



Understanding the relationship between self-esteem and self-clarity: The role of desired self-esteem



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HIGHLIGHTS

- People's desired self-esteem (SE) often differs from their actual SE.
- When actual SE and desired SE are incongruent, self-clarity is reduced.
- High SE is often desired, so low SE is associated with larger discrepancies.
- Discrepancies help explain relationship between SE and clarity.

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ABSTRACT

In this research, we examined a novel predictor of clarity in one's self-conceptions: discrepancies between actual and desired levels of self-esteem. Because people tend to desire high self-esteem, such discrepancies are generally larger among individuals low in self-esteem. Among college students (Study 1) and in a more diverse sample (Study 2), we found that the relationship between actual self-esteem and self-clarity was stronger among participants who had high levels of desired self-esteem. Further supporting the causal role of actual-desired self-esteem discrepancies in predicting self-clarity, Study 3 found that a manipulation designed to make high self-esteem seem less desirable reduced the relationship between self-esteem and clarity. These results demonstrate the importance of considering not only people's actual levels of self-esteem, but also their desired levels. Implications for the possible origins and consequences of self-clarity are discussed.

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Introduction

People's self-views are important determinants of how they think, feel, and behave (Swann, Chang-Schneider, & McClarty, 2007). However, there is more to a person's sense of self than the content of their self-concept and self-evaluation, including the organization (McConnell, 2011; Showers, 1992), stability (Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993), and clarity (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996) of self-conceptions. In the present investigation, we explore one of these dimensions – self-clarity, or the perception that one has a clear and coherent sense of self (Campbell et al., 1996) – and its relationship with self-esteem. We posit that the relationship between self-esteem and self-clarity can be influenced by the extent to which people *desire* a level of self-esteem that differs from their actual self-esteem. Because most people desire high self-esteem, we predict that people low in self-esteem will generally have greater incongruity, and consequently, less clarity.

Explanations for the self-esteem–clarity relationship

Self-esteem is strongly related to self-clarity, with people higher in self-esteem reporting more clear self-views (Campbell et al., 1996; Wu, Watkins, & Hattie, 2010). The most common measure of self-clarity, the self-concept clarity scale (Campbell et al., 1996), is in turn associated with a variety of important consequences, including reduced symptoms of depression and eating disorders (Bigler, Neimeyer, & Brown, 2001; Butzer & Kuiper, 2006; Vartanian, 2009); better educational consequences (Thomas & Gadbois, 2007); and a reduced likelihood of responding to an ego threat with anger and aggression (Stucke & Sporer, 2002). Because of these meaningful consequences, it is important to understand the antecedents of self-clarity.

Campbell (1990) (see also Campbell et al., 1996) discussed two possible reasons why people high in self-esteem generally have higher clarity than people low in self-esteem. First, because people are motivated to seek both positive information about themselves and information that is consistent with their preexisting self-concepts (Sedikides, 1993; Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987), people low in self-esteem will likely seek both positive (i.e., reflecting an enhancement bias) and negative (i.e., reflecting a bias to be consistent

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with their low self-esteem) self-relevant information. This results in an unclear, evaluatively incongruent self-concept. Second, the opposite causal path might hold – low clarity could render people more open to potential negative self-relevant information, decreasing their overall level of self-esteem. Although support for both causal paths has been obtained, we focus on self-esteem as a predictor of self-clarity (see also Wu et al., 2010).

Attitude strength and self-clarity

Our explanation for the relationship between self-esteem and self-clarity is grounded in research on attitude strength (i.e., the extent to which an attitude is durable and impactful; Petty & Krosnick, 1995). A number of variables predict the strength of an attitude, including the degree to which it is held with certainty (Tormala & Rucker, 2007) or ambivalence (Conner & Armitage, 2008). Research on attitudes is relevant to the self because self-esteem is generally defined as an attitude toward the self (Rosenberg, 1965).

Research examining variables such as certainty, accessibility, and ambivalence, which are known to predict attitude strength outcomes, has found that these variables similarly predict the strength of self-views and self-esteem (e.g., DeMarree, Morrison, Wheeler, & Petty, 2011; Swann & Ely, 1984, for a review, see DeMarree, Petty, & Briñol, 2007). Self-clarity overlaps heavily with these variables (DeMarree & Morrison, 2012). Indeed, many of the items on the self-concept clarity scale (SCC; Campbell et al., 1996) seem to assess *subjective ambivalence*, or the experience of conflict regarding an attitude object (e.g., “My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another”).

Based on attitude research, we examine a yet-untested predictor of self-clarity – discrepancies between actual and desired attitudes toward the self (i.e., actual–desired self-esteem discrepancies). In so doing, we can gain more insight not only into the origins of self-concept clarity, but also into why self-esteem level is associated with self-clarity.

Actual–desired (self-) attitude discrepancies

Much like people have behavioral or outcome goals (e.g., to exercise more or to get into medical school; Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986), they also have attitudinal goals (DeMarree, Wheeler, Briñol, & Petty, 2013; Maio & Thomas, 2007). That is, people often *want* to have an attitude that differs from the one they currently possess (e.g., they want to like chocolate cake less or their political party’s nominee more than they currently do), and they will engage in a number of strategies directed toward obtaining the desired attitude (Maio & Thomas, 2007). Critical to the present investigation, as with possessing other forms of conflicting beliefs, people who hold discrepant actual and desired attitudes can experience conflict in their evaluative responses. In many ways, this mechanism is similar to others noted in previous research. With an objectively ambivalent attitude (i.e., possessing both positive and negative associations), for example, one’s positive and negative evaluations have opposing implications for action. According to recent perspectives on ambivalence (e.g., van Harreveld, van der Pligt, & de Liver, 2009), which note that people experience the greatest conflict in their evaluations when their attitudes are objectively ambivalent and action is required, these opposing behavioral implications of positive and negative evaluations are what lead to the experience of conflict. For example, although positive feelings about an attitude object (e.g., cheesecake) might increase one’s likelihood of approaching the object (e.g., eating the cheesecake), negative feelings about the attitude object might increase one’s likelihood of avoiding the object (e.g., rejecting the cheesecake), leading to confusion, conflict, and indecision. Just as separate positive and negative evaluations present in ambivalent attitudes lead to different implications for behavior and thought (van Harreveld et al., 2009), so too might different actual and desired evaluations. These opposing pulls lead to greater feelings of conflict. Consequently, when people’s actual and desired

attitudes differ in valence, they tend to experience greater conflict than when the valences are similar. Stated differently, as the magnitude of actual–desired attitude discrepancies increases, so too do feelings of conflict about the attitude (i.e., subjective ambivalence; DeMarree et al., 2013).

However, unlike topics on which some people might want to be more positive and some people might want to be more negative (e.g., gun control), with self-esteem there appears to be a strong preference for a positive self-evaluation, at least in Western cultures (e.g., Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). Thus, the lower one’s level of self-esteem, the larger the discrepancy between one’s actual and desired self-esteem is likely to be, and the lower one’s self-clarity will be.

The present research

One way to test whether actual–desired self-esteem discrepancies predict self-clarity is by examining the interaction between actual and desired self-attitudes (i.e., self-esteem). In Study 1 and Study 2, we examined actual and desired self-esteem as interacting predictors of self-clarity in a large student sample (Study 1) and a large international sample (Study 2). In Study 3 we experimentally manipulated whether high or low self-esteem was desired, in order to examine the causal impact of actual–desired self-esteem discrepancies on self-clarity. Our prediction was that the positive relationship between actual self-esteem and self-clarity would be strongest among those who desired high self-esteem.

Study 1

Method

Participants

Six hundred and eight university students (249 men, 359 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.72$, $SD = 2.85$) completed an online mass testing session. Not all participants completed all measures, so the degrees of freedom reported below reflect this. Because these measures were included in a mass testing session with limited space, brief versions of the measures were used.

Procedure and materials

Self-esteem. Participants first completed a single-item measure of self-esteem: “Using the scale below, please indicate the extent to which you like yourself” (1 = *dislike strongly*, 7 = *like strongly*). Scales like this have been used in previous research to measure self-esteem (DeMarree, Petty, & Strunk, 2010; Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001).¹

Actual & desired self-esteem. Prior to the actual and desired self-esteem measures, participants received the following prompt:

Sometimes the opinions people ACTUALLY have are different from the opinions people would LIKE TO have and sometimes these are the same. On the following scales, we’d like you to indicate the extent to which you ACTUALLY like yourself, the extent to which you IDEALLY would like yourself, and the extent to which you feel you SHOULD or OUGHT TO like yourself.

Participants then reported, on three separate scales, their actual, ideal, and ought self-esteem using the same scale as was used for the aforementioned self-esteem measure. We averaged ideal and ought self-esteem to form an index of desired self-esteem ($r = .53$) for the

¹ Validating the use of this measure, in a separate sample of 157 university students, we found this measure to be correlated with the RSE at $r = .69$, and with the Robins et al. (2001) measure at $r = .59$, $ps < .001$. Using this measure in place of the actual self-esteem measure produced the same results.

primary analyses reported below (see also DeMarree et al., 2013).² As expected, on average, people desired a higher level of self-esteem than they actually had ($M_{\text{actual}} = 5.77$, $SD = 1.37$; $M_{\text{desired}} = 6.62$, $SD = .74$, paired $t(599) = 16.34$, $p < .001$).

Baumeister, Tice, and Hutton (1989) note that “low” self-esteem individuals in most published research are only low *relative* to people high in self-esteem. In terms of the range of possible scores, low self-esteem people often score above the theoretical midpoint of the scale. Consequently, low self-esteem is both lower and less extreme than high self-esteem in most samples. This is important because the *extremity* of an attitude is correlated with variables that predict attitude strength, including ambivalence, certainty, and importance (e.g., Bassili, 1996). To control for the impact of extremity on self-clarity, we computed self-esteem extremity by squaring the deviation of scores on the single-item actual self-esteem measure from the midpoint (i.e., 4) of the scale (i.e., a quadratic effect of actual self-esteem).

Self-clarity. We included two measures of clarity to capture the clarity of both the self-concept and self-evaluation. The first consisted of the five highest loading scale items reported in the development of Campbell's self-concept clarity scale (SCC; Campbell et al., 1996). Participants indicated their agreement with various statements (e.g., “My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another”, 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Participants' responses were recoded and averaged to form a composite ($\alpha = .88$).

The second self-clarity measure was subjective ambivalence, or the extent to which a person subjectively experiences evaluative conflict toward the self. This measure consisted of two items: “How conflicted would you say you are in your opinion of yourself?” and “How indecisive would you say you are about whether or not you like yourself?” (1 = *not at all*, 6 = *extremely*; $r = .57$, $p < .001$).

Because SCC and subjective ambivalence revealed identical results, were strongly correlated ($r = -.54$, $p < .001$), and loaded onto a single factor in an exploratory factor analysis, we standardized each measure, and reverse-coded subjective ambivalence, to create a clarity composite. Thus, we created aggregate measure of clarity from a measure of self-evaluative ambivalence and the self-concept clarity scale. Although it can be important to acknowledge potential differences between measures of “strength” (Krosnick & Petty, 1995), aggregation is justified when there is conceptual and empirical rationale for doing so, such as the single-factor structure and identical pattern of results we observed across our studies (Krosnick & Petty, 1995; for further discussion of issues relating to the measurement of “self-strength” variables, see DeMarree & Morrison, 2012; DeMarree et al., 2007).

Objective ambivalence. In addition to the *experience* of ambivalence (i.e., subjective ambivalence), we measured people's objective acknowledgement of simultaneous positive and negative reactions toward the self (i.e., objective ambivalence) by asking people to report, on separate scales, the extent to which they felt positively and negatively toward themselves (Kaplan, 1972; Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995). Items were answered on 6-point scales ranging from *not at all negative* to *extremely negative* and *not at all positive* to *extremely positive* (see also Gramzow, Sedikides, Panter, & Insko, 2000). A single-item ambivalence index was computed using the formula recommended by Thompson et al. (1995), although other formulae produced parallel results.

² Examining each type of desired self-esteem separately did not change the results reported. Specifically, in the primary analyses without covariates, replacing desired self-esteem with either ideal self-esteem ($b = .097$, $se = .020$), $t(595) = 4.90$, $p < .001$, or ought self-esteem ($b = .092$, $se = .020$), $t(593) = 4.51$, $p < .001$, produced the same interaction observed in the analyses reported. When entered simultaneously, ideal self-esteem significantly interacted with actual self-esteem ($b = .068$, $se = .025$), $t(588) = 2.69$, $p < .01$, whereas the interaction involving ought self-esteem was marginal ($b = .048$, $se = .026$), $t(588) = 1.83$, $p = .07$.

This measure is important for multiple reasons. First, objective ambivalence is a consistent predictor of subjective ambivalence (our measure of self-evaluative clarity in this study). Second, because low self-esteem people could seek both positive (enhancing) and negative (consistent) self-information (Campbell et al., 1996), low self-esteem individuals should have higher objective ambivalence than high self-esteem individuals. Thus controlling for objective ambivalence allows us to test the interactive roles of desired self-esteem and actual self-esteem in predicting self-clarity, independent of these influences.

Results

For descriptive statistics and correlations between measures, see Table 1.

We predicted that the relationship between actual self-esteem and self-clarity would be stronger to the extent that desired self-esteem was high. Analyses for this study were conducted using regression. All predictors, except for self-esteem extremity, were mean centered. We first entered our primary predictors, actual self-esteem, desired self-esteem, and their interaction. Then, in a subsequent step, we added the control variables, objective ambivalence and self-esteem extremity. Although it is typical to add covariates in the first step of an analysis, we added them last to address potential concerns with collinearity among highly correlated predictors. However, the variance inflation factor (VIF) values in these analyses (see Tables 2, 4, and 6) combined with nearly identical results in analyses that include and exclude the covariates suggest that multicollinearity was not a problem. Graphs in this and all subsequent studies are based on the model without covariates.

In addition to a main effect of actual self-esteem ($b = .37$, $se = .024$), $t(596) = 15.05$, $p < .001$, the predicted Actual Self-esteem \times Desired Self-esteem interaction emerged ($b = .12$, $se = .022$), $t(596) = 5.23$, $p < .001$ (see Table 2). As seen in Fig. 1, the relationship between actual self-esteem and self-clarity increased in strength as desired self-esteem increased. Indeed, when we probed this interaction using the Johnson–Neyman technique (see Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006), which tests regions of significance instead of selecting a particular point above or below the sample mean (e.g., $\pm 1 SD$), the linear effect of actual-self-esteem on clarity was significant ($p < .05$) at levels of desired self-esteem above 4.64 (in standardized units, this corresponds to $z = -2.68$). Furthermore, this effect remained after controlling for two other predictors of clarity, objective ambivalence and actual self-esteem extremity (see Table 2, bottom panel).³

Discussion

This study demonstrated a novel predictor of self-clarity: the extent to which people's actual levels of self-esteem are discrepant from their desired levels of self-esteem. People with lower levels of desired self-esteem did not show the typical relationship between (actual) self-esteem and self-clarity. Further, these relationships held after controlling for other predictors of self-clarity.

In addition, these data lend only moderate support to the claim that competing enhancement and consistency motives lead low self-esteem individuals to acquire evaluatively incongruent self-information (Campbell et al., 1996). If this were the case, we would observe a strong relationship between self-esteem level and objective ambivalence, which measures evaluative incongruence in self-esteem. However, the correlation between self-esteem and objective ambivalence is relatively modest in magnitude, and including it in the primary analyses does not eliminate the interaction between actual and desired self-esteem.

³ In both correlational studies, creating an index of actual–desired self-esteem discrepancies (i.e., absolute value of the discrepancy between actual and desired measures of self-esteem) revealed parallel results. That is, as actual–desired self-esteem discrepancies increased, clarity decreased (see also DeMarree et al., 2013).

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations between Study 1 measures.

		Descriptives		Correlations											
		M	SD	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
A	Self-esteem	6.01	1.24												
B	Actual SE	5.77	1.37	.81											
C	Ideal SE	6.59	.85	.37	.40										
D	Ought SE	6.64	.84	.25	.30	.53									
E	Desired SE	6.62	.74	.35	.40	.88	.88								
F	SA	2.61	1.30	-.35	.45	-.14	-.13	-.15							
G	SCC	4.53	1.65	.39	.46	.15	.09	.14	-.54						
H	Clarity	.00	.88	.42	.52	.17	.13	.17	-.88	.88					
I	Extremity	5.00	3.17	.49	.64	.25	.18	.24	-.41	.45	.49				
J	OA	1.66	1.74	-.22	-.26	-.12	-.08	-.12	.42	-.37	-.45	-.35			
K	Ideal disc	.97	1.19	-.62	-.82	-.13	-.14	-.15	.42	-.43	-.49	-.53	.23		
L	Ought disc	1.06	1.24	-.65	-.83	-.21	-.17	-.22	.43	-.45	-.50	-.52	.21	.82	
M	Desired disc	.99	1.16	-.66	-.86	-.16	-.13	-.16	.43	-.45	-.50	-.53	.23	.95	.95

Ns = 597–602, all $ps < .05$.

Self-esteem measures used 7-point scales. Extremity is the squared deviation of actual self-esteem from the scale midpoint. SA = subjective ambivalence, SCC = self-concept clarity scale (Campbell et al., 1996), clarity = composite of SA and SCC, OA = objective ambivalence. Disc measures are absolute deviation of actual and desired self-esteem items.

Table 2
Regression models predicting self-clarity (composite), Study 1.

	b	se	β	t	p	VIF
Step 1						
Intercept	-.046	.031		1.479	.140	
Actual	.369	.024	.575	15.051	.000	1.243
Desired	.075	.051	.063	1.478	.140	1.567
Actual \times desired	.117	.022	.222	5.229	.000	1.540
Step 2						
Intercept	-.173	.067		2.580	.010	
Actual	.269	.031	.420	8.800	.000	2.283
Desired	.039	.048	.033	.807	.420	1.632
Actual \times desired	.087	.023	.166	3.840	.000	1.861
OA	-.159	.017	-.314	9.289	.000	1.146
Extremity	.028	.013	.100	2.152	.032	2.161

N = 599.

Study 2

In Study 2, we sought to extend the results of Study 1 by examining these effects in a more diverse sample.

Method

Participants

One hundred and seventy-eight people (95 men, 83 women, $M_{age} = 31.15$, $SD = 11.45$) were recruited using Mechanical Turk and were paid \$.15 for participating in a brief survey. Participants came from 24 countries in addition to the United States (e.g., India, Italy, Philippines, Turkey). One participant did not complete all measures, and the degrees of freedom in the analyses reported below reflect this.

Procedure

Participants completed measures of actual and desired self-esteem, self-concept clarity, and objective ambivalence.⁴

Materials

Actual & desired self-esteem. Participants completed a measure that was very similar to the one used in Study 1. Instead of reporting ideal and ought self-esteem separately, participants reported a single-item measure

⁴ This study included a draft version of the “desired self-esteem” manipulation included in Study 3. However, in this study, the manipulation produced no effects. Because the procedure was similar to Study 3, the RSE was also included before the manipulation. Using RSE in place of the actual self-esteem measure produced the same results.

of their desired self-esteem. Specifically, after a prompt explaining the difference between actual and desired attitudes, participants then answered two questions (What is the ACTUAL opinion you have of yourself?, What opinion of yourself would you LIKE TO have?) on 9-point scales ranging from 1 = *Dislike extremely* to 9 = *Like extremely*. As expected, on average, people desired a higher level of self-esteem than they actually had ($M_{actual} = 6.61$, $SD = 1.69$; $M_{desired} = 7.61$, $SD = 1.24$, paired $t(177) = 7.75$, $p < .001$).

Self-clarity. Participants completed the full (12-item) SCC scale ($\alpha = .90$) as well as a measure of subjective ambivalence. The subjective ambivalence items were slightly different from Study 1. Specifically, participants were asked, “To what extent do you feel conflicted in your evaluation of yourself?”, “To what extent are your thoughts and feelings toward yourself one-sided versus mixed?” and “To what extent is your reaction toward yourself confused?”. Participants responded on 9-point scales ($\alpha = .78$). As in Study 1, because both SCC and subjective ambivalence revealed parallel results, and because they were strongly correlated ($r(178) = -.70$, $p < .001$) and loaded onto a single factor in an exploratory factor analysis, we standardized each measure, and reverse coded subjective ambivalence, to create a composite measure of clarity.

Objective ambivalence. We included the measure of objective ambivalence described in Study 1, except that each item was assessed using a 9-point rather than a 6-point scale.

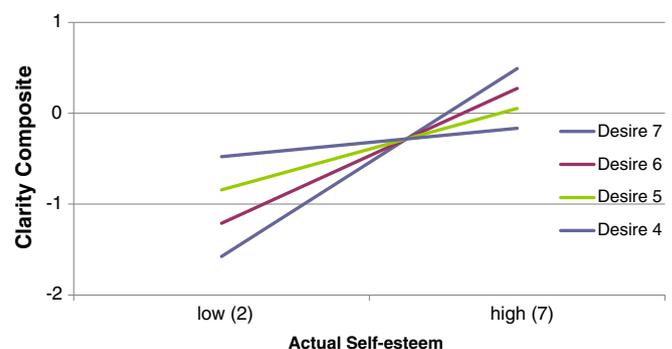


Fig. 1. Self-clarity as a function of actual and desired self-esteem (Study 1). Plotted at the scale points indicated. Plotted at values selected by at least 10 participants. Note: $M_{actual} = 5.77$; $M_{desired} = 6.62$.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics and correlations between Study 2 measures.

		Descriptives		Correlations									
		M	SD	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
A	RSE	41.99	9.17										
B	Actual SE	6.61	1.69	.65									
C	Desired SE	7.61	1.69	.32	.33								
D	SA	4.71	1.77	-.49	-.27	-.26							
E	SCC	4.19	1.20	.66	.45	.15	-.70						
F	Clarity	.00	.92	.62	.39	.22	-.92	.92					
G	Extremity	5.43	4.30	.42	.65	.35	-.27	.38	.36				
H	OA	2.84	2.73	-.34	-.26	-.25	.48	-.45	-.50	-.41			
I	Desired disc	1.40	1.43	-.48	-.70	.07	.20	-.40	-.33	-.26	.11		
J	Individualism	68.86	26.62	.06	-.12	.17	-.04	.00	.02	.00	.04	.21	
K	Unc. avoid	47.36	14.92	.08	-.03	-.07	-.07	.09	.08	-.12	-.07	-.06	-.28

Ns = 177–178, all $ps < .05$ except those in italics.

Actual & desired self-esteem measures used 9-point scales. Extremity is the squared deviation of actual self-esteem from the scale midpoint. SA = subjective ambivalence, SCC = self-concept clarity scale (Campbell et al., 1996), clarity = composite of SA and SCC, OA = objective ambivalence, Unc. avoid = Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance dimension. Disc measure is absolute deviation of actual and desired self-esteem items.

Results and discussion

For descriptive statistics and correlations between measures, see Table 3. Analyses for this study paralleled those in Study 1.

We predicted that the relationship between actual self-esteem and self-concept clarity would be strongest among participants who had high desired self-esteem. In addition to main effects of actual self-esteem ($b = .19$, $se = .039$), $t(174) = 4.97$, $p < .001$, and desired self-esteem ($b = .12$, $se = .055$), $t(174) = 2.22$, $p < .05$, the predicted Actual Self-esteem \times Desired Self-esteem interaction emerged ($b = .095$, $se = .028$), $t(596) = 3.41$, $p < .001$ (see Table 4). As depicted in Fig. 2, the relationship between actual self-esteem and self-clarity increased in strength as desired self-esteem increased. Indeed, using the Johnson–Neyman technique, the linear effect of actual-self-esteem on clarity was significant at levels of desired self-esteem above 6.69 (in standardized units, this corresponds to $z = -.55$). Furthermore, this effect remained after controlling for objective ambivalence and actual self-esteem extremity (see Table 4, bottom panel).⁵

Thus, we replicated the effects of Study 1 using a more diverse sample. As desired self-esteem increased, the relationship between actual self-esteem and self-clarity increased. Critically, at lower levels of desired self-esteem (i.e., below 6.69 on our 9-point scale) this relationship was eliminated.

Study 3

One critical limitation to this work so far has been the reliance on correlational methods. In this study, we experimentally manipulated desired self-esteem by giving participants feedback suggesting that either high or low self-esteem was desirable. We expected a strong relationship between self-esteem level and clarity among people told that high self-esteem was desirable (congruent with prevailing cultural

norms). However, we expected that this relationship should be weakened among people told that low self-esteem was desirable.

Method

Participants

Sixty-five Texas Tech University students participated in this study for partial course credit. One participant did not complete all of the measures, so the effective sample size was 64 (19 male, 45 female, $M_{age} = 19.27$, $SD = 1.78$). Participants were recruited from a group of students who completed an online mass testing session.⁶ Included in this mass survey was the single-item measure of self-esteem described in Study 1. To examine participants with both truly low and truly high self-esteem, we invited all participants who scored at or below the midpoint of the scale and an equal number of participants randomly selected from the upper half of the distribution to participate in a brief online study.

Procedure and materials

Self-esteem. Participants first completed the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale (RSE), a global measure of self-esteem. Participants indicated their agreement with various statements (e.g., I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on equal basis with others; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). Responses were recoded, as appropriate, and added to form a composite ($\alpha = .93$).

Desired self-esteem feedback. Immediately after completing the RSE, participants received feedback indicating that high or low self-esteem was more desirable. This feedback was loosely based on current psychological research. For example, the feedback designed to make low self-esteem more desirable was as follows:

Thank you for completing the Rosenberg self-esteem scale.

Recent research indicates that having high self-esteem is often a *bad* thing.

- In particular, people with high self-esteem are prone to narcissistic tendencies.
- High self-esteem can be destructive for social relationships because people with high self-esteem are seen as less likeable and harder to get along with than people with low self-esteem.
- In addition, people with high self-esteem tend to have overly positive self-views, which makes them especially disappointed when they experience failures.

⁵ Because we used an international sample, we conducted exploratory analyses examining the effects across cultures. We coded each participant's country of origin on two dimensions, individualism–collectivism and uncertainty avoidance (0–100 scaling), using Hofstede's ratings (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Individualism–collectivism was selected because self-esteem and self-clarity are more highly valued among individualists, who define themselves as separate from others (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002), and uncertainty avoidance was selected because people high in this trait might be more uncomfortable with actual–desired self-esteem discrepancies (cf., Newby-Clark, McGregor, & Zanna, 2002). We conducted the primary analyses with the addition of individualism–collectivism and uncertainty orientation and their interactions with actual and desired self-esteem and the two 3-way interactions. The critical interaction was replicated ($p = .001$), and the only new effect to emerge was a marginal main effect of uncertainty orientation on clarity ($b = .008$, $se = .004$), $t(172) = 1.75$, $p = .08$. The three-way interactions were not significant ($ps > .41$). Although this sample is limited in its size and diversity and culture is measured at a country rather than an individual level, these findings indicate that it is worth exploring whether the effects of desired self-esteem might transcend cultural boundaries.

⁶ Analyses of the mass testing responses replicated those reported in Study 1.

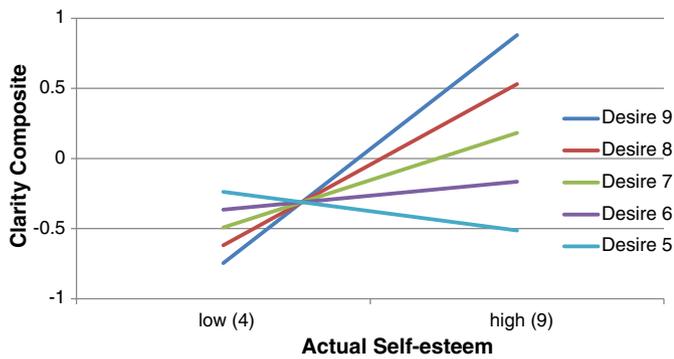


Fig. 2. Self-clarity as a function of actual and desired self-esteem (Study 2). Plotted at the scale points indicated. Plotted at values selected by at least 10 participants. Note: $M_{\text{actual}} = 6.61$; $M_{\text{desired}} = 7.61$.

Table 4
Regression models predicting self-clarity (composite), Study 2.

	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	VIF
Step 1						
Intercept	-.066	.065		1.016	.311	
Actual	.193	.039	.355	4.969	<.001	1.125
Desired	.121	.055	.163	2.215	.028	1.200
Actual \times desired	.095	.028	.238	3.405	.001	1.076
Step 2						
Intercept	-.021	.115		.185	.853	
Actual	.158	.044	.290	3.558	<.001	1.791
Desired	.059	.051	.079	1.139	.256	1.285
Actual \times desired	.078	.026	.195	3.050	.003	1.099
OA	-.140	.023	-.414	6.128	<.001	1.227
Extremity	-.006	.019	-.028	.325	.746	2.005

N = 177.

Comparable feedback was given indicating that high self-esteem was good (e.g., people high in self-esteem are happier, less likely to experience depression).

Actual & desired self-esteem. Participants then completed the measures of actual and desired self-esteem described in Study 2. People, on average, desired a higher level of self-esteem than they actually had ($M_{\text{actual}} = 6.02$, $SD = 1.85$; $M_{\text{desired}} = 8.03$, $SD = .94$, paired $t(64) = 10.00$, $p < .001$).

Self-clarity. Participants completed the same measures of SCC and subjective ambivalence described in Study 2 ($\alpha_{\text{SCC}} = .90$; $\alpha_{\text{SA}} = .78$). Because these two measures yielded parallel results and were strongly

correlated ($r(64) = -.70$, $p < .001$), we standardized each measure, and reverse coded subjective ambivalence, to create a composite measure of clarity.

Objective ambivalence. We included the measure of objective ambivalence described in Study 2.

Results

For descriptive statistics and correlations between measures, see Table 5.

Self-clarity

We predicted that the relationship between self-esteem (RSE) and self-concept clarity would be weaker among participants who received feedback that high self-esteem was undesirable (versus desirable). Analyses for this study were conducted using regression. All variables, except for self-esteem extremity (again, calculated as the squared deviation from the scale midpoint), were mean centered. We first entered our primary predictors: Rosenberg self-esteem, desired self-esteem feedback (coded +.5, -.5), and their interaction. Then, in a subsequent step, we added in the control variables, objective ambivalence and self-esteem (RSE) extremity. All graphs are based on the model without these covariates.

As seen in Table 6, results were consistent with predictions. Specifically, in addition to a main effect of RSE ($b = .047$, $se = .009$), $t(60) = 5.38$, $p < .001$, the predicted RSE \times Condition interaction emerged ($b = .041$, $se = .018$), $t(60) = 2.33$, $p < .05$ (see Fig. 3). Decomposition of this interaction revealed that the linear effect of self-esteem on clarity was stronger in the desire-high condition ($b = .068$, $se = .011$), $t(60) = 6.00$, $p < .001$ [in the model with covariates included ($b = .050$, $se = .011$), $t(58) = 4.53$, $p < .001$], than in the desire-low condition ($b = .027$, $se = .013$), $t(60) = 1.99$, $p = .05$ [in the model with covariates included ($b = .005$, $se = .014$), $t(58) = .38$, *ns*]. That is, the linear relationship typically observed between self-esteem and clarity is markedly reduced when high self-esteem is seen as less desirable.

Manipulation checks

To determine whether the manipulation had its intended effect on desired self-esteem, but not on other measures, we submitted the single-item actual self-esteem measure, desired self-esteem, and objective ambivalence to ANOVAs with condition as a predictor. None of these effects achieved significance, although the effect on desired self-esteem was the closest to significance and in the predicted direction ($F(1,63) = 2.53$, $p = .12$, all other $ps > .25$). When RSE was added as a covariate (predicting desired self-esteem, $F(1,62) = 6.74$, $p = .01$), condition marginally predicted desired self-esteem, with people in the

Table 5
Descriptive statistics and correlations between Study 3 measures.

		Descriptives		Correlations							
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
A	RSE	40.69	10.68								
B	Actual SE	6.02	1.85	.85**							
C	Desired SE	8.03	.94	.29*	.48**						
D	SA	5.14	1.85	-.47**	-.30*	-.13					
E	SCC	3.97	1.21	.60**	.52**	.25*	-.70**				
F	Clarity	.00	.92	.58**	.44**	.21 ⁺	-.92**	.92**			
G	Extremity	144.65	129.67	.52**	.33**	.13	-.56**	.54**	.60**		
H	OA	3.37	2.95	-.24 ⁺	-.11	.04	.41**	-.33**	-.40**	-.49**	
I	Desired disc	2.02	1.62	-.80**	-.86**	.03	.27*	-.45**	-.39**	-.31*	.15

Ns = 64–65.

Actual & desired self-esteem measures used 9-point scales. Extremity is the squared deviation of actual self-esteem from the scale midpoint. SA = subjective ambivalence, SCC = self-concept clarity scale (Campbell et al., 1996), clarity = composite of SA and SCC, OA = objective ambivalence, Unc. Avoid = Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance dimension. Disc measure is absolute deviation of actual and desired self-esteem items.

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

Table 6
Regression models predicting self-clarity (composite), Study 3.

	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	VIF
Step 1						
Intercept	.006	.093		.065	.948	
Self-esteem (RSE)	.047	.009	.548	5.377	<.001	1.039
Desired manipulation	.129	.185	.070	.695	.490	1.009
SE \times desired	.041	.018	.237	2.332	.023	1.032
Step 2						
Intercept	-.411	.153		2.679	.010	
Self-esteem (RSE)	.027	.009	.320	2.979	.004	1.451
Desired manipulation	.121	.165	.066	.732	.467	1.009
SE \times desired	.045	.017	.259	2.663	.010	1.186
OA	-.017	.034	-.053	.486	.629	1.481
Extremity	.003	.001	.407	3.404	.001	1.800

“desire high” condition reporting a higher desired level of self-esteem ($M = 8.21$, $se = .15$) than people in the “desire low” condition ($M = 7.79$, $se = .17$), $F(1,62) = 3.58$, $p = .06$. Condition did not predict any other measures in this analysis ($ps > .36$).

Discussion

In Study 3, when participants were told that high self-esteem was desirable, the typical positive relationship between self-esteem level and self-clarity was observed. However, when participants were told that high self-esteem was undesirable, this relationship was significantly weakened. Given the emphasis on the desirability of high self-esteem in Western cultures, it is notable that a brief manipulation of the undesirability of self-esteem would produce such an effect.

Despite the fact that our manipulation affected people's desired self-esteem in the expected direction, this effect was relatively weak. This might have been because the manipulation undermined their confidence in their (relatively high) desired self-esteem (e.g., Tormala, Clarkson, & Petty, 2006). If this were the case, a high self-esteem standard held with low certainty would not exert as much impact as one held with high certainty (DeMarree et al., 2007), thereby reducing this standard's effect on people's evaluative responses.

General discussion

The clarity of one's self-views is associated with a number of important consequences (e.g., Butzer & Kuiper, 2006; Thomas & Gadbois, 2007; Vartanian, 2009). However, the origins of clarity are still not well understood. In this paper, we proposed that discrepancies between a person's actual and desired levels of self-esteem are important determinants of self-clarity. Because the

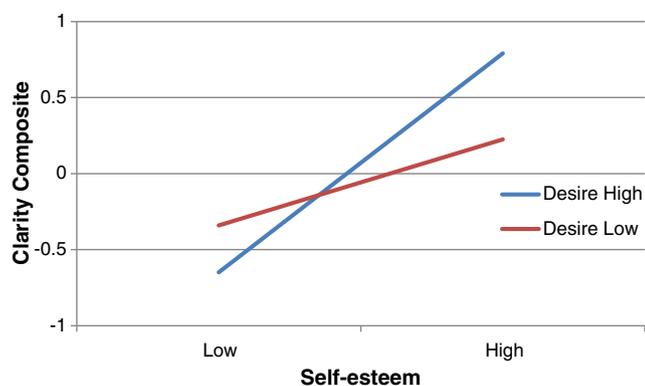


Fig. 3. Self-clarity as a function of self-esteem level and manipulated feedback regarding the desirability of high or low self-esteem (Study 3). Plotted at ± 1 SD from sample mean of self-esteem (as measured by RSE, $M_{RSE} = 40.69$, $SD_{RSE} = 10.68$, possible scale range = 10–60).

majority of people desire high self-esteem, people low in self-esteem tend to have larger actual-desired self-esteem discrepancies, which could reduce their self-clarity. Indeed, across our studies, as people's desired self-esteem decreased, the typical relationship between self-esteem and self-clarity was reduced. This pattern was observed whether we measured (Studies 1 & 2) or manipulated (Study 3) desired self-esteem. Furthermore, this effect occurred both in student samples (Studies 1 & 3) and in a relatively diverse online sample (Study 2).

Our results speak to the origins of self-clarity and the relationship of self-esteem to self-clarity. We argue that the opposing behavioral and cognitive implications of one's actual and desired self-esteem, if incongruent, can lead to feelings of conflict and a lack of clarity about who one is or what one wants. Previous research has also argued for a positive relationship between self-esteem and self-clarity, presumably because low self-esteem individuals accept evaluatively incongruent self-information as a result of competing consistency (leading to negative self-information) and enhancement motives (leading to positive self-information; Campbell et al., 1996). If this were the case, we would expect people low in self-esteem to have high objective ambivalence – the actual presence of both positive and negative evaluations. This relationship between self-esteem and ambivalence was present in our studies, although it was relatively weak in magnitude (see Tables 1, 3, & 5). Further, our results held after controlling for objective ambivalence as well as actual self-esteem extremity. Thus, actual-desired self-esteem discrepancies affect clarity even when taking into account the actual presence of conflicting positive and negative self-information.

Instead, the present research suggests an additional explanation for the relationship between self-esteem level and self-clarity. Because of the prevailing cultural norm that possessing high self-esteem is desirable (at least in Western cultures), people low in self-esteem have larger discrepancies between their actual and desired self-esteem levels and, as a result, feel conflicted in their views of themselves. High self-esteem individuals, on the other hand, have more congruence between their actual and desired levels of self-esteem, and as such experience greater self-clarity.

Interestingly, a small but meaningful minority of participants in our sample actually reported wanting lower self-esteem than they actually possessed (e.g., 6.3% in Study 1). Although high self-esteem is typically desirable in Western cultures, there are documented negative consequences of excessively or defensively high self-esteem (e.g., Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996), and perhaps the desire for lower self-esteem is driven by people's realization of these negative consequences. No matter the cause of these discrepancies, we predict that any factor that leads to opposing pulls on people's self-evaluative responses should undermine clarity.

The present research documents parallels between self-clarity and constructs related to attitude strength (DeMarree & Morrison, 2012). Specifically, self-clarity shares many of the same antecedents of attitudinal ambivalence (DeMarree et al., 2013). Because of this, one might wonder whether self-clarity predicts strength-related outcomes, such as the durability or impact of self-views (cf., Petty & Krosnick, 1995). There is evidence that self-clarity predicts the durability of self-views (Campbell et al., 1996), but to date, no research has examined whether clarity predicts the impact of self-views (e.g., whether people high in clarity are more likely to act on their self-views).

In addition to the conceptual advances, we should note the potential methodological advances of the current research. Specifically, the manipulation of desired self-esteem that we employed could be useful in a wide range of applications. Notably, researchers who examine self-esteem striving (e.g., Crocker & Park, 2004; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004) could manipulate people's motivation to pursue such goals to gain greater understanding of the causal role that these goals play. In addition, because discrepancies between actual and ideal states can create depressive affect, such an intervention, if

successful, could have practical utility. Indeed, one approach employed in many cognitive approaches to therapy is to target and undermine the impact of unrealistic standards (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979). Thus, manipulations such as ours not only shed more light on the reasons for the relationship between self-esteem and clarity, but also could be used to ultimately reduce negative affect and depressive symptoms in clinical as well as non-clinical populations.

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