How do self-concept differentiation and self-concept clarity interrelate in predicting sense of personal identity?

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ABSTRACT

Research has established that there are individual differences in the self-structure, and that they are relevant for an individual's psychological and social functioning. However, little is known about how they interrelate to predict certain outcomes. The present study focused on two such individual differences – self-concept differentiation and self-concept clarity – and examined the influence of self-concept clarity on the relationship between self-concept differentiation and sense of identity, first as a mediator, and secondly as a moderator. Self-concept clarity was found to mediate this relationship, with no direct effect of self-concept differentiation on sense of identity. No support was found for the moderating effect of self-concept clarity. Results are interpreted as extending previously reported data regarding the relative independence and significance of the two constructs.

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1. Introduction

The traditional view of a stable and monolithic self has been replaced by a model of self as dynamic and differentiated. This new notion of self of necessity points to an individual's sense of identity. Since various self-aspects within the structure of the self may vary in their content, one's subjective experience of self among them may vary as well. This raises the problem of how a sense of personal identity is achieved and maintained within such a multiplicity of selves, and this issue represents a main focus of this paper.

Donahue, Robins, Roberts, and John (1993) proposed the term "self-concept differentiation" (SCD) to refer to an individual's "tendency to see oneself as having different personality characteristics in different social roles" (p. 834). The SCD index is assessed by participants rating how descriptive a set of attributes is of them in different social roles, and can be expressed as the unshared variance, the mean intercorrelation, or the absolute differences among the roles (Campbell, Assanand, and Di Paula, 2003; Donahue et al., 1993; Styła, Jankowski, and Suszek, 2010). Consistent with a long-standing belief that the pursuit of consistency is an essential manifestation of self and significant indicator of effective adaptation and mental health (e.g., James, 1890; Lecky, 1945; Rogers, 1959), Donahue et al. (1993) found that high levels of SCD were strongly related to intrapersonal and interpersonal difficulties, including emotional distress, rejection of social norms, and failed role relationships. This effect has been replicated in subsequent studies investigating a variety of adjustment outcomes, including a mature sense of identity, thus further supporting the assumption that contextual variation in self-views is indicative of a fragmented self-concept and leads to identity

diffusion (e.g., Block, 1961; Campbell et al., 2003; Diehl, Hastings, and Stanton, 2001; Pilarska and Suchańska, 2015a; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthrone, and Ilardi, 1997; Styła et al., 2010).

The present study further explored the association between context variability in the manifestation of personality attributes and psychological integration, and sought to test whether the relationship between SCD and sense of personal identity (i.e., a subjective awareness and experience of inner content, coherence, continuity, uniqueness, self-boundaries, and self-worth; Blasi and Glodis, 1995; Pilarska, 2016) is influenced by other variables. Specifically, it was investigated whether and how the effect of SCD on sense of personal identity is affected by self-concept clarity. Self-concept clarity (SCC) is a structural aspect of the self-concept that refers to the extent to which one's self-concept is "clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable" (Campbell et al., 1996, p. 141), and has been found to be positively related to several adjustment indices – identity commitment and sense of identity among them (e.g., Bigler, Neimeyer, and Brown, 2001; Campbell et al., 1996; Crocetti, Rubini, and Meeus, 2008; Pilarska and Suchańska, 2013; Ritchie, Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, and Gidron, 2011; Wong, Vallacher, and Nowak, 2016).

SCD and SCC are both considered measures of self-concept unity (e.g., Campbell et al., 2003; Rafaeli and Hiller, 2010), and prior research has demonstrated a moderate, inverse relation between the two (*r*'s ranging from −0.19 to −0.48; Boucher, 2011; Campbell et al., 2003; Constantino, Wilson, Horowitz, and Pinel, 2006; Pomerance and Converse, 2014). This brings up the question of whether it is better to view SCD and SCC as opposite and mutually exclusive phenomena, or as separate but correlated constructs.

The first alternative would be consistent with a long tradition in personality psychology that has linked contextual variability of the self-concept to lack of self-direction and integrity (e.g., Block, 1961; James,

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1890). More precisely, the argument would be that role-to-role variability in trait manifestation leads to inner confusion, as it delimits one's ability to settle on a self-definition that would provide stable frame of reference for thoughts, feelings, and actions. As pointed by Donahue et al. (1993) and Suh (2007), those who show great variability in self-descriptions tend to be highly sensitive to the social context, such that the other's perspective dominates the key experiences of the self. And the more one moves toward meeting changing role expectations, the more one moves away from one's true self (e.g., Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1959). The empirical research gives some support to this view by demonstrating that SCD is negatively related to sense of authenticity (Boucher, 2011; Sheldon et al., 1997) and self-congruence (Sheldon, Gunz, and Schachtman, 2012), and positively related to dissociative tendencies (Lutz and Ross, 2003) and role conflict (Sheldon et al., 1997).

Two theoretical considerations suggest the second alternative. First, although SCC addresses the internal consistency of self-beliefs, as does SCD, it is broader in its scope and encompasses the extremity, confidence, and temporal stability of self-beliefs (Campbell, 1990). Second, it has been suggested that differentiation (inconsistency) of the self-concept across different roles may breed psychological maladjustment, when it is a sign of fragmentation and diffusion (e.g., Block, 1961; Donahue et al., 1993), but it may as well lead to well-being, when it is a sign of specialization and complexity (e.g., Linville, 1985; Lutz and Ross, 2003). The clarity (or lack thereof) in the self-concept could be a useful criterion for distinguishing the two situations, that is, having a high SCD would be predictive of poor well-being in the absence, but not (or to a lesser extent) in the presence of a high SCC. One might even argue that holding different, but effectively defined and integrated self-views would help to establish an overall sense of identity and cope with the complexities of the social world (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Linville, 1985). Some empirical evidence exists supporting the notion that SCD and SCC are related but distinct constructs. Admittedly, the correlation between SCD and SCC is substantial, but not so strong as to suggest redundancy. Following this line of reasoning, Bigler et al. (2001) investigated the extent to which both self-structure variables predict levels of psychological well-being (e.g., self-esteem, sense of coherence, affect balance). They concluded that SCD and SCC accounted for both shared and unique variance in measures of psychological adjustment, and that the predictive power of SCC was greater than that of SCD. In another joint consideration of SCD and SCC, Diehl and Hay (2011) used cluster analysis to identify conceptually meaningful groups of individuals based on their SCD and SCC scores, and further showed that these groups differed on measures of psychological well-being. More precisely, participants with low SCD and high SCC (i.e., self-assured) scored the highest on indicators of positive well-being (e.g., Ryff's six dimensions of well-being) and the lowest on measures of negative well-being (e.g., negative affect, depression); whereas the reverse was true for those high in SCD and low in SCC (i.e., fragmented and confused), and, to a lesser extent, for those average in SCD and low in SCC (i.e., confused-only), and for those high in SCD and average in SCC (i.e., fragmented-only). However, Diehl and Hay (2011) did not clarify the nature of the association between SCD and SCC by statistical testing. Nor did these authors report whether the identified groups differed significantly from each other in terms of SCD and SCC.

The present investigation draws upon these previous research efforts to statistically examine the interrelationship between SCD and SCC in their influence on sense of personal identity. Is SCD problematic because it results in low SCC, which, in turn, leads to weak sense of identity; in other words, is SCC an important proximate cause for the negative outcomes? Can these two self-structure factors compensate for one another, so that the relationship between SCD and weakened sense of identity will be less strong among those with high SCC than among those with low SCC? In the first case, low SCC is not necessarily a preexisting condition but rather one that develops as a result of an overly context-sensitive self, that is to say, SCC acts as a mediator. According to this model, identity interventions should involve strategies intended

to facilitate transcendence from external social input, so that more importance is placed on the inner, private, and experiential aspects of the self. In the second case, cross-role variability in self-concept is more or less common, but weakening of sense of identity is far more likely among those who lack clarity, that is to say, SCC acts as a moderator. According to this model, identity interventions should involve strategies intended to facilitate clarification and integration of different aspects of self-concept. In order to gain a clearer understanding of the relationship between SCD and SCC in predicting sense of personal identity, this study tested both possibilities. Thus, two alternative hypotheses were considered: (1) SCC would mediate the relationship between SCD and sense of identity; (2) SCC would moderate (buffer) the relationship between SCD and sense of identity (Fig. 1).

2. Method

2.1. Overview and procedure

As part of a larger research on self and identity, data were collected from young adults who had achieved either upper secondary education or above. Participants completed measures of self-concept structure and sense of personal identity, as well as several questionnaires assessing constructs not relevant to the subject of this article. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and asked for consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured.

2.2. Participants

The sample included 281 Polish undergraduate students of different fields of study (65.1% female), whose age ranged from 19 to 29 years ($M = 20.96$, $SD = 1.99$). The focus on this population was borne out of the recognition that the transition to adulthood, prolonged by education, is marked by a number of role changes that may demand changes in self-concept. Moreover, identity formation becomes central at this stage of development (Arnett, 2000).

2.3. Measures

Self-concept differentiation was measured by the *Self-Incoherence Scale* (SIS, Styła et al., 2010), based on the methodological approach proposed by Donahue et al. (1993). Participants' task was to rate how descriptive 7 personality traits (i.e., active, open-minded, loyal, self-confident, resourceful, independent, direct) are of them in each of five different social roles (student, romantic partner, son or daughter, friend, and worker), using a 7-point scale. The total score represented the absolute differences among the roles (i.e., the extent that participants' personality trait ratings had deviated from one another when describing themselves across their different roles), and was obtained by first computing the standard deviation of each of participant's personality trait ratings across each role (7 standard deviations in all), and then averaging them. Higher values reflect more variation across roles and therefore greater self-concept differentiation ($\alpha = 0.83$).[1]

Self-concept clarity was assessed via the *Self-Concept Clarity Scale* (SCC; Campbell et al., 1996; Polish version by Pilarska and Suchańska, 2013). The scale consist of 12 items focusing on the perceived consistency and temporal stability of self-beliefs (e.g., Sometimes I feel that I am not really the person that I appear to be; My beliefs about myself seem to change very frequently; I seldom experience conflict between the different aspects of my personality); each scored on a 5-point scale from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree". Total scores are calculated by summing across all items, with higher scores indicating greater self-concept clarity ($\alpha = 0.82$).

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[1] For cases where at least 80% of items within each measure were endorsed, missing data were replaced using person-mean substitution.