2003; Nezlek & Plesko, 2001; Steffgen et al., 2007). Using the same conceptualization and operationalization, the scale has been translated into other languages including German (Stucke & Sporer, 2002), Korean (Kim, 1998) and Japanese (Campbell et al., 1996). Psychometric properties of these versions of the scale were found to be promising.

Recent studies have shown that, beyond domain-specific self-concepts and global self-esteem, self-concept clarity has made a unique contribution in predicting psychological well-being and adjustment (Campbell et al., 2003; Steffgen et al., 2007). From a developmental perspective, due to cognitive maturation and increasing social interaction, an increase in levels of self-concept clarity with age could be expected. However, to be qualified as a trait that could be applied in future research, this construct needs to be fairly stable over time and across situations. Unfortunately, due to the cross-sectional nature of previous studies and a clustering of respondents' age ranges in the late adolescence to early adulthood period (particularly the college samples), this assertion could not be thoroughly examined (Campbell et al., 1996; Matto & Realo, 2001). Adolescence, as a critical period of transition from childhood to adulthood, involves events such as moving to a new

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school, making new friends, and detaching from parents which are likely to impact on one's concept of the self. As such, changes in many aspects of the self including self-structure could be expected during this period. It is necessary to collect more data on self-concept clarity spanning the whole period of adolescence so that developmental changes in self-concept clarity can be more adequately examined.

### 1.2. Self-concept clarity and self-esteem

Extensive research has also explored the nomological network of the clarity construct. In particular, the relationships between the latter and constructs such as self-esteem, the Big-Five, self-consciousness, mood, and coping strategies (Campbell et al., 1996; Matto & Realo, 2001; Nezlek & Plesko, 2001; Smith, Wethington, & Zhan, 1996; Steffgen et al., 2007). The interplay between the content and structural components of the self in self-formulation could lead to an observable association between self-concept clarity and self-esteem. Thus, examining this relationship might advance our understanding of self-formulation.

There has been much support for the claim that higher self-concept clarity goes with higher self-esteem (Campbell et al., 2003; Fickova, 1999; Nezlek & Plesko, 2001). There are at least two ways of examining this relationship. The first focuses primarily on the construct validity of self-concept clarity and its nomological networks. Here, self-concept clarity and self-esteem are considered conceptually distinguishable constructs with the former being more cognitive than affective in nature. Positive and moderate to strong correlations between measures of self-concept clarity and self-esteem have been reported (Campbell et al., 1996; Matto & Realo, 2001). The second line of research aims at clarifying the role of self-concept clarity in psychological well-being. A more articulated self is hypothesized to be associated with a higher sense of self-worth (an indicator of adaptive psychological adjustment). This hypothesis has been empirically supported in several studies (Bigler et al., 2001; Campbell et al., 2003).

Both lines of research converge to suggest a positive relation between self-concept clarity and self-esteem. This suggests that people with a more articulated self were those who had a higher self-regard. But how and why do people formulate the self in this manner? This question cannot be adequately answered by cross-sectional data that were typical in previous studies of this construct. In addition, small sample sizes in previous studies might further limit the generalizability of findings.

It is also noted that this relation has been demonstrated to vary across cultures and by age. In cross-cultural comparisons by Campbell et al. (1996) and by Kim (1998), the correlations between self-concept clarity and self-esteem were smaller for Korean and Japanese (Eastern cultures) than Canadian samples. Campbell et al. (1996) attributed these differences to the independent self-construal which is more normative in Western cultures; thus a more pronounced association between self-concept clarity and self-esteem among Canadians was not unexpected.

By comparing respondents from different age groups, it seems that people may develop a stronger association between self-concept clarity and self-esteem over time (Bigler et al., 2001; Campbell et al., 1996; Kim, 1998). The causal direction, however, remains unclear. Baumgardner (1990) showed that manipulating self-certainty (conceptually close to self-clarity) increased temporary feelings of self-regard. Yet, Nezlek and Plesko (2001) found that daily events could lead to changes in mood and self-esteem, which in turn could lead to changes in self-concept clarity. Such contradictory findings provide support for the more cautious view of Campbell and Lavallee (1993) that the causal relationships between these constructs are reciprocal and systemic. Low self-esteem individuals tend to accept indiscriminately both positive

and negative self-relevant environmental cues to protect the self from embarrassing and humiliating experiences, which in turn further limits the development of a more positive and clear self-view.

### 1.3. Stability of self-concept clarity

So far, only test-retest correlations (a measure of rank-order consistency) have been reported to evaluate the normative stability of self-concept clarity over time (and these over a few months only). Campbell et al. (1996) reported values of .83, .79, and .70 for the test-retest stability coefficients of the Self-Concept Clarity Scale over periods of 3-, 4-, and 5-month intervals, respectively, based on undergraduate samples. A similar level of temporal stability was also reported by Matto and Realo (2001) with a heterogeneous sample composing participants aged from 14 to 80 years. Compared with the values typically found for personality traits in general (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000) and self-esteem in particular (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003), where values of the stability coefficients generally ranged from .50 to .70 over a period of 1-year interval, the levels of temporal stability for this construct can be considered to be high. Aside from the examination of rank-order consistency as evidence of the trait-like character of self-concept clarity, data on its level stability (mean-level changes) over time were generally omitted in published studies. As such, the developmental change of this construct over time remains unclear from the extant literature.

### 1.4. Aims of the study

Research into self-concept clarity is still sparse. Most such studies were done in Western cultures, using small samples of college students at one point in time. To enrich our knowledge of this construct, it is necessary to extend the scope of previous research. In this study, we incorporated both measures of self-content and self-structure, collecting a large sample of data spanning different periods of adolescence and traced their responses over a fairly long period of time. Specifically, the study aimed at examining in a non-Western context the stability of self-concept clarity over time and its causal connections with self-esteem.

## 2. Method

This was a two-wave panel study over a period of one year. The participants were 1150 Form 1 to Form 6 students from two Hong Kong secondary schools at Time 1 of measurement and they entered the next grade at Time 2 of measurement. Of these, 577 were boys and 536 were girls (37 did not indicate their gender). Their ages ranged from 11 to 21, with a median age of 15 years ( $SD = 1.70$  years). Some new immigrants from mainland China entering school with ages higher than the norm contributed to such a wider age range. The responses of 824 students could be matched across waves. This set of longitudinal data comprised 424 boys and 386 girls (14 did not indicate their gender). Participants were asked to complete at both time points several instruments administered by class teachers during their regular class periods. The items were written in Chinese (after necessary translation and back-translation) and were in self-reporting format with specific instructions for each part. They were told that the data would be used solely for research purposes and would be treated confidentially.

The Chinese version of Campbell's Self-Concept Clarity Scale (CSCCS) used in this study was a 20-item self-report instrument using 7-point Likert scales anchored by "strongly disagree" (1) and "strongly agree" (7) and higher scores indicated higher clarity. It was developed after considerable pilot work, and the procedures

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