The role of self-concept clarity in guiding romantic partner evaluations and the rejection of incompatible mates

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December 2023

Thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

Past research suggests that less well-defined self-attributes may hinder self-other comparisons (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993). In the present thesis, I investigated whether individuals with a confused personal identity (i.e., those low in self-concept clarity) have a harder time evaluating, and making decisions about, prospective partners and whether this leads them to be more likely to date incompatible ones. In Manuscript 1, I examine whether people use similarity information less effectively when they lack self-clarity. Because similarity is thought to contribute to compatibility (e.g., Sprecher, 2011), I began my investigation by asking whether people low in self-concept clarity select similar (i.e., compatible) prospective partners less often, and/or reject dissimilar (i.e., incompatible) ones more often. Across 4 repeated measures online experiments (N = 758), I found that those lower, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity are less discriminating about less similar targets. Study 4 also showed that such individuals are also less certain about their judgments for less similar targets offering one possible explanation for the weaker ruling-out effect among those lower in self-concept clarity. Manuscript 2 extends this research by examining the effects of self-concept clarity on judgements of compatibility in real world dating contexts. Across two retrospective studies with 340 adults, I found that those *lower*, versus higher, in self-concept clarity dated incompatible others more frequently, experienced more difficulty judging compatibility, and were less decisive in their dating decisions. Exploratory mediation analysis further suggests that such individuals are more likely to date incompatible others *because* they find it harder to judge compatibility and are less decisive.

I further build on this research in Manuscript 3 by proposing that those who lack self-concept clarity are also likely to lack *relationship clarity* (i.e., have a poor understanding about the type of romantic relationship one desires and seeks). I hypothesized that a lack of relationship

clarity may be an additional explanation for why those low in self-concept clarity are less discriminating about incompatible partners. I developed a new scale to measure relationship clarity and tested this hypothesis; I analyzed a merged dataset (the two retrospective studies report in Manuscript 2) and found that relationship clarity partly explains the association between self-concept clarity and the frequency of dating incompatible others, and that the association between lower relationship clarity and greater frequency of dating incompatible others is due to greater judgement difficulty and dating indecision, as well as lower levels of dating decision confidence. Overall, the research in this thesis expands relationship research by providing evidence for the assertion that those with a confused personal identity are less discriminating about incompatible prospective partners because they find compatibility judgments harder to make, are less adaptive decision makers, and are confused about what they desire in, or from, their romantic relationships.

Résumé

La recherche suggère que des attributs personnels moins bien définis peuvent entraver les comparaisons entre le soi et l'autre (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993). Dans la présente thèse, j'ai cherché à savoir si les individus dont l'identité personnelle est confuse ont plus de mal à évaluer leurs partenaires potentiels et à prendre des décisions à leur sujet, et si cela les mène à fréquenter davantage des personnes incompatibles. Dans le Manuscrit 1, j'examine si les gens utilisent moins efficacement les informations relatives à la similarité lorsqu'ils manquent de clarté envers eux-mêmes. Étant donné qu'on pense que la similarité contribue à la compatibilité (par exemple, Sprecher, 2011), j'ai entamé mon enquête en me demandant si les personnes qui manquent de clarté dans leur concept de soi choisissent moins souvent des partenaires potentiels similaires (c'est-à-dire compatibles) et/ou rejettent plus souvent des partenaires dissemblables (c'est-à-dire incompatibles). Au cours de quatre expériences en ligne à mesures répétées (N = 758), j'ai constaté que les personnes dont le concept de soi est peu clair, par rapport à celles dont le concept est plus clair, sont moins discriminantes à l'égard des cibles moins similaires. L'étude 4 a également montré que ces personnes sont aussi moins sûres de leurs jugements par rapport aux cibles moins similaires, ce qui constitue une explication possible de l'effet d'exclusion plus faible chez les personnes dont le concept de soi est moins clair.

Le Manuscrit 2 approfondit cette recherche en examinant les effets de la clarté du concept de soi sur les jugements de compatibilité dans des contextes de rencontres dans le monde réel. Dans le cadre de deux études rétrospectives, j'ai constaté que les personnes dont le concept de soi était moins clair que les autres sortaient plus souvent avec des personnes incompatibles, éprouvaient plus de difficultés à juger de la compatibilité, et étaient moins décisives dans leurs décisions de sortir avec des personnes incompatibles. Une analyse de médiation suggère en outre

que ces personnes sont plus susceptibles de sortir avec des personnes incompatibles parce qu'elles ont plus de misère à juger de la compatibilité et sont moins décisives au sein de leurs relations amoureuses.

J'ai développé davantage cette recherche dans le Manuscrit 3 en proposant que les personnes qui manquent de clarté dans leur concept de soi sont également susceptibles de manquer de clarté dans leurs relations (c.-à-d. une compréhension claire du type de relation romantique qu'elles désirent et recherchent). J'ai émis l'hypothèse qu'un manque de clarté dans la relation pouvait constituer une explication supplémentaire du fait que les personnes qui manquent de clarté dans leur concept de soi sont moins discriminantes à l'égard des partenaires incompatibles. J'ai analysé un ensemble de données fusionnées (les deux études rétrospectives rapportées dans le Manuscrit 2) et j'ai trouvé que la clarté dans les relations explique en partie l'association entre la clarté du concept de soi et la fréquence des rendez-vous avec des personnes incompatibles, et que l'association entre une faible clarté dans les relations et une plus grande fréquence des rendez-vous avec des personnes incompatibles est due à une plus grande difficulté de jugement et à une plus grande indécision lors des rencontres, ainsi qu'à des niveaux plus faibles de confiance par rapport à la décision de sortir avec des personnes incompatibles. Dans l'ensemble, mes recherches élargissent la recherche sur les relations en fournissant des preuves à l’appui de l'affirmation selon laquelle les personnes dont l'identité personnelle est confuse font preuve de moins de discernement à l'égard des partenaires potentiels incompatibles parce qu'elles trouvent les jugements de compatibilité plus difficiles à porter, elles sont des décideurs moins adaptatifs et elles ne savent pas exactement ce qu'elles désirent dans leurs relations amoureuses.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, John Lydon, for his expert guidance, patience, and belief in my abilities. I am grateful that he encouraged and supported me in pursuing a research idea that had very wobbly legs at first but that deeply intrigued me. I would also like to thank Richard Koestner and Eric Hehman for giving me supportive feedback each year on this program of research as it came to life, and Mark Baldwin for his pointed feedback during Tupperware talks and his coding savvy in helping me generate and test an important follow-up analysis related to Manuscript 1. I am also grateful to Jessica Flake for her instruction during a multilevel modeling course I took with her; she got me started with a good foundation which was invaluable to my research pursuits. And I would like to thank Jens Kreitewolf for consulting with us on statistical issues related to Manuscript 1 before our original submission, and then for joining our team as co-author in the final revision process.

Next, I would like to thank current and past lab members for their feedback over the years at lab meetings: grad students Catalina, Marlee, and Hasagani, and the wonderful lab coordinators we have had over the years that made the lab run smoothly, Angelica, Serena, and Elisabeth. I am also grateful to Elisabeth Dromer, an undergraduate honours student I supervised, for her coding enthusiasm and abilities in generating the algorithms that were used in the studies reported in Manuscript 1. And a big thank you to the many research assistants that came through our lab that helped by testing out all of the online studies!

Finally, I would like to express my deep appreciation to two dear friends. First, to my steadfast and incredibly generous friend, David Ludmer Jones, for his unwavering support throughout my doctoral pursuits and for reminding me to “keep my eyes on the prize” during the most challenging moments. The global pandemic hit just as I was wrapping up year three of my

degree, making the following three years a bit more arduous. I am so grateful that a couple of months into the pandemic I bumped into an old friend on the street, Thomas Konigsthal Jr., with whom I rekindled a dear friendship, one that brought much needed levity, kindness, and home-cooked goodness. These all helped me get through a pandemic and finish a doctoral thesis.

Contributions of Author

This thesis is comprised of three manuscripts. I am the first author of manuscript 1, and my co-author is my supervisor John Lydon. I first came to John with a grain of a research idea which we spent three weeks probing and discussing. This grain sprouted, becoming the foundation for the experimental studies reported in Chapter 2. John and I together designed the online experimental paradigm used in manuscript 1 (which was based on the *bogus stranger procedure* by Byrne, 1971). I designed the materials and algorithms and Elisabeth Dromer, an undergraduate honours student I supervised, generated the code for the algorithms. Ramsha Ijaz, an IT intern at our lab, then incorporated the code into the online survey platform. I conducted the two pilot studies to test this paradigm, and then modified the procedure and conducted Studies 1 to 4. I conducted the literature review and collected the data for all studies reported in manuscript 1. For the first draft, I interpreted the data with input from John and received additional input from Eric Hehman. John also provided editorial assistance. Jens Kreitewolf consulted with us on some statistical issues related to manuscript 1 before we submitted it for publication and then joined our team as co-author in the revision process, contributing to the paper by running key supplemental analyses and helping to interpret the new data. John provided editorial assistance for manuscript 1 which is presently in revision at the *Journal of Self and Identity*.

I am first author of manuscript 2 (Chapter 3), which is co-authored by John Lydon. The idea for Study 1 of manuscript 2 (testing the effects of self-concept clarity in real world settings) was developed together by John and myself. I conducted the literature review, designed the materials, and collected the data. I interpreted the analyses with the input of John. I then conducted Study 2, a pre-registered replication, ran all analyses, and interpreted the analyses

with John. I wrote the manuscript with editorial assistance from John; this paper was submitted to the *Journal of Personal Relationships*, and is currently in review.

Manuscript 3 (Chapter 4) is a first draft of a manuscript currently in preparation. I am the first author, with John Lydon as my co-author. I came to John with the idea of creating a new self-report measure to assess a new construct: *relationship clarity*. I developed this measure with John's assistance and incorporated it in the two retrospective studies reported in manuscript 2 (Chapter 3). I then conducted exploratory analyses with this scale using a merged dataset of the retrospective studies and came to John with a preliminary idea for the third manuscript which he helped flesh out. I conducted the literature review and all analyses. I interpreted the results with John's input. I wrote the manuscript with John's editorial assistance. This manuscript is a first draft; I hope to build on ideas in this draft by incorporating new data from additional studies, with the aim to submit it to a journal in the field in 2024.

Statement of Original Contribution

An abundance of research suggests that compatible mates are vital to relationships being satisfying and enduring over time (e.g., Berscheid, 1983; Ickes, 1983). Evaluating compatibility with prospective partners during dating is, therefore, an important step towards developing more successful relationships. However, little research has examined whether some individuals have a harder time evaluating compatibility with prospective partners. Interestingly, research suggests that self-confusion may impair self-other comparisons (Setterlund & Neidenthal, 1993). Given that individuals often compare themselves with prospective romantic partners as they evaluate who would make a good, compatible 'match' for them, it is surprising that no research has yet examined whether having a clear, versus confused, personal identity influences compatibility judgements and the subsequent selection of compatible and/or incompatible partners. My doctoral research addresses this knowledge gap by examining whether people are less selective about compatible and incompatible prospective partners when they have a confused sense of who they are themselves.

The research in this thesis constitutes several original contributions to the literature on self-concept clarity. First, the present research empirically demonstrates for the first time that self-concept clarity is associated with suboptimal partner choices: we show that low self-concept clarity predicts less harsh evaluations of less similar others (across 4 experimental studies; Chapter 2), and a greater likelihood of having dated incompatible others (across 2 retrospective studies; Chapter 3). Second, the current research provides evidence for several mechanisms explaining why low self-concept clarity interferes with the rejection of incompatible partners. These include greater uncertainty about match judgment for dissimilar others (Chapter 2), difficulty judging compatibility, dating indecision (Chapter 3), as well as a lack of relationship

clarity (Chapter 4). These findings lend support for the theoretical premise that self-confusion hinders self-other comparisons (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1983) and extends this premise to the interpersonal context of dating in suggesting that self-confusion hinders compatibility judgements which in turn impacts partner selection.

Third, the findings in this thesis add to the small but budding literature on self-concept clarity's influence on decision making by showing links between low self-concept clarity and greater indecision about dating partners (Chapter 3 and 4) and maladaptive decisional styles (Chapter 4). Fourth, the current work contributes to literature in which researchers have begun extending the construct of self-concept clarity to other aspects of identity. In Chapter 4, I provide evidence to support the idea that individuals can have, or lack, relationship clarity (i.e., a clear understanding of what they desire in a relationship); the findings reported in Chapter 4 suggest that self-concept clarity may be a gateway to relationship clarity. Relatedly, the research in this thesis also expands the literature on close relationships by offering a social cognitive explanation for why some people end up in less fulfilling, lower quality relationships: they do not know what they want in, or from, their relationships. And finally, the repeated measures experimental paradigm I designed based on the classic Byrne (1971) protocol (Chapter 2) constitutes an original methodological contribution to the field. This paradigm leverages power and can be modified to test many other research questions by other researchers.

Taken together, the research in this thesis provides important insight into the role of a clear, vs confused, self-concept during romantic relationship formation, advancing both relationship science and self-concept clarity research. By better understanding how a clear, vs confused, sense of self guides romantic partner preferences and decisions, this research may ultimately shed light on why some people end up in unsatisfying romantic relationships.

General Introduction

Romantic relationships are fundamental to the human experience and having them is reliably associated with greater wellbeing (e.g., Stack & Eshleman, 1998; Diener et al., 1999). However, not just any romantic relationship enhances peoples' lives. The quality of a relationship is key to its positive consequences. Indeed, plenty of research has shown that high quality, rewarding relationships have important implications for mental and physical health. For example, a meta-analysis of 93 cross-sectional and longitudinal studies found that higher levels of marital quality were associated with indicators of personal well-being, such as fewer depressive symptoms, higher levels of global happiness and self-esteem, and better physical health (Proulx et al., 2007). Relationship satisfaction has also been consistently found to be a strong predictor of life satisfaction (e.g., Glenn & Weaver, 1981; Schimmack & Oishi, 2005), and regardless of relationship status (married, cohabitating, or in a dating relationship), people with more, compared to less, satisfying relationships report higher levels of subjective well-being (Dush & Amato, 2005).

Conversely, low quality, unsatisfying relationships can have a variety of negative effects on an individual's life. Not only are people in unhappy relationships experiencing lower levels of well-being (e.g., Emmons et al, 1983; Dush & Amato, 2005), but they are also experiencing higher levels of depressive symptoms (e.g., Whisman, 2001; Beach et al., 2003; Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012). Moreover, troubled marriages are often plagued by high levels of stress (e.g., Coyne & Delongis, 1986), and studies have shown that higher levels of conflict and hostility amongst intimate partners have a negative impact on cardiovascular, endocrine, and immune functioning (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1993; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1998). It is clear, then, that

entering relationships can be risky: successful relationships can be very good for us, but many relationships do not end up being successful ones.

Although numerous factors can influence the developmental course of any relationship impacting its success, such as individuals' attachment styles (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994), negative life events (Cohen & Bradbury, 1997), perceived partner support (Cohen & Willis, 1985; Wethington & Kessler, 1986), conflict management skills (Koerner & Jacobson, 1994), and the expression of negative emotions (Gottman & Levenson, 1986; 2000), choosing whom to go out with and whether to continue dating someone arguably set the stage for better, or worse, relationships. Choices about which prospective partner to select and which to reject while dating are thus important and consequential decisions, and some individuals make for better, more suitable partners (Berscheid, 1985; Byrne et al., 1986; Joel & Eastwick, 2018). Compatibility between romantic partners is generally considered to be an important ingredient for high quality, functioning relationships (e.g., Berscheid, 1985; Ickes, 1985), although research on whether some people are better at assessing compatibility and selecting compatible partners is sparse.

Interestingly, self-confusion has been shown to interfere with similarity judgements when making decisions about consumer products (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993). Given that people compare themselves with prospective dating partners on metrics such as similarity (one causal contributor to compatibility; Sprecher, 2011) as they decide who would be a good, compatible match for them, in the current research I sought to examine whether individuals with confused, or poorly defined, personal identities are less selective about dating partners in terms of compatibility. I argue that in order use compatibility information effectively (i.e., choose someone compatible or reject someone incompatible) one first needs to have a fairly clear self-view; one needs to be able to perceive if the self and potential-other match or mismatch in terms

of the various aspects that constitute one's idea of compatibility. Importantly, being *unclear*, or confused, about one's personal identity may lead to greater difficulties in choosing from among potential partners, possibly undermining the mate selection process.

To my knowledge, no research has yet examined whether individuals with a confused personal identity have a harder time evaluating compatibility and whether they are less likely to select compatible, and/or more likely to select incompatible, partners. Throughout the research in this thesis, I operationalize a confused personal identity as self-ratings on the self-concept clarity scale (Campbell et al., 1996) because it is a reliable and commonly used scale in research on identity; this measure assesses the extent to which one has a clear, versus confused, perception of oneself. My main research question is whether individuals who are *lower* in self-concept clarity are less discriminating about prospective dating partners in terms of compatibility compared to those higher in self-concept clarity. My second research question asks, if such individuals are less selective, why? Is it because they are less certain about their partner judgements, or because they use maladaptive decision strategies, or because they lack a clear vision about the type of relationship they want?

Romantic Compatibility

Compatibility is a term that is often used by lay folks to indicate an intuitive understanding that two people "match" or "fit" together romantically, and the greater the compatibility, the better the supposed match. In fact, many modern online dating sites and apps try to sell the ultimate dream to its' users of matching people with highly compatible prospective mates via computer algorithms (Finkel et al., 2012). Research substantiates this intuitive view of compatibility, showing that people consider compatible partners to be mates who bring high value to a relationship (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014). Sprecher (2011) points out that while most

researchers agree that compatibility is important for successful, happy relationships (e.g., Berscheid, 1983; Eastwick et al, 2023), research on compatibility has been mostly indirect; compatibility has largely been assumed from the presence of other constructs such as relationship satisfaction, commitment, and persistence (Berscheid, 1983). That is, satisfied, committed couples in lasting relationships are presumed to be compatible. The main reason why compatibility has been seldom directly investigated is because it is conceptualized as a broad, multi-component construct and thus challenging to operationalize.

A summary of the literature on compatibility by Sprecher (2011) suggests there are four broad components thought to drive compatibility between two romantic partners: each person's positive qualities, joint characteristics of both individuals, the interaction quality or dyadic processes that unfold between two people, and various proximal or distal environmental factors that facilitate couple functioning. The first component, positive individual characteristics, are characteristics that individuals have that make them generally easy to be with and enjoyable to be around, which presumably makes them more compatible as a partner for whomever they are with. For example, traits such as emotional stability, extraversion, and high self-esteem and have been associated with better marital quality (Barelds, 2005) and a recent meta-analysis of 18 correlational studies showed that couples low in neuroticism and high in conscientiousness had more satisfying marriages (Sayehmiri et al., 2020).

The second component, joint characteristics, reflects the combination of both individuals' attributes; joint characteristics are core to matching theories of relationships (e.g., Levinger & Rand, 1985; Sprecher, 2011; Eastwick et al., 2023) and have been mainly examined as self-other similarity (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Watson et al., 2004; Montoya et al., 2008). Similarity is thought to contribute to compatibility because similarity validates the self and one's world view (Byrne,

1971; Singh et al., 2007) and because interactions are usually smoother and more enjoyable when people share similar outlooks on life (Davis, 1981; Burleson & Denton, 1992). Complementarity (i.e., "opposites attract") has also been suggested as a matching strategy, with researchers showing that differences may offer opportunities for personal growth (Baxter & West, 2003) or help balance the power dynamic within a couple (i.e., submissive vs dominant personalities; Markey & Markey, 2007); however, empirical findings seldom support complementarity as contributing to compatibility (e.g., Buss, 1985; Felmlee, 2001).

The third component of compatibility refers to emergent qualities and processes that result from dyadic interactions, such as communication patterns, co-constructed humour, or interpersonal chemistry. Interactions are the "essence" of relationships (Thibault & Kelley, 1959); not surprisingly, many researchers agree that emergent, or relationship, characteristics or processes have the strongest impact on couple functioning and relationship satisfaction (and thus presumably on compatibility; Reis et al., 2022; Eastwick et al., 2023). For example, Reis and colleagues (2022) propose that chemistry is a unique "intense connection" or felt "spark" that emerges between two people as they interact. When it is strong, individuals have a powerful sense that they are highly compatible.

And finally, the fourth component of compatibility is environmental factors that may help (or hinder) couple functioning. One important factor that seems especially important for compatibility is that of social support via social networks. For example, researchers have shown positive associations between perceptions of support from family and friends and emotional attachment for those in romantic relationships (Parks et al., 1983). Relatedly, when family and friends approve of an individual's relationship, individuals are more likely to report feeling more love, commitment, and relationship satisfaction, presumably because one's social network treats

members of a couple as a functional 'unit' which validates one's choice of partner and encourages persistence (Sprecher, & Felmlee, 1992). One example of an external factor that could impair compatibility are negative life events (Cohen & Bradbury, 1997); the stress experienced during stressful times can make it more challenging for couples to function well as a unit.

Taken together, research suggests that some people have traits that make them generally more compatible with most people (e.g., agreeableness), that individuals' conceptions of compatibility likely comprise of ideas about "matching" with romantic partners in terms of similarity and how they might interact with them in unique, enjoyable, and synergistic ways, and that factors outside a relationship can potential impact how well couples function together. Clearly, compatibility is a complex construct that, according to lay folks and scholars, seems to matter considerably for relationship success.

However, successful dating is not only a matter of selecting compatible prospective partners but also a matter of ruling out less suitable ones (Joel & Eastwick, 2018). Byrne and colleagues (1986) propose there are two broad stages to relationship formation: first people track negative information (i.e., dissimilarity) so as to exclude "undesirable" people from the dating pool. Second, they pay attention to the similarities they share with people who are left in the pool, and choose from amongst those individuals - the better, more compatible, candidates. A narrower dating pool would presumably mean fewer but better options to choose from, as well as having more enjoyable dating experiences over time. According to this model, mate selection is initially more about first ruling people out than ruling them in. Rosenbaum (1986) went further and argued that similarity does not matter at all for initial interpersonal attraction, rather it is dissimilarity that matters to people because negative information is highly diagnostic, potentially

signaling threats to survival and wellbeing. More recently, Joel & MacDonald (2021) argued that people initially start out by dating a diverse range of people and then weed out the less suitable prospective partners during dating. In other words, they suggest that there is no imperative to rule out at first - people keep their options very open and rule out incompatible ones over the course of dating.

Quite plausibly, both broad dating approaches are simultaneously at play, given there is little information to go on when first meeting, or learning about, a prospective partner. Because many, if not most, people ultimately want a compatible mate, one may try to weed out the *least* suitable people in a first pass effort (e.g., an atheist who just knows they will not get along with religious believers, or vice versa), resulting in a narrower though still relatively wide and diverse dating pool. After spending some time with various prospective partners, those least suitable get weeded out and those most suitable remain. As such, there may be two main weeding out stages, an initial quick one and a second more deliberate one once dating begins. Furthermore, dating approaches may vary considerably depending on how people meet (e.g., online versus through friends versus randomly in person); different strategies are likely required when people are faced with selecting or rejecting 1 stand-alone person compared to selecting 1 out of tens or hundreds of potential partners, in the case of online dating for example. Clearly though, ruling out incompatible others effectively is one key step in finding and forming satisfying relationships**.**

The biggest consequence of not selecting compatible dating partners is likely to be some missed opportunities which might lead to regret, although not recognizing compatible partners likely also means one is not much aware of having missed these golden moments. However, not rejecting incompatible ones effectively may be more consequential, as it may lead someone to go on initial dates with incompatible others more often, as well as persist in dating relationships

with incompatible others for longer durations. Because research shows that individuals in fledgling relationships start to get attached to each other early in dating (Heffernan et al., 2012; Fagundes & Schindler, 2012), become increasingly reliant on each other for social support (Reis et al., 2004), and make decisions that tend to advance rather than end their relationships (Joel & McDonald, 2021), not being good at ruling out incompatible partners may increase the chances of developing more committed relationships with them. In this manner, dating incompatible others more often may waste time and resources, significantly prolonging finding a suitable mate. And given that plenty of evidence shows that low quality relationships have negative consequences for mental (e.g., Kim & McKenry, 2002) and physical health (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1998; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2008;), ineffectively ruling out partners may ultimately lead to reductions in personal and relationship wellbeing. Despite these possible negative consequences to wellbeing, little research has examined whether some individuals are better at assessing compatibility, and consequently better at selecting compatible, as well as rejecting incompatible, dating partners.

Some researchers have examined whether some individuals are more likely to settle for less in relationships; for example, individuals who feel insecure about themselves as romantic partners are more likely to lower their ideal partner standards (Campbell et al., 2001; Regan, 1998). Relatedly, individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to have lower partner standards (Hirschberger et al, 2002). And although one correlational study showed that anxiously attached men were less likely to compromise their partner ideals compared to secure and avoidantly attached men (Tolmacz, 2004), a speed-dating study demonstrated that people higher, compared to lower, in attachment anxiety are less selective about prospective partners (McClure et al., 2010). Additionally, Speilmann and colleagues (2013) found that individuals who fear

remaining single are also more likely to settle for less in relationships compared to those who do not have such a fear: in two studies such individuals rated less responsive and less attractive dating targets more positively, in a third speed dating study they expressed romantic interest for more dating partners, and in a longitudinal study they were more likely to stay in unsatisfying relationships. Taken together, these findings highlight the role of personal insecurity in settling for less desirable partners and relationships; personal insecurity as studied above largely reflects negative affectivity towards, or about, the self (i.e., low self-worth; attachment anxiety; distress of thoughts of being single). The current thesis, however, takes a more social cognitive approach in better understanding why some individuals are less discriminating about the compatibility with dating partners.

The Self Concept as Guide

For some time now, scholars have theorized that self-knowledge is critically involved in decision making and regulating behavior. Fundamental to several classic psychological theories is the idea that decisions that align with the self-concept can have different consequences compared to those not aligned (e.g., cognitive dissonance, Festinger, 1957; self-verification theory, Swann et al., 1992). The self-concept is theorized to be a dynamic cognitive knowledge structure comprised of one's implicit and explicit self-beliefs which can include traits, preferences, skills, abilities, goals, social roles, among many other aspects of self-knowledge (e.g., Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Indispensably, the self-concept helps guide our choices and behaviors (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1987; McConnell, 2011). For example, imagined possible selves are important components of the self-concept, and one's ideal-self (i.e., what one hopes to be or become; let's say an Olympian) can direct one's behavior in the direction of achieving said hoped-for-self (in this case, engaging in training regimes and eating

certain diets; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Self-efficacy (i.e., one's beliefs about whether one can control one's behavior to successfully complete a task) has also been shown to reliably determine the type of behaviors that are chosen for a given task (Bandura, 1977; 1982).

Most relevant to the current thesis, another way that the self-concept guides choices is via *self-to-prototype matching*, a decision-making strategy in which an individual compares themselves to a prototypical-other who they imagine behaving a certain way in a given situation and then makes choices based on self-to-prototype similarity (Niedenthal & Cantor, 1984; Niedenthal, Cantor, & Kihlstrom, 1985). For example, someone choosing between two travel packages (a cruise to Alaska versus a resort in Cancun) might imagine the type of person that typically goes to such travel destinations. To help them decide, this individual compares their own personal attributes (intellectual, introvert, climate conscious) to that of the typical person they imagine traveling to each destination. They imagine a mature, conscientious, ecologically minded person travelling to Alaska, and a younger, extroverted, social person travelling to Cancun. They then select the destination that the more similar proto-typical other would take (Alaska cruise).

The use of this decision strategy was first tested in a study by Niedenthal, Cantor, and Kihlstrom (1985); in this study, college students' attributes were associated with different types of housing which the authors interpreted as a preference for housing that matched one's self-concept. In other words, individuals tried to maximize self-to-prototype similarity. Subsequent studies examining self-to-prototype matching in other decision-making domains have found evidence that this strategy is used to make decisions about career choices (Cheryan & Plaut, 2010), college enrollment (Lane & Gibbons, 2007), and school subjects (Kessels, 2005). Interestingly, Hassebrauck and Aron (2001) also found that individuals in committed

relationships used prototype matching to assess their relationships – participants judged their relationship as better the closer it was to a prototypically high-quality relationship.

Importantly, one set of studies on self-to-prototype matching set out to examine individual differences in the use of this cognitive strategy. Setterlund and Niedenthal, (1993) hypothesized that individuals high, compared to low, in self-esteem should be able to use self-to-prototype matching more often because such individuals have more stable, clear (Campbell, 1990) and certain self-beliefs (Baumgardner, 1990) and clearer self-attributes would presumably make for easier self-to-prototype comparisons. In testing this idea with college students, they first found that indeed those high in self-esteem used self-to-prototype matching more often when rating preferences about cars and restaurants. Critically, in their third study, the experimenters induced either more self-clarity or self-confusion in their participants by asking them to recall a time when they acted consistently or inconsistently with their self-beliefs and then asked them to rate their preferences for the cars and restaurants. Findings revealed that those in the self-clarity condition used self-to-prototype matching when rating their preferences, but those in the self-confusion condition did not. These results were taken as evidence that self-knowledge influences the self-behaviour connection. And although these researchers manipulated self-clarity, they theorized that self-clarity is an individual difference variable because it is closely linked with self-esteem (Campbell, 1990), and self-esteem has long been considered an individual difference (e.g., Baumeister, 1999; Leary & MacDonald, 2003). These findings provide some evidence that individual differences in the clarity of self-knowledge may be differentially linked to the use of a decision-making strategy that involves using similarity in self-other comparisons.

Surprisingly, no research has yet examined whether self-clarity helps guide (or whether self-confusion hinders) compatibility judgements and the subsequent selection and rejection of prospective partners during dating - a time when people are frequently making comparisons with dating partners as they try to decide who is a good compatible match. Although it is plausible that prototype matching may be used, prior to, and during, romantic formation as people decide whom to date and whether to continue dating them, I argue that people are most often likely making *direct* comparisons between themselves and potential partners as this seems cognitively less complex. I propose that in order to recognize and choose a compatible partner, and reject an incompatible one, one must first have a fairly clear and stable self-concept. One needs to perceive if the self and potential-other directly match in terms of compatibility, and clarity about one's own personal attributes should facilitate comparisons with others. Importantly, having a confused and poorly defined personal identity could make it harder to either select more compatible dating partners as well as reject incompatible ones.

Self-Concept Clarity

One way to operationalize a clear, versus confused, personal identity is with the construct of self-concept clarity. It is broadly defined as "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). Campbell (1990) conceptualizes self-concept clarity as a structural characteristic of the self-concept in that it describes how the contents of the self-concept (e.g., self-beliefs; self-schemas) are organized. Some researchers have examined self-concept clarity using various measurement approaches over the past 3 decades. Most notably, self-concept clarity has been measured via the extremity (Campbell, 1990; Landau et al, 2009), certainty (Hamid & Cheng, 1995), latitude (i.e., range; Burger & Guadagno, 2003), consistency

(Campbell, 1990; Boucher, 2011), and response latency (Boucher, 2011) of self-descriptions. However, DeMarree & Bobrowski (2017) point out that it remains unclear to what extent these measures validly reflect self-concept clarity as it is broadly defined by Campbell and colleagues (1996). They suggest that these indicators may in fact capture different constructs because they are seldom correlated with each other. The predominant way in which self-concept clarity has been investigated since the original work on self-concept clarity (Campbell, 1990) has been via the Self-Concept Clarity Scale (Campbell et al., 1996). Higher levels on this self-report measure reflect one's perception of having a clear and well-defined sense of self, whereas lower levels reflect having a confused and poorly defined sense of self.

As mentioned previously, self-concept clarity is conceptualized as a relatively stable, individual difference variable (Campbell et al., 1996) with evidence from numerous longitudinal studies indicating a high degree of rank-order stability (*r*s > .65) across several months (e.g., Campbell et al., 1996; Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009) and years (e.g., Crocetti et al., 2016; Lodi-Smith et al., 2017). Self-concept clarity has also been shown to generally increase over the lifespan as a result of normative changes; Lodi-Smith and Crocetti (2017) meta-analyzed 108 effect sizes across 15 longitudinal studies with adolescents and adults finding that self-concept clarity increases over the lifespan. However, self-concept clarity has also been shown to change due to situational factors. For example, social role transitions (Light & Visser, 2013) and romantic break ups (Slotter et al., 2010) have been associated with decreases in self-concept clarity that can last weeks to months.

As people enter or exit important social roles, they are likely to experience changes to their self-concept (e.g., Aron, 2003; Light & Visser, 2013). Often, role entries (e.g., becoming a parent) are marked by new content being added to the self-concept, or self-expansion, whereas

role exits (e.g., becoming an empty nester) can be marked by the loss of self-concept content, or self-contraction (Aron et al., 1996; Lewandowski et al, 2006; Mattingly et al., 2014). Self-concept clarity is thought to decrease during role transitions because of the changes to the self-concept that occur during these transitional times (Slotter & Walsh, 2017). In the case of romantic break-ups, self-concept clarity is thought to decrease because aspects of people's self-concept (e.g., taking on new sports with partner; becoming more *athletic*) that expanded during relationship development (Aron et al., 1996) may become lost after break-up because these are no longer tied to the partner (Slotter et al., 2010). In other words, people's identities become tied to their partners, and losing the partner often comes with the experiences of losing self-clarity. Finally, self-concept clarity can also temporarily fluctuate as demonstrated by experimental studies in which self-concept clarity is manipulated (e.g., Csank & Conway, 2004; Emery et al., 2015).

According to Campbell (1990), self-concept clarity is closely related to, but theoretically distinct, from self-esteem, which she views as the evaluative characteristic of the self-concept reflecting general feelings of self-worth. Many studies have reliably shown a moderate to strong positive correlation between self-concept clarity and self-esteem (e.g., Campbell et al, 1996; Thomas & Gadbois, 2007; DeMarree & Bobrowski, 2017). Researchers therefore recommend that efforts be made to measure both self-concept clarity and self-esteem so as to disambiguate these two constructs and help clarify findings about the effects of self-concept clarity (DeMarree & Bobrowski, 2017). For this reason, I measured self-esteem and treated it as a covariate in all main analyses throughout this thesis. I also measured self-esteem because as previously mentioned, lower levels of self-esteem have been associated with having lower standards for romantic relationships (Hirschberger et al., 2012). I wanted to rule out self-esteem as a potential

confound when testing whether self-concept clarity is uniquely associated with differential partner discrimination.

Self-concept clarity is generally associated with better functioning and psychological wellbeing. For example, higher levels of self-concept clarity predict lower levels of neuroticism and chronic self-analysis (Campbell, et al., 1996), higher levels of self-esteem (e.g., Campbell et al., 1996; Bigler et al., 2001), as well as with lower levels of loneliness, better physical health (Light & Visser, 2013), and greater meaning in life (e.g., Blazek & Besta, 2012). In the domain of committed romantic relationships, self-concept clarity has also been linked with a variety of positive processes and outcomes. For example, at the individual level, self-concept clarity has been linked with greater relationship satisfaction, commitment (Lewandowski et al., 2010; Emery et al., 2021), and dyadic functioning (Gurung et al, 2001). And research using a dyadic framework has shown that individuals higher, compared to lower, in self-concept clarity are not only more satisfied in their romantic relationships, but that their partners are also more satisfied (Parise, et al, 2019). McIntyre and colleagues (2017) suggest that self-concept clarity likely benefits relationships because it supports psychological wellbeing (Campbell et al., 2003). According to the above findings then, self-concept confusion is linked with a host of negative wellbeing correlates (e.g., low self-esteem, neuroticism, loneliness, being less satisfied in relationships). Lower levels of self-concept clarity have also been shown to predict higher levels of depressive symptoms (Richman et al., 2016) and anxiety disorder symptoms (Hayward et al., 2020).

Less attention has been given to how self-concept clarity influences decision making. As mentioned previously, Setterlund and Neidenthal (1983) theorized that confused self-beliefs impair comparisons, and that is why those with confused self-beliefs are less likely to use

similarity information in decisions about self-product fit. Other evidence comes from the literature on goal pursuit. Light (2017) theorized that one important way that self-concept clarity helps individuals pursue their goals, and thus achieve greater well-being, is by facilitating self-control. She argues that the self-concept directs which goals we choose to pursue, and that individuals lacking self-clarity may not only find it harder to create goals for themselves, but their goals may also be vaguely and poorly defined. Consequently, lacking self-clarity may undermine the selection of which goals to pursue. Recently, low self-concept clarity has been linked to worse decision making, showing that people lower, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity make less equitable choices in hypothetical economic games (Ugurlar & Wulff, 2022). It seems that such individuals are less able, or willing, to consider own and others' interests when making decisions that involve both parties. Although the research on self-concept clarity and decision making is sparse, the above literature provides some evidence for the main idea of this thesis, that a confused personal identity may impair the processing of self-other attributes which may in turn hinder the selection and/or rejection of prospective partners.

Thesis Overview

The following chapters comprise of three related manuscripts. The first manuscript (Chapter 2) uses an experimental repeated measures paradigm based on the *phantom-other* procedure (Byrne, 1971) to examine whether dissimilar and similar targets are evaluated differently as a function of self-concept clarity. Studies 1-3 are presented simultaneously because they use virtually the same procedure with Study 3 serving as a pre-registered replication study. For study 1, I began by hypothesizing one of two patterns: lower levels of self-concept clarity would predict either a) less positive evaluations for highly similar targets and more positive evaluations for dissimilar targets, or b) more positive evaluations for less similar targets (low and

moderate levels of similarity). Given the results of study 1, I then hypothesized finding pattern b across Studies 2-4. In Study 4, I incorporated new levels of similarity to make the paradigm more like real world dating scenarios where similarity with others occurs continuously and not categorically, and explored whether uncertainty for match judgments was one mechanism that explained why those low in self-concept clarity ruled out less similar targets less harshly.

The second manuscript (Chapter 3) extends manuscript 1 findings and examines whether lower levels of self-concept clarity highlight a problematic dating tendency in the real world. Study 1 and 2 are retrospective studies asking people to report on their past dating experiences and are presented simultaneously because Study 2 is a pre-registered near replication. I predicted that individuals lower, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity are more likely to have dated incompatible others, have a harder time judging compatibility, and are less decisive during dating. I also predicted that those lower in self-concept clarity are higher in dating-related negative affect and are less satisfied with their dating experiences. Finally, I explored whether those lower in self-concept clarity are more likely to date incompatible others *because* such individuals find it more challenging to judge compatibility and *because* they are less decisive in their dating decisions.

In the third manuscript (Chapter 4), I utilize the same data reported in manuscript 2; I merged the data from the two studies and present new findings in an effort to extend my theorizing about why those with a personal identity may be less choosy when it comes to incompatible dating partners. I created a scale which captures the extent to which one has a clear, vs confused, idea about what the type of romantic relationship one desires and seeks: the *relationship clarity scale*. I use this scale to examine whether relationship clarity is a mechanism through which self-concept clarity influences dating partner evaluations and subsequent partner

selection. Conducting mediation analyses, I first explored whether individuals low in self-concept clarity are less discriminating about dating incompatible partners *because* they are low in relationship clarity. I then examined whether judgement difficulty and dating indecision explain how individuals lower in relationship clarity might come to be less discriminating about incompatible dating partners.

Manuscript 1

Ruling out potential dating partners:

The role of self-concept clarity in initial romantic partner evaluations

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Publication details:

Kubin, D., Kreitewolf, J., & Lydon, J. (2023). Ruling out potential dating partners: The role of self-concept clarity in initial romantic partner evaluations. *Self and Identity; revisions submitted.*

Abstract

Compatibility is considered vital for successful relationships and similar others may make for more compatible romantic partners. Research has also shown that self-confusion interferes with similarity judgements. We thus tested whether people who are lower, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity (i.e., those more confused about who they are) use similarity information less advantageously when evaluating potential romantic partners – whether they are less selective about compatibility at the relationship initiation stage. Across four repeated measures experiments (N = 758), we found that controlling for self-esteem and gender, those lower, versus higher, in self-concept clarity judge low and moderately similar others more positively but judge highly similar others equivalently well. Study 4 also showed that those lower, versus higher, in self-concept clarity are less certain about their match judgements for less similar others, offering one possible explanation for the weaker ruling-out effect among those lower in self-concept clarity. Findings suggest that having an unclear sense of self results in reduced discrimination for less compatible prospective dating partners.

Keywords: self-concept clarity, romantic relationships, compatibility, attraction, similarity

Ruling out potential dating partners: The role of self-concept clarity in initial romantic partner evaluations

Entering romantic relationships can be risky. Successful relationships (i.e., rewarding, higher quality relationships) are good for us in terms of wellbeing (e.g., Dush & Amato, 2005; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010), but often relationships are not successful. Although many factors throughout the course of a relationship can impact relationship success, one of the earliest ones that arguably sets the stage for rewarding relationships is deciding whom to go out with in the first place - some individuals may make for better, more compatible, mates from the outset. Compatibility essentially captures how well two people "fit" together. Compatible partners are theorized to have smoother (Ickes, 1983) and more positive interactions (Berscheid, 1983), and evidence from the literature on attraction suggests that similar others make for more compatible mates (Sprecher, 2011). But presumably to know whether someone is compatible, one needs to have a fairly clear and coherent sense of self; clarity about one's own personal attributes should facilitate self-other comparisons, impacting judgements of self-other "fit".

Interestingly, one earlier study found that those with less clear, more confused self-beliefs use similarity information less often when making consumer decisions about self-product fit (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993). However, no research has yet examined whether or how a confused sense of self influences similarity judgements in the context of dating - a time when people are frequently making self-other comparisons as they decide who would be a good, compatible match for them. In the current research we treated similarity as a proxy for compatibility and examined whether people use similarity information less often, or effectively, when they have a confused sense of who they are themselves - whether such individuals are less discriminating about dating partners in terms of similarity.

Compatibility

Few would argue with the general assertion that individuals who are compatible increase their odds of developing longer lasting and more satisfying romantic relationships. When asked what makes a potential mate a high value one, the most common response among lay folks is one who is compatible (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014). And scholars have long considered compatibility to be vital to relational wellbeing, broadly conceptualizing compatibility as how well two members of a couple 'fit' together; that is, how smoothly and harmoniously they function as a unit (Berscheid, 1985; Ickes, 1985). Although compatibility is theorized to lead to greater relationship success and wellbeing, it has largely been assumed from constructs such as relationship satisfaction, commitment, and persistence (Berscheid, 1985) in large part because compatibility is a complex, multi-dimensional construct that is challenging to operationalize and hence to examine more comprehensively.

A summary of the literature by Sprecher (2011) suggests there are four broad components thought that drive compatibility between two romantic partners: each person's positive qualities (e.g., agreeableness), joint characteristics of both individuals combined to create some kind of 'match' between them (e.g., similarity), the interaction quality or dyadic processes that unfold between two people (e.g., communication styles), and various proximal or distal environmental factors that facilitate couple functioning (e.g., supportive friends). This aforementioned 4-factor model is also somewhat consistent with recent theorizing by Eastwick and colleagues (2022) who posit that people are tracking and matching various self-other attributes (e.g., ideal partner preferences, similarity, mate value) as well as, and to a greater extent, weighing past idiosyncratic shared experiences they have had with someone when assessing compatibility with them.

Similarity has received a lot of attention in relationship research, with findings generally supporting the idea that similar others are a good way to maximize compatibility, or self-other "fit". For example, considerable earlier research on interpersonal attraction in first impression contexts has shown that people like others who are more similar to them (*similarity-attraction effect*; e.g., Byrne, 1971; meta-analysis, Montoya et al., 2008) in terms of attitudes and beliefs (e.g., Byrne, 1971), values (e.g., Davis, 1981; Lewis & Walsh, 1980), and activity preferences (Lydon et al., 1988) though findings have been less consistent for personality traits (e. g., Banikiotes & Neimeyer, 1981). Other avenues of research have shown that individuals explicitly state they prefer romantic partners who are similar to them (Regan et al., 2000; Sprecher & Regan, 2002) and that real world users of online dating sites prefer other users who are similar to them on various demographic variables, such as education (e.g., Skopek et al., 2011), religion, and ethnicity, as well lifestyle habits (Hitsch et al., 2010; Fiore & Donath, 2005).

Similarity is thought to be important because it reinforces and validates our sense of who we are and what we believe in (Byrne & Clore, 1970; Singh et al., 2007), promotes smoother, more enjoyable interactions (Davis, 1981), and increases the chances of engaging in activities that both individuals find interesting and fun (Baxter & West, 2003; Burleson & Denton, 1992). Although the link between similarity and relationship satisfaction downstream in existing relationships is, to date, inconsistent and unclear (e.g., Gonzaga et al, 2007; Dyrenforth et al, 2010), Finkel and colleagues (2012) posit that similarity for some attributes, such as important attitudes and values, may be a starting point for compatibility in the early stages of relationship formation, acting as a foundation of some common ground upon which other powerful relationship processes then unfold.

Clearly, compatibility is a complex construct that, according to lay folks and scholars, seems to matter considerably for relationship success. However, successful dating is not only a matter of finding compatible partners. It is also about being able to reject ill-suited ones (Joel & Eastwick, 2018). Some researchers have argued that in dating, people rule out the least desirable (i.e., least similar) prospective partners first so as to narrow the dating pool, and then begin choosing from among the more suitable candidates (Byrne et al., 1986). Rosenbaum (1986) went further and argued that it is not similarity that matters for attraction, but rather that dissimilarity (i.e., negative information) matters because it engenders repulsion. More recently, Joel & MacDonald (2021) made the case that people initially consider dating a diverse range of people and then weed out the less suitable prospective partners during dating. Although dating paths can take many trajectories, it seems clear that ruling out unsuitable or incompatible others is key to forming satisfying relationships.

Self-Concept Clarity

But, to effectively assess compatibility, one likely requires having reliable and well-defined self-knowledge. Presumably, the better defined a self is, the better a reference point the self makes in a self-other comparison (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993). The self is usually a highly accessible reference point when making social comparisons (Rogers et al., 1977; Dunning & Hayes, 1996) and similarity judgements (Catrambone et al., 1996), but when the self is less clear and self-knowledge is less well-defined, the self may be a less accessible reference point and as a result a less useful or reliable one. In short, a confused self may make comparisons and/or similarity judgements more challenging (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993), ultimately undermining compatibility assessments during mate selection.

Self-concept clarity refers to the degree to which contents of the self-concept (i.e., the myriad of self-beliefs) are well defined and organized, and stable over time (Campbell et al., 1996). It is conceptualized as a structural characteristic of the self-concept and is conceptually distinct from the construct of self-esteem, the evaluative aspect of the self-concept (Campbell, 1990). To be *lower* in self-concept clarity, as measured by the validated Self-Concept Clarity Scale (Campbell et al., 1996), is to have a less clear, more confused sense of oneself. This subjective perception of self-confusion has been associated with lower levels of individual wellbeing (e.g., greater neuroticism and lower self-esteem; Campbell et al. 1996) as well as lower levels of relationship commitment and satisfaction (Lewandowski et al., 2010), dyadic functioning (Gurung et al., 2001), and partner satisfaction (Parise et al., 2019). Research on the impact of self-concept clarity on compatibility judgements and partner selection is, however, sparse.

Interestingly, earlier evidence suggests self-confusion interferes with the use of similarity information when making consumer decisions. Setterlund and Niedenthal (1993) examined individual differences in the use of self-to-prototype matching, a decision-making strategy in which an individual compares themselves to a prototypical-other who they imagine behaving a certain way in a given situation and then makes choices based on similarity with the prototypical other (Niedenthal & Cantor, 1984). For example, if an individual is thinking of purchasing a new car – a red Porsche - they would compare their personal attributes (successful, passionate, daring) to that of the typical person they imagine would buy that type of car (ambitious, passionate, sophisticated) and then select that car if their personal attributes match the imagined other's attributes in terms of similarity. Setterlund and Niedenthal (1993) reasoned that individuals who have more stable and clear self-beliefs should be able to use self-to-prototype

matching more often because clearer self-attributes would make for easier self-to-prototype comparisons. In their study, they induced either more self-clarity or self-confusion in their participants and found that those in the self-clarity condition used self-to-prototype matching when rating their preferences for cars and restaurants but those in the self-confusion condition did not. This demonstrated that clarity of self-knowledge could be differentially linked to using a decision-making strategy involving similarity judgements, and importantly, it showed that self-confusion interferes with the use of such a strategy.

We extended and tested this idea, that self-confusion interferes with similarity judgements, in the context of relationship initiation - a time when people are likely using similarity information in their direct comparisons with prospective partners as they decide who would be a better, more compatible match for them. We theorize that individuals *lower*, versus higher, in self-concept clarity use similarity information less often, or advantageously, as they evaluate potential romantic partners because confusion about one's personal attributes may hinder similarity judgements and ultimately result in such individuals becoming less selective about their dating partners.

Overview of Present Research

Across four experiments, we tested whether people evaluate similar and dissimilar prospective dating partners differentially depending on their levels of self-concept clarity. We operationalized similarity in terms of both attitudes and personality because attitudes demonstrate the most robust similarity-attraction effect (e.g., Byrne, 1971) and personality would make the studies seem more ecologically valid. Given that our studies were advertised as online tests of a future dating app, we thought that personality traits would make the people in the profiles seem more real and our cover story more believable.

At this early stage of theorizing, we reasoned that using similarity information less well when evaluating potential mates would most likely manifest in one of two patterns. To the extent that self-concept clarity broadly facilitates the use of similarity judgements, one possibility is that it is most useful in helping individuals *rule-out* dissimilar others (i.e., those less compatible) and *rule-in* highly similar others (i.e., those more compatible). If this is the case, then we would expect that lower self-concept clarity predicts more positive evaluations of dissimilar targets, and less positive evaluations of highly similar targets (Hypotheses 1a and b; Pattern 1). However, literature on first impressions has reliably demonstrated a negativity bias (e.g., Peeters & Czapinski, 1990) and research on relationship formation suggests that ruling dissimilar others out may be a critical first step in the process of finding more compatible romantic partners (Byrne et al., 1986). If ruling out dissimilar others is the imperative in dating, and those lower in self-concept clarity use similarity information less often or advantageously, then we may rather expect to find that lower self-concept clarity predicts more positive evaluations for low and moderately similar others, but not influence evaluations of highly similar targets (Hypotheses 2a and b; Pattern 2).

In *Studies 1* and *2*, using diverse populations, we explored which of these two broad patterns was more likely. Based on results from these studies, we conducted *Study 3* and pre-registered our hypotheses (Pattern 2). In *Study 4*, we used a modified version of the experimental procedure (adding levels of similarity) and sought to conceptually replicate Pattern 2. We also attempted to explain that pattern by testing whether those *lower*, versus higher, in self-concept clarity are less certain about their interpersonal evaluations. To rule out two potential confounds and to be able to compare the same pre-registered model across studies, we controlled for both self-esteem and gender across studies. Self-esteem is a reliably strong covariate of self-concept

clarity (e.g., DeMarree & Bobrowski, 2017) and some research has linked lower self-esteem with lower romantic partner standards (Hirschberger et al., 2002). With respect to gender, males, compared to females, tend to evaluate prospective partners more positively (Lee et al., 2008) and are typically less selective in dating (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993).

Method

Studies 1- 3

The same experimental procedure and analytic model was employed for Studies 1-3; we thus present these studies together for parsimony. Our pre-registered hypotheses for Study 3 were that *lower* self-concept clarity predicts more positive evaluations for dissimilar and moderately similar targets, and equally positive evaluations for highly similar targets (https://osf.io/gpu97/?view_only=81443655dab74f359b7c351874f1cc5a; includes codebook, datasets, and syntax for all three studies). All studies were approved by our University Ethics Board and conducted using Qualtrics. We did not conduct a priori power analyses for our studies. We employed a repeated measures design which leverages power and collected as much data as possible given resources for each study to ensure an adequate sample exceeding the minimum recommendation of 50 level-2 units (i.e., participants) for multilevel designs to minimize bias of estimates (Maas & Hox, 2005).

Following Lane & Hennes (2018), in R we performed sensitivity analyses for multilevel models by running simulations to estimate the smallest effect size for the fixed effect of self-concept clarity that could be reliably detected with 80% power in a replication study with the same sample size and parameters as those in Study 1. Results indicate that a replication study with a sample size of 176 would provide 80% power to detect an unstandardized coefficient of at

least b = -.11 (SE = .11) between self-concept clarity and overall evaluations (using Model with Low Similarity as reference group; see supplemental materials for details).

Participants

Study 1

One hundred eighty-four individuals participated in this study (48.4% female; 58.7% Caucasian; M_{age} = 26.84; SD = 5.24; see supplemental material for detailed demographics); all were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online crowdsourcing platform. To be eligible to participate, participants had to be single, between 18-40 years old, and located in North America. Eight participants were removed from analyses: five completed the study in less than half the advertised time, and three were neither male nor female (controlling for gender across studies required us to include only males and females in all studies[1]). The final analytic sample = 176 participants.

Study 2

One hundred seventy individuals participated in this study (60% female; 63.5% Caucasian; M_{age}[2] = 19.97; SD = 1.61); all were recruited from a large Canadian university and were compensated either with course credit or were paid $5.00 for their time. To be eligible to participate, participants had to be single. Three participants were removed from analyses: one completed the study in less than half the advertised time, one took longer than 6 hours to finish, and one was neither male nor female. The final analytic sample = 167 participants.

Study 3

One hundred seventy-four individuals participated in this pre-registered study (49.4% female; 58.6% Caucasian; M_{age} = 27.37; SD = 5.40); all were recruited from MTurk. Eligibility

[1] All analyses held when including participants who identified as other-gendered in all studies.
[2] Data collection error: age is calculated from 55.7% of undergraduate sample.

criteria was the same as Study 1. Eleven participants were removed from analyses: two completed the study in less than half the advertised time, five were neither male nor female, three were inconsistent in their self-reported gender/sexual orientation and the gender/sexual orientation of preferred targets, and one inadvertently chose the wrong gender to evaluation. The final analytic sample = 163 participants.

Procedure

The studies were advertised as a test of a future dating app being developed by local developers, for which only singles (i.e., those currently not involved in committed relationships) could take part. Instructions informed participants the researchers were helping a local web-developer in a large Canadian city test question formats for the app and that they would be evaluating profiles of single past participants who were in a database from recent studies. The procedure for all three studies was virtually identical, except that in Study 2 we added an innocuous filler task[3] between self and target ratings to make the nature of the study less obvious and hinder rote memorization of self-ratings.

Beginning the study proper, participants first provided demographic information and then completed a measure of self-concept clarity. Next, they rated themselves on various personality and attitude items and then completed a measure of self-esteem. They were then asked for their romantic preferences: whether they preferred to view males or females, heterosexual/homosexual or bisexual individuals, and the preferred age range of those they would consider dating. Next, participants viewed and rated one target profile at a time. Unknown to the participants, their self-report information on traits and attitudes was used to generate the profiles they viewed and rated. These fictitious profiles were designed to vary in terms of how similar each target was to each

[3] Participants completed a 21-item measure of construal level (Behavior Identification Form, Vallacher & Wegner, 1989); reported findings were not influenced by its inclusion.

participant. The target profiles consisted of either a generic male or female silhouette, descriptive information that was uninformative (initials, and gender/sexual orientation/age range - the latter three reflected participants' preferences), and critically, eight traits and eight attitudes. After all evaluations, a suspicion check was done followed by debriefing. Across studies, no participant reported knowing the true nature of the studies; however, four raised doubts about whether the individuals in the profiles were real. These four were kept in the analyses; when dropped, results were not significantly different.

Measures

Personality Traits

Following Campbell (1990), participants rated themselves on 20 bipolar traits which were comprised of adjective pairs, such that endorsement of one adjective corresponds with non-endorsement of the other. Traits included items such as gentle/boisterous and conventional/unconventional. Participants recorded their responses to each trait-pair using a 6-option multiple choice response format. For example, when asked to rate themselves on gentle/boisterous, options were: I am *very gentle*/*fairly gentle*/*a bit gentle*/*a bit boisterous*/*fairly boisterous*/*very boisterous*. See codebook for details.

Attitudes

Following Byrne (1971), participants rated themselves on 20 attitude issues/topics. Not all attitude ratings followed the same format; items asked participants to agree/disagree, support/not support, or show a preference for or against an issue or topic. Items included attitudes about sports, fate, and money. Participants rated their attitudes using a 6-option multiple choice response format. For example, when asked to rate their attitude about sports, options were: I *enjoy* sports very much, I *enjoy* sports, I *enjoy* sports a bit, I *dislike* sports a bit, I *dislike*

sports, I *dislike* sports very much. This type of pattern was repeated for all attitude items. See codebook for details.

Self-Concept Clarity

Participants completed a 12-item measure assessing their self-perception of having stable and clear self-beliefs (SCC; Campbell et al., 1996), using a 5-point Likert scale from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (5). A sample item is "In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am". A mean score was computed; across studies, α = .85 - .90.

Self-Esteem

Participants completed a 10-item measure assessing general feelings of self-worth (SE; Rosenberg, 1965). A sample item is "I feel that I have a number of good qualities"; responses were made using a 4-point Likert scale, from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (4). A mean score was computed; across studies, α = .89 - .93.

Interpersonal Attraction

Participants were asked two questions assessing their liking for a target taken from Alves (2018): "To what extent do you like this person?", and "To what extent do you find this person interesting?". Responses were made using a 7-point Likert scale, from *Not at All* (1) to *Extremely* (7). A mean of these two items serves as the measure for interpersonal attraction. Across all stimuli, these two items were strongly correlated (*r*s .80 - .87).

Match judgements

Participants were asked to assess how well they matched each target by responding to one item, "Do you think this person would be a good match for you?". Responses were made using a 7-point Likert scale, from *Definitely Not* (-3) to *Definitely Yes* (3); for analyses, item was recoded to *Definitely Not* = 1 and *Definitely Yes* = 7.

Overall Evaluations

A composite was created from two variables, attraction and match judgements (correlated across studies from .79 to .85), to capture overall mean positive evaluation of targets. We disclose that we pre-registered our hypotheses for two separate dependent measures, attraction and match judgements; we originally reasoned that the former might tap an affective evaluation and latter a cognitive evaluation of self-other fit. The pattern of results was very similar for both outcome variables across studies which may be due to having placed these two measure one after the other such that responses for attraction may have driven responses for match judgements. Because the two variables were highly correlated across studies within levels of similarity (*r*'s range from .74 to .90), to simplify reporting we present findings for one outcome variable - *overall evaluation* - a composite of attraction and match judgements, computed as [attraction + match]/2. Of note, for 18 comparisons, the pattern of results across studies for the two variables was consistent for all but two of the 18 analyses (see supplemental material).

Evaluation difficulty

In an exit question at the end of each study, participants were asked, "How easy, vs hard, was it for you evaluate the people in the profiles?". Responses were made on a 5-point Likert scale, from *Very Easy* (1) to *Very Hard* (5).

Target Profile Generation

We computed similarity by randomly selecting 8 of the 20 traits and 8 of the 20 attitudes each participant self-reported and input these 16 items into each profile. We designed algorithms which were applied equally for traits and attitudes, such that a highly similar other, for example, was similar in terms of both traits *and* attitudes. The algorithms generated profiles that were roughly 10%, 50% and 90% similar to the participant in terms of traits and attitudes. To create a

similar target, six of the 8 traits were identical in response to that of the participant on a 1-6 bipolar Likert scale, one was 1 point away, and one was 2 points away. Because creating a moderately similar target was less obvious computationally, we created two algorithms for moderate similarity and used both algorithms in all three studies. With the Moderate 1 algorithm, one of the 8 traits was identical in response, three were 1 point away, three were 2 points away, and one was 3 points away. With the Moderate 2 algorithm, two traits were identical, two were 1 point away, two were 2 points away, and two were 3 points away. And to create a dissimilar target, six of the 8 traits were 3 points away, one was 2 points away, and one was 1 point away. In total, each participant viewed 12 targets in random order: 3 low, 6 moderate, and 3 high in similarity (see supplemental material for more details).

Data Analysis

A multilevel modeling approach was employed using the MIXED procedure in SPSS (V.23) to analyze our repeated measures experimental design. For all studies, linear mixed models were estimated using full information maximum likelihood (ML) and the variance components (VC) option. We followed the same model building sequence for all studies (see supplementary materials for the regression equation, model building details and model fit statistics). Here we report only results from the full models for each study, predicting overall evaluations; the full model contains two level-1 predictors (similarity; as 2 dummy variables), three level-2 predictors, self-esteem, gender, and self-concept clarity, six cross-level interactions between similarity and the three level-2 predictors, and three random effects (intercept and level-1 slopes).

Because similarity is a categorical variable with 3 levels (Low, Mod, High), additional models in each series of multilevel models were conducted in which the reference group for

similarity was recoded. This coding scheme allowed us to obtain a simple effect of self-concept clarity for each type of unique target – the critical tests of our study hypotheses. As an effect size measure, we provide partially standardized beta coefficients (β) of the fixed effects of self-concept clarity for all studies. Following Lorah (2018), we refit each full model with standardized continuous predictors and the outcome variable and kept the level-1 dummy variables as binary because it is not meaningful to standardize them. Effect sizes for self-concept clarity can thus be interpreted as: an increase of 1 *SD* in self-concept clarity is associated with an increase/decrease of X *SD* units in overall evaluation, controlling for associated variables.

Manipulation Check

A pilot study (N = 192; 78.4% female; M_{age} = 20.22; SD = 1.57) with an undergraduate sample was conducted to test the algorithms. Results revealed that participants perceived the highly similar targets as most similar, the moderately similar targets as less similar and the dissimilar targets as least similar. All levels of actual similarity were significantly different from one another in terms of perceived similarity (PS; all p's < .05; see supplemental material); because the two moderate algorithms produced very close ratings on PS and were both considerably different from the low and high similarity ratings, we collapsed them for all analyses going forward. We also tested whether those lower, versus higher, in self-concept clarity are less accurate in perceiving similarity with the different types of targets because one possibility is that having an unclear sense of self makes it harder to perceive similarity which could explain why those lower in self-concept clarity may prefer dissimilar others more and/or highly similar others less. Using multilevel regression analyses, we found no such evidence: self-concept clarity did not predict PS for any type of similarity target (all p's > .05; see supplementary materials for details). Our results suggest that those lower and higher in self-

concept clarity are comparably accurate in perceiving similarity with low, moderate, and highly similar targets in our paradigm.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics for main study variables are provided in Table 1. Self-concept clarity and self-esteem (abbreviated as SCC and SE, respectively, in results for simplicity) were strongly positively correlated across studies (*r*'s range from .56 to .62; all *p*'s < .001), and males, versus females, rated dissimilar targets more positively in Studies 1 and 3, and moderately similar targets more positively in all three studies (see effects of gender in main analyses).

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for main study variables across Studies 1-3

	Study 1 *N* = 176	Study 2 *N* = 167	Study 3 *N* = 163
Variable	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)
Self-concept clarity	3.28 (.79)	3.05 (.68)	3.22 (.81)
Self-esteem	2.88 (.61)	2.84 (.53)	2.85 (.63)
Overall Evaluations (aggregate)	3.99 (1.57)	4.06 (1.47)	4.04 (1.53)
Low similarity targets	2.80 (1.32)	2.75 (1.11)	2.84 (1.28)
Moderate similarity targets	3.99 (1.42)	4.09 (1.24)	4.03 (1.33)
High similarity targets	5.16 (1.12)	5.29 (1.04)	5.26 (1.13)
Evaluation Difficulty	2.79 (1.09)	3.28 (1.07)	2.96 (1.11)

Note. Overall Evaluations = (attraction + match judgement)/2.

SCC was also negatively associated with evaluation difficulty in all three studies (Study 1, $r(176) = -.19$, $p = .012$; Study 2, $r(165) = -.33$, $p < .001$; Study 3, $r(163) = -.30$, $p < .001$); these

associations remained significant after controlling for SE in Studies 2 ($r(156) = -.30$, $p < .001$) and 3 ($r(160) = -.20$, $p = .012$), but not Study 1 ($r(172) = -.12$, $p = .113$), indicating those lower, versus higher, in SCC find it more challenging to evaluate descriptive profiles of people.

Main Analyses

Predicting Overall Evaluations of Dissimilar Targets

In all three studies, those lower, versus higher, in SCC evaluated dissimilar targets more positively, controlling for gender and SE. As seen in Figure 1, and detailed in Table 2, a significant simple effect of SCC was found for dissimilar targets in each study: Study 1, $b = -.31$, $SE = .11$, t (319.02) = -2.85, $p = .005$, CI [-.52, -.10], Study 2, $b = -.26$, $SE = .11$, t (404.23) = -2.45, $p = .015$, CI [-.47, -.05], Study 3, $b = -.33$, $SE = .10$, t (381.958) = -3.88, $p = .001$, CI [-.52, -.13]. The partially standardized coefficients of SCC for dissimilar targets are $\beta = -.16$ (Study 1), $\beta = -.12$ (Study 2), and $\beta = -.17$ (Study 3). Additionally, two significant interactions were found in Study 3 (Low vs Mod Similarity X SCCS, $b = .21$, $p = .031$; and Low vs High Similarity X SCCS, $b = .52$, $p < .001$) revealing that as SCCS increases, the relationship between similarity-overall evaluations becomes stronger. These overall interactions were not found in Studies 1 and 2.

Predicting Overall Evaluations of Moderately Similar Targets

Results were less consistent across studies with respect to Hypothesis 2b: as seen in Figure 1, and detailed in Table 3, a simple effect of SCC on overall target evaluations for Moderately similar targets was significant in Study 1 ($b = -.41$, $SE = .10$, t (213.68) = -4.21, $p < .001$, CI [-.60, -.22]), but not in Studies 2 ($b = -.12$, $SE = .09$, t (249.77) = -1.32, $p = .118$, CI[-.29, .06]) and 3 ($b = -.12$, $SE = .08$, t (235.165) = -1.47, $p = .144$, CI [-.28, .04]). The standardized coefficients for SCC for moderately similar targets are $\beta = -.21$ (Study 1), $\beta = -.05$

(Study 2), and β = -.06 (Study 3). A significant interaction between Mod vs High Similarity and SCC was also found in Study 1 (*b* = .25, *p* = .025), and Study 3 (*b* = .31, *p* = .002). Both interactions indicate that the relationship between SCC and evaluations differed between the moderately and highly similar conditions.

Predicting Overall Evaluations of Highly Similar Targets

Those lower in SCC evaluated highly similar targets less positively in Study 3, but not in Studies 1 and 2 where null effects were observed. As seen in Figure 1, and detailed in Table 4, a simple effect of SCC on overall target evaluations was significant in Study 3, (*b* = .19, *SE* = .10, *t* (359.12) = 1.99, *p* = .047, CI [.00, .38]), but not in Study 2, (*b* = -.02, *SE* = .11, *t* (396.02) = -0.21, *p* = .831, CI [-.23, .19]) or Study 1, (*b* = -.16, *SE* = .10, *t* (309.99) = -1.58, *p* = .116, CI [-.36, .04]). The standardized coefficients for SCC for highly similar targets are β = -08 (Study 1), β = -.01 (Study 2), and β = .10 (Study 3).

Table 2

Parameter estimates from full multilevel models for Studies 1, 2 and 3, predicting overall evaluations of Low similarity targets

Parameter	STUDY 1		STUDY 2		STUDY 3	
	b (*SE*)	*p*	*b* (*SE*)	*p*	*b* (*SE*)	*p*
Fixed effects						
Intercept	2.80 (.07)	< .001	2.76 (.06)	< .001	2.85 (.07)	< .001
D1: Low vs Mod Similarity	1.19 (.06)	< .001	1.37 (.06)	< .001	1.20 (.06)	< .001
D2: Low vs High Similarity	2.36 (.08)	< .001	2.55 (.07)	< .001	2.42 (.08)	< .001
Self-esteem	.16 (.14)	.259	.30 (.14)	.030	.17 (.13)	.183
Gender	-.41 (.14)	.003	-.11 (.12)	.353	-.51 (.13)	< .001
Self-concept clarity[1]	**-.31 (.11)**	**.005**	**-.26 (.10)**	**.015**	**-.33 (.10)**	**.001**
D1 x Self-esteem	.09 (.13)	.458	.00 (.13)	.983	-.04 (.12)	.768
D2 x Self-esteem	.10 (.16)	.554	-.12 (.16)	.464	-.06 (.15)	.664
D1 x Gender	-.01 (.12)	.953	-.20 (.12)	.079	.05 (.13)	.683
D2 x Gender	.21 (.16)	.188	-.03 (.14)	.809	.47 (.15)	.003
D1 x Self-concept clarity	-.10 (.10)	.316	.14 (.10)	.158	.21 (.09)	.031
D2 x Self-concept clarity	.15 (.13)	.237	.24 (.12)	.056	.52 (.12)	< .001
Random effects						
Intercept	.43 (.06)	< .001	.23 (.04)	< .001	.28 (.05)	< .001
Residual	1.15 (.04)	< .001	1.05 (.04)	< .001	1.22 (.04)	< .001
D1 – random slopes	.09 (.07)	.072	.00 (.03)	.934	.03 (.04)	.524
D2 – random slopes	.32 (.09)	< .001	.09 (.06)	.120	.13 (.07)	.075

Note. Low similarity = reference group; SE and SCC are grand-mean centered; gender is contrast coded (male = -.5, female = .5); D designates a dummy coded variable; [1] parameter estimate of self-concept clarity represents the association between SCC on overall evaluations in the low similarity condition, controlling for SE and gender.

Table 3

Parameter estimates from full multilevel models for Studies 1, 2 and 3, predicting overall evaluations of Moderately similar targets

Parameter	STUDY 1		STUDY 2		STUDY 3	
	b (*SE*)	*p*	*b* (*SE*)	*p*	*b* (*SE*)	*p*
Fixed effects						
Intercept	3.99 (.06)	< .001	4.13 (.05)	< .001	4.04 (.05)	< .001
D1: Mod vs Low Similarity	-1.19 (.07)	< .001	-1.37 (.06)	< .001	-1.20 (.07)	< .001
D2: Mod vs High Similarity	1.17 (.07)	< .001	1.18 (.06)	< .001	1.22 (.07)	< .001
Self-esteem	.25 (.13)	.044	.30 (.11)	.009	.13 (.11)	.213
Gender	-.42 (.12	.001	-.32 (.10)	.002	-.46 (.11)	< .001
Self-concept clarity[1]	**-.41 (.10)**	< .001	**-.12 (.10)**	**.118**	**-.12 (.08)**	**.144**
D1 x Self-esteem	-.09 (.15)	.521	-.00 (.14)	.991	.04 (.13)	.787
D2 x Self-esteem	.00 (.14)	.990	- .12 (.14)	.386	-.03 (.13)	.824
D1 x Gender	.00 (.14)	.959	.20 (.13)	.110	-.05 (.14)	.703
D2 x Gender	.22 (.14)	.118	.17 (.12)	.170	.41 (.13)	.002
D1 x Self-concept clarity	.10 (.11)	.386	-.14 (.11)	.195	-.21 (.11)	.050
D2 x Self-concept clarity	.25 (.11)	.025	.09 (.11)	.381	.31 (.10)	.002
Random effects						
Intercept	.47 (.06)	< .001	.23 (.04)	< .001	.29 (.05)	< .001
Residual	1.10 (.04)	< .001	1.03 (.04)	< .001	1.19 (.04)	< .001
D1 – random slopes	.34 (.09)	< .001	.11 (.06)	.065	.19 (.08)	.017
D2 – random slopes	.27 (.08)	.001	.08 (.06)	.165	.11 (.07)	.115

Note. Moderate similarity = reference group; SE and SCC are grand-mean centered; gender is contrast coded (male = -.5, female = .5); D designates a dummy coded variable; [1] parameter estimate of self-concept clarity represents the association between SCC on overall evaluations in the moderate similarity condition, controlling for SE and gender.

Table 4

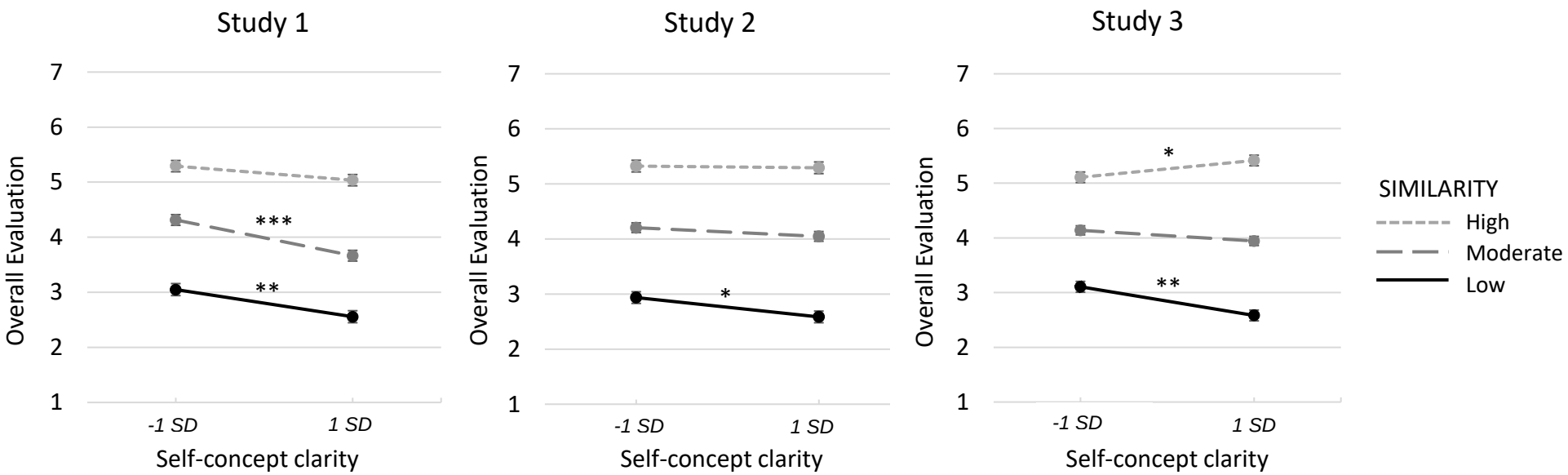
Parameter estimates from full multilevel models for Studies 1, 2 and 3, predicting overall evaluations of Highly similar targets

Parameter	STUDY 1		STUDY 2		STUDY 3	
	b (*SE*)	*p*	*b* (*SE*)	*p*	*b* (*SE*)	*p*
Fixed effects						
Intercept	5.16 (.06)	< .001	5.31 (.06)	< .001	5.26 (.06)	< .001
D1: High vs Mod Similarity	-1.17 (.06)	< .001	-1.18 (.06)	< .001	-1.22 (.06)	< .001
D2: High vs Low Similarity	-2.36 (.08)	< .001	-2.55 (.07)	< .001	-2.42 (.08)	< .001
Self-esteem	.26 (.13)	.053	.18 (.14)	.186	.10 (.12)	.398
Gender	-.20 (.13)	.114	-.15 (.12)	.226	-.05 (.13)	.712
Self-concept clarity[1]	**-.16 (.10)**	**.116**	**-.02 (.11)**	**.831**	**.19 (.10)**	**.047**
D1 x Self-esteem	-.00 (.13)	.985	.12 (.13)	.356	.03 (.12)	.820
D2 x Self-esteem	-.10 (.17)	.574	.12 (.16)	.465	.06 (.15)	.676
D1 x Gender	-.22 (.13)	.095	-.17 (.12)	.144	-.41 (.13)	.001
D2 x Gender	-.21 (.17)	.207	.03 (.14)	.819	-.47 (.16)	.004
D1 x Self-concept clarity	-.25 (.10)	.017	-.09 (.10)	352	-.31 .10)	.001
D2 x Self-concept clarity	-.15 (.13)	.259	-.24 (.13)	.060	-.52 (.12)	< .001
Random effects						
Intercept	.34 (.06)	< .001	.23 (.04)	< .001	.26 (.05)	< .001
Residual	1.12 (.04)	< .001	1.04 (.04)	< .001	1.20 (.04)	< .001
D1 – random slopes	.17 (06)	.004	.01 (.04)	.877	.05 (.05)	.282
D2 – random slopes	.45 (.10)	< .001	.12 (.06)	.050	.21 (.08)	.009

Note. High similarity = reference group; SE and SCC are grand-mean centered; gender is contrast coded (male = -.5, female = .5); D designates a dummy coded variable; [1] parameter estimate of self-concept clarity represents the association between SCC on overall evaluations in the high similarity condition, controlling for SE and gender.

Figure 1

Simple effects of self-concept clarity on overall target evaluations for Low, Moderate, and High similarity targets for Studies 1-3



Note. Multilevel regression analyses depicting the association between SCC (1 *SD* below and above the mean) and overall target evaluations for low, moderate, and highly similar target, plotted descriptively from separate analyses; error bars represent standard errors. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

Integrated Data Analysis

Although the interaction between SCC and the Low vs High Similarity dummy variable was inconsistent across studies, its presence offers some evidence that similarity may influence evaluations more strongly for those higher, versus lower, in SCC. Unfortunately, approaches to synthesizing slopes are not recommended because slopes are partial associations and previously used methods that impute *r* values from standardized *B* are no longer recommended in meta-analyses as they can bias estimates (Roth et al., 2018). To test the reliability of the aforementioned interaction and clarify whether the slope of SCC is steeper for dissimilar compared to highly similar targets, we conducted follow-up analyses by merging data from the 3 studies (N = 506) and refitting the same full model. Findings revealed a significant interaction between SCC and Low vs High Similarity (b = .28, p < .001), and between SCC and Mod vs High Similarity (b = -.23, p < .001) on overall evaluations, suggesting that both the low and moderate slopes differ from high similarity. The slope of SCC did not get steeper going from moderate to low similarity (SCC X Low vs Mod Similarity interaction; b = .06; p = .320).[4] Finally, as expected, we found a significant simple effect of SCC for low similarity targets (b = -.29, p < .001), as well as for moderately similar targets (b = -.23, p < .001), but not highly similar targets (b = -.01, p = .904) which is consistent with our earlier analyses.

Discussion

The most consistent pattern found across studies is that lower SCC predicts more positive (or less negative) evaluations of dissimilar targets. Although the results across studies are less

[4] We conducted the same analyses controlling for Study. To simplify this analysis, we compared Study 2 (undergraduates) to Studies 1 and 3 combined (MTurk workers) via one dummy variable. Study was not a significant factor in this analysis (b = .11, p = .193) and it did not moderate the 2-way interactions of (A) SCC X Low vs High Similarity, nor (B) SCC X Mod vs High Similarity, nor (C) SCC X Low vs Mod Similarity. However, having this term in the model did weaken the 2-way interactions of A (p = .080), and B (p = .424).

clear for moderately and highly similar targets, results taken together lend more support for hypothesized Pattern 2 than for Pattern 1. That is, we observed a null effect of SCC for highly similar targets in Studies 1 and 2, though not in Study 3; however, in Study 3 the effect was not robust. We also observed an effect of SCC for moderately similar targets in Study 1 but not in Studies 2 and 3, although the slopes were trending in the same direction across the 3 studies[5]. It was unclear, however, if the slopes of SCC were stronger the greater the dissimilarity. The pattern of results from the integrated data analysis, interpreted cautiously, suggests that highly similar targets tend to be well liked, regardless of SCC, and that at some point near or below levels of moderate similarity, SCC starts to impact evaluations. Additionally, we also found that those lower in SCC report finding it harder to evaluate descriptive profiles of others suggesting they find prospective partner evaluations more challenging to do.

Study 4

One first goal with Study 4 was to conceptually replicate Pattern 2 from our earlier studies. We were concerned that differences in target similarity (low, moderate, high) may have been obvious to participants in Studies 1-3 and did not reflect real world dating contexts in which the pool of potential dating partners is diverse in terms of similarity and thus likely harder to navigate. We therefore made the task of target evaluation more challenging by introducing two new intermediary levels of similarity into our paradigm. We pre-registered the hypotheses that 1. those *lower*, versus higher, in SCC would judge less similar others as better romantic matches, and that 2. regardless of SCC, highly similar targets would be liked equivalently well (https://osf.io/dr8y7/?view_only=41582bcef7a749bea978a23f809b0346; includes codebook, dataset and syntax*).*

[5] All simple effects held when re-running the analyses without covariates, except for one (Study 2; simple effect of SCC on overall evaluations for dissimilar targets was no longer significant, b = -.03, SE = .08, p = .682).

Second, we sought to test a possible explanation for the weaker ruling out effect for those lower in SCC. The negative correlations observed between SCC and evaluation difficulty in Studies 1-3 supports the idea that that those lower in SCC find it harder to assess social partners. We propose that one reason why people with an unclear sense of self judge less similar others as better potential matches may be because they are less certain about their judgements. Presumably, less effective comparisons could increase judgement uncertainty. Furthermore, greater judgement uncertainty may be a downstream consequence of self-uncertainty; research has shown a positive association between scores on the self-concept clarity scale and certainty of self-conceptions (DeMarree & Bobrowski, 2017). Baumgardner (1990) posited that a lack of self-certainty may prevent someone from using self-knowledge optimally for choice behaviour. It is therefore possible that being less self-certain may result in being less certain downstream, when evaluating prospective dating partners. Despite being less certain, it is plausible that individuals lower in SCC may end up being more open to less similar others because they are nonetheless motivated to find a partner. In Study 4, interpersonal evaluation was assessed via 1 item only - *match judgement* - because it fit better with certainty judgements than did the item capturing liking. We thus explored whether lower levels of SCC predict less certainty about match judgements for less similar others (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants

We recruited 252 MTurk workers for this study (43.3% female; Mage = 28.69; SD = 5.67); eligibility criteria same as Study 1. Twenty-three participants were removed from analyses: three completed the study in less than half the time advertised, seven were neither male nor female, seven stopped early, five rated targets sporadically, and one rated every target

equivalently. The final analytic sample = 229 participants. We again collected as much data as possible exceeding the minimum recommendation of 50 level-2 units for multilevel designs (Maas & Hox, 2005) and we performed sensitivity analyses in R (following Lane & Hennes, 2018), by running simulations to estimate the smallest effect size of SCC that could be reliably detected with 80% power in a replication study with the same sample size and parameters in Study 4. Results indicate that a replication study with a sample size of 229 would provide 82.6% power to detect an unstandardized coefficient of at least b = -.085 (SE = .08) between SCC and overall evaluations. See supplemental materials for details.

Procedure and Materials

The procedure and measures were very similar to our previous studies. The same cover story was used; participants completed the same scales for SCC, SE, traits, attitudes, and the same filler task as in Study 2 (Behavior Identification Form; no findings reported in the manuscript change in terms of statistical significance when controlling for BIF, entered as a level-2 predictor in the models). Participants evaluated ostensible profiles one at a time, in random order, in terms of match judgements using the same single item as in the previous studies. Two changes were made in Study 4: two new intermediary algorithms were introduced, modifying the study design and analytic models, and a single item measure, certainty for match judgements, was added.

New Levels of Similarity

Low/Moderate and *Moderate/High* levels of similarity were introduced, increasing the number of targets that were presented to each participant. A computer algorithm calculated and generated profiles that were roughly 10%, 30% (new), 50%, 70% (new) and 90% similar to the participant self-reported ratings on personality and attitudes. In total, all participants viewed all

18 profiles, 3 of each level of similarity. As in the earlier studies, the algorithms were applied equally to traits and attitudes.

Certainty about Match Judgements

Participants were asked to rate their certainty for their judgements of self-other fit by responding to 1 item, "How certain are you about your previous rating of whether this person would be a good match for you?", using a 5-point Likert scale, from *Not at all* (1) to *Totally* (5).

Manipulation Check

With a sample of 76 participants from MTurk, we tested the functionality of the new algorithms. Results revealed a stepwise pattern again: participants perceived highly similar targets as most similar, and they progressively perceived targets as less similar the more actual similarity decreased. All levels of actual similarity were significantly different from one another in terms of perceived similarity (all *p*s < .05; see supplementary materials).

Data Analysis

To test pre-registered hypotheses 1 and 2, a series of mixed linear models using SPSS (v.23) was conducted for the outcome variable *match judgement* (Model A; see Table 5, and supplemental material for complete regression equation). A 4-step model building sequence was followed: *first*, a null model was estimated, *second*, a level-1 predictor (similarity) and corresponding random slope was added, *third*, level-2 covariates (SE, grand-mean centered; gender, contrast-coded) and corresponding interaction terms were added, and *fourth*, the focal level-2 predictor SCC (grand-mean centered) and related interaction term was added. Similarity was treated as continuous because of the stepwise linear relationship to perceived similarity observed in the pilot study (coded 0-5 reflecting 6 levels of similarity); this coding scheme allowed for a meaningful zero and interpretable intercept; additional models were thus refit in

Table 5

Parameter estimates from full multilevel models (Model A) predicting match judgements in Study 4

	Low Similarity Coded as 0 (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5)		Low/Mod Similarity Coded as 0 (-1, 0, 1, 2, 3, 4)		Moderate1 Similarity Coded as 0 (-2, -1, 0, 1, 2, 3)		Moderate2 Similarity Coded as 0 (-3, -2, -1, 0, 1, 2)		Mod/High Similarity Coded as 0 (-4, -3, -2, -1, 0, 1)		High Similarity Coded as 0 (-5, -4, -3, -2, -1, 0)	
Parameter	*b* (*SE*)	*p*	*b* (*SE*)	*p*	*b* (*SE*)	*p*	*b* (*SE*)	*p*	*b* (*SE*)	*p*	*b* (*SE*)	*p*
Fixed effects												
Intercept	2.76 (.06)	< .001	3.28(.05)	< .001	3.80 (.05)	< .001	4.33 (.04)	< .001	4.85 (.04)	< .001	5.37 (.05)	< .001
Similarity	.52 (.01)	< .001	.52 (.02)	< .001	.52 (.02)	< .001	.52 (.02)	< .001	.52 (.02)	< .001	.52 (.02)	< .001
Self-concept clarity	**-.21 (.08)**	**.009**	**-.19 (.07)**	**.010**	**-.17 (.07)**	**.010**	**-.15 (.06)**	**.014**	**-.13 (.06)**	**.038**	**-.11 (.07)**	**.111**
Self-esteem	.07 (.10)	.497	.07 (.09)	.427	.08 (.08)	.345	.08 (.08)	.282	.09 (.08)	.269	.09 (.08)	.292
Gender	-.60 (.11)	< .001	-.46 (.10)	< .001	-.32 (.09)	.001	-.18 (.09)	.043	-.03 (.09)	.701	.11 (.10)	.269
Similarity X Self-concept clarity	.02 (.02)	.329	.02 (.03)	.163	.02 (.03)	.436	.02 (.03)	.455	.02 (.03)	.435	.02 (.02)	.388
Similarity X Self-esteem	.004 (.03)	.867	.004 (.03)	.741	.004 (.03)	.893	.004 (.03)	.897	.004 (.03)	.894	.004 (.03)	.884
Similarity X Gender	.14 (.03)	< .001	.14 (.03)	< .001	.14 (.03)	< .001	.14 (.03)	< .001	.14 (.03)	< .001	.14 (.03)	< .001
Random effects												
Intercept	.45 (.04)	< .001	.45 (.06)	< .001	.39 (.04)	< .001	.32 (.04)	< .001	.28 (.04)	< .001	.25 (.04)	< .001
Residual	1.60 (.04)	< .001	1.56 (.04)	< .001	1.54 (.04)	< .001	1.53 (.04)	< .001	1.54 (.04)	< .001	1.56 (.04)	< .001
Similarity – random slopes	.02 (.004)	< .001	.03 (.01)	< .001	.05 (.01)	.072	.05 (.01)	< .001	.05 (.01)	< .001	.03 (.01)	< .001

Note. Similarity is recoded six times to obtain simple effects of self-concept clarity (bolded) on match judgments for the six unique types of similarity targets; similarity is treated as a continuous variable with 6-points; self-esteem and self-concept clarity are grand-mean centered; gender is contrast coded (male = -.5, female = .5); regression coefficients are unstandardized.

which the reference group for similarity was recoded as zero, allowing us to obtain a simple slope of SCC on match judgements for each of the six unique types of similarity targets - the critical tests of study hypotheses. The same model was used to test the effect of SCC on certainty (exploratory hypothesis 3); because gender was not significantly associated with certainty and adding it to the model did not improve model fit, it was removed from the model (Model B). We focus reporting on the simple effects of SCC from the full models; see supplemental material for all estimated parameters from Models A and B.

Results

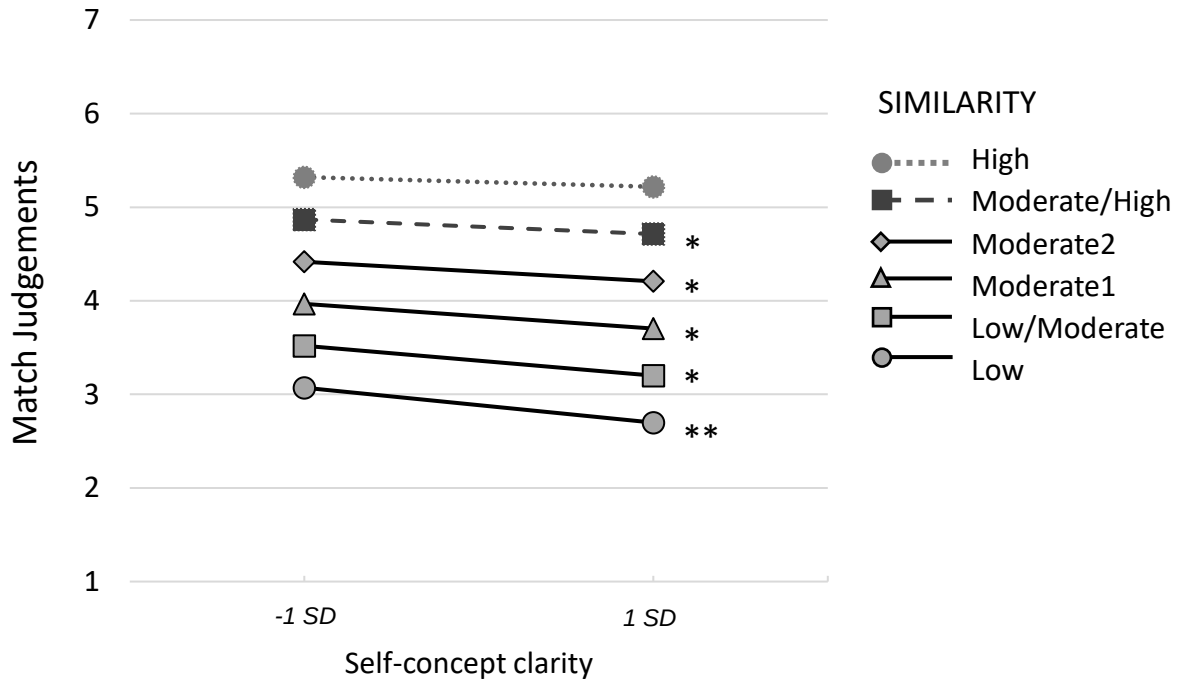
Predicting Match Judgements

No omnibus interaction was found between SCC and the six levels of similarity across iterations of Model A which controls for SE and gender (b = .02, ps between .163 - .455). However, supporting our pre-registered hypotheses and consistent with the previous studies we continued to find an effect of SCC for low similarity targets but not high similarity targets. As seen in Figure 2, and mostly replicating hypothesized Pattern 2 of Studies 1-3, simple slopes analyses revealed an effect of SCC on match judgements for targets that were Low Similarity (b = -.21, SE = .08, t (272.51) = -2.62, p = .009, CI [-.37, -.05]), Low/Mod Similarity (b = -.19, SE = .07, t (241.38) = -2.60, p = .010, CI [-.34, -.05]), Mod1 Similarity (b = -.17, SE = .07, t (230.97) = -2.61, p = .010, CI [-.30, -.04], Mod2 Similarity (b = -.15, SE = .06, t (231.67) = -2.48, p = .014, CI [-.27, -.03]), and Mod/High Similarity (b = -.13, SE = .06, t (258.02) = -2.09, p = .038, CI [-.25, .01]), but not High Similarity (b = -.11, SE = .07, t (327.19) = -1.60, p = .111, CI [-.24, .03]. All but one of the aforementioned simple effects of SCC held when removing the covariates from the model; Mod/High Similarity was no longer significant (b = -.09, p = .082). The standardized coefficients for SCC for the different levels of similarity are as follows: Low (β

= -.11), Low/Mod (β = -.09), Mod1 (β = -.08), Mod2 (β = -.06), Mod/High (β = -.05), and High (β = -.03).

Figure 2

Simple effects of self-concept clarity on match judgements for six types of similarity targets



Note. Simple effects depicting the association between SCC (1 *SD* below and above the mean) and match judgements, plotted descriptively for different types of similarity targets from six separate multilevel analyses. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

Predicting Certainty

We also found support for the hypothesis that *lower* SCC would predict greater uncertainty for less similar targets. An omnibus interaction was found between SCC and similarity across iterations of Model B (see supplemental material for regression equation), controlling for SE (b = -.03, ps between .006 - .012). This interaction (illustrated in Figure 3) indicates that the association between SCC and certainty gradually becomes stronger moving from high to low similarity. As seen in Table 6, simple slopes analyses revealed that lower levels of SCC predict less certainty for targets that are Low, Low/M, and Mod1, but not for Mod2, Mod/High, nor High levels of similarity.

Exploratory Analyses

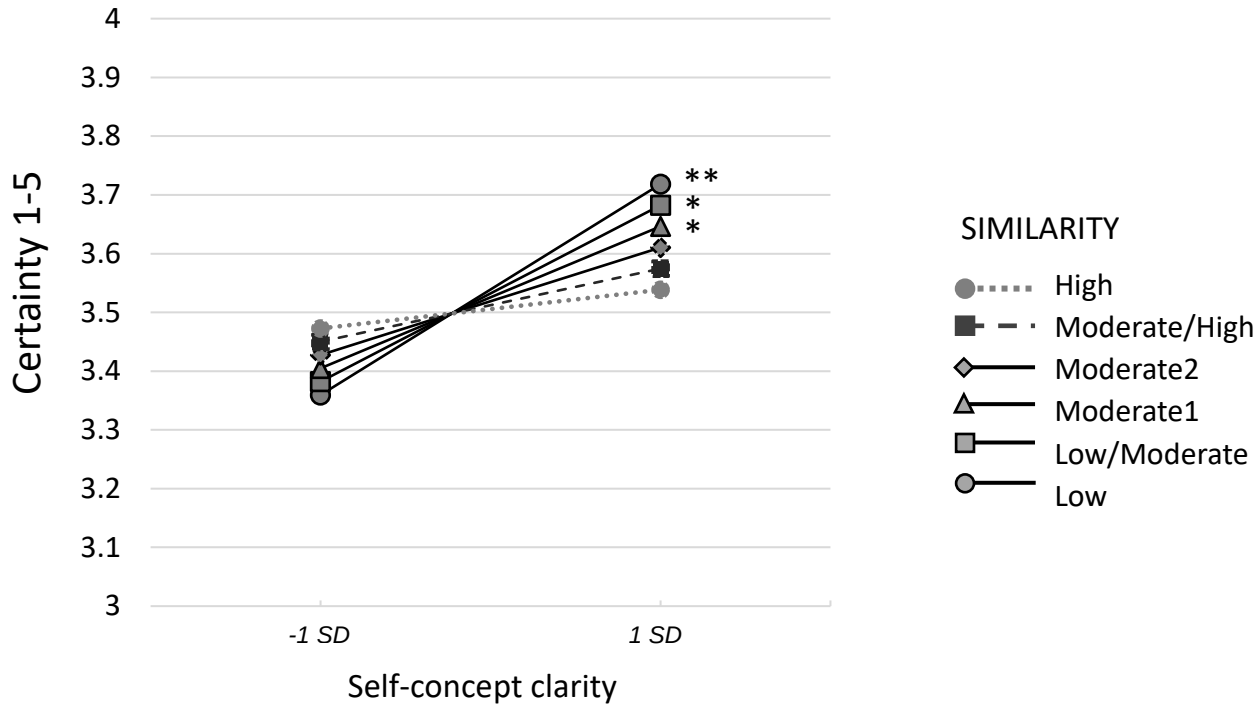
We also examined the association between certainty and match judgements to test the idea that certainty may help judgements at the more extreme ends of similarity. As summarized in Table 7, and detailed in supplemental materials (Model C; see supplemental materials), results show that greater certainty about one's match judgements predicts increasingly more positive judgements the more similar targets became and increasingly more negative judgements the less similar targets became.

Discussion

Results from Study 4 are consistent with those of Studies 1-3 in showing that individuals lower and higher in SCC judge highly similar targets as comparably good romantic matches, but that those higher, versus lower, in SCC start judging individuals as poorer matches as they start becoming less similar. Although descriptively the slopes of SCC are getting stronger the greater the dissimilarity, in Study 4 we found no omnibus interaction between SCC and similarity on match judgements which is inconsistent with the interactions found in Study 3 and the IDA. It is

Figure 3

Simple effects of self-concept clarity on certainty for match judgements for six types of similarity targets



Note. Simple effects depicting the association between SCC (1 *SD* below and above the mean) and certainty for match judgements, plotted descriptively for different types of similarity targets. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

Table 6

Summary of simple effects of self-concept clarity predicting certainty for 6 unique types of similar targets

Similarity	*b (SE)*	*t*	*p*
Low	.21(.07)	2.95	.004
Low/Moderate	.18 (.07)	2.58	.010
Moderate1	.14 (.07)	2.16	.032
Moderate2	.11 (.07)	1.69	.093
Moderate/High	.08 (.07)	1.18	.240
High	.04 (.07)	0.66	.510

Note. $N = 229$. Depicted are simple slopes of SCC predicting certainty for each type of similarity target obtained from six unique multilevel models; analyses control for SE.

Table 7

Summary of simple effects of certainty predicting match judgements for 6 unique types of similar targets

	b (SE)	*t*	*p*
Certainty for Low Similar targets	-.60 (.06)	-9.25	<.001
Certainty for Low/Moderate Similar targets	-.38 (.06)	-6.85	<.001
Certainty for Moderate1 Similar targets	-.16 (.05)	-3.23	.001
Certainty for Moderate2 Similar targets	.06 (.05)	1.20	.230
Certainty for Moderate/High Similar targets	.28 (.05)	5.18	<.001
Certainty for High Similar targets	.47 (.06)	7.87	<.001

Note. $N = 229$. Depicted are simple slopes of certainty (clustered with-in person) predicting match judgements for each type of similarity target obtained from six unique multilevel models; no covariates in the model.

possible that we did not find the SCC by Similarity interaction significant in Study 4 because similarity was tested as a continuous, rather than categorical, variable making them different effects and therefore not easily comparable. According to Figure 1, low and moderate similarity seem to have similar effects on evaluations relative to high similarity, which suggests that similarity may function in a nonlinear manner in Study 4. That said, in Study 4 we replicated Pattern 2, showing simple effects of SCC for less similar targets (those low to moderately similar) but not for highly similar targets. The findings across studies seem to suggest there may be a breaking point at which those high in SCC start ruling out less similar others more strongly compared to those low in self-concept clarity who seem less willing to rule such individuals out.

Results also revealed that, as hypothesized, those lower, versus higher, in SCC are less certain about their match ratings for the least similar targets. And additional analyses provide support for the idea that certainty may help judgements, as greater certainty about one's match

judgements predicted increasingly stronger positive match judgements the more similar targets became, and increasingly stronger negative match judgements the less similar targets became, although limits to directionality render this interpretation cautious. If certainty does help rule out dissimilar others, and those lower in SCC are less certain about such targets, such individuals may not reap the benefits of certainty about dissimilar targets and may consequently discriminate less against them. These results thus support a hypothesized moderated mediation model: that people low, compared to high, in SCC evaluate dissimilar targets as better matches because they are less certain about such targets. However, one limitation of Study 4 is that we could not test this hypothesized model in a single step analysis because SCC and similarity are level-2 and level-1 variables, respectively. Simply put, there is no variance in SCC at the participant level that could be estimated in such a model.

General Discussion

The overall goal of this research was to examine if people lower in self-concept clarity are less discriminating about prospective dating partners in terms of compatibility. Past research suggests dissimilar others make for less compatible romantic partners (e.g., Byrne et al., 1986; Sprecher, 2011) and that ruling out the least suitable partners is an important early step in relationship formation (Joel & Eastwick, 2018). Past research also suggests that a lack of self-clarity interferes with the use of similarity information in decision making (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993). We therefore conveniently used the similarity-attraction effect as a vehicle to examine how self-concept clarity relates to compatibility judgements, theorizing that those *lower* in self-concept clarity may use, or be influenced by, similarity information to a lesser extent when evaluating potential dating partners because an unclear self could make for an unclear reference point, impacting the comparison between self and other. Initially we reasoned that

using similarity information less well could influence judgements of highly similar and dissimilar others (Pattern 1), *or* selectively influence judgements of less similar others (Pattern 2; pre-registered hypotheses, Studies 3 and 4).

Across all studies we provide empirical evidence for a basic phenomenon most consistent with Pattern 2: that individuals lower, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity discriminate less when it comes to potential dating partners who are *less* similar to them - they rule them out less strongly. We did not find reliable evidence for Pattern 1, the idea that those lower in self-concept clarity, in using similarity less advantageously, might also be less likely to rule-in highly similar others; in three of the four studies self-concept clarity did not predict evaluations of highly similar others. It may be that highly similar others are easily detectable because they are strongly rewarding and reinforcing social partners for everyone (Byrne & Clore, 1970), even those with an unclear sense of self. Our findings suggest that as similarity starts to decrease near moderate levels of similarity, there may be a breaking point for those higher compared to lower in self-concept clarity such that they start evaluating prospective partners less positively. Our findings also indicate that those lower, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity find it more challenging to evaluate prospective partners. First, those lower in self-concept clarity reported finding it harder to judge the descriptive profiles (Studies 1-3), and in Study 4 they reported being less certain about their match judgements for less similar others in particular. Certainty likely helps people make stronger judgements, making it easier for them to rule in similar, and rule out dissimilar, targets, which means that reduced certainty for dissimilar others likely hinders compatibility judgements for those lower in self-concept clarity. However, because directionality between match judgements and certainty is unclear, limiting interpretation, it should be noted that it is also possible that certainty may be a consequence of having made

judgements about the most and least similar targets. Given our current analyses we cannot directly answer if people lower in self-concept clarity rated dissimilar others as better matches *because* they were less certain about their match judgements of them.

Furthermore, our pilot data indicates that those lower in self-concept clarity are able to perceive similarity and dissimilarity with others to the same degree as those higher in self-concept clarity. Early in theorizing we thought that those lower, vs higher, in self-concept clarity might perceive similarity with targets less accurately because poorly defined self-attributes may, plausibly, make it more challenging to detect similarity (e.g., if one is unclear about being extroverted, how can they detect being dis/similar with another person in terms of extroversion?) which would decrease confidence in our paradigm to be able to test the effect of self-concept clarity on evaluations of dis/similar targets. However, we did not observe this in our pilot data. Rather, our results taken together suggest that those lower in self-concept clarity may recognize dissimilarity but that they rely on, or use, it less when assessing compatibility with others. Or perhaps such individuals are able to make dissimilarity judgements when called upon to explicitly make them but find it more difficult to do so when not explicitly prompted, making them less likely to spontaneously ascertain dissimilarity.

Setterlund and Niedenthal (1993) first proposed that poorly defined self-attributes likely render the self a less useful reference point in a self-other comparison and consequently impact the use of similarity in decision making, but this might not necessarily mean that an individual who is lower in self-concept clarity is rendered less accurate in their similarity judgements. Perhaps, as our data suggests, an individual with an unclear self is rendered less certain in their dissimilarity judgements and, as such, comes to have less trust in such judgements. And although uncertainty is reliability associated with feelings of anxiety (e.g., Hirsh et al., 2012; Grupe &

Nitschke, 2013), and higher levels of anxiety in decision making promotes the avoidance of risky choices and negative outcomes even when there are gains to be had (e.g., Maner et al., 2007; Maner & Schmidt, 2006), we argue that because the motivation to find a romantic partner can be a powerful one (Fraley et al., 2005; Fletcher et al., 2015); perhaps those lower in self-concept clarity rule out less strictly to avoid missing potential mate opportunities. We posit that individuals low in self-concept clarity are as motivated to find partners as those high in self-concept clarity, but it is also plausible that they are even more motivated to find partners on account of being less personally secure or because they may have been less successful in dating which introduces an alternative explanation for our results. Our studies likely reflect a low-stakes (i.e. low motivation) context, since participants were not given the impression they were going to meet the ostensible targets. The fact that we found an effect of self-concept clarity at low motivation suggest to us that cognition more than motivation may be operating to a greater extent in explaining our results, but we are not in a position to disentangle effects of cognitive impairment and motivation with our data. It remains unclear how processing may be impaired exactly in those lacking self-concept clarity and to what extent motivation pulls such individuals towards less similar (or less compatible) prospective partners.

Not ruling out the least compatible prospects as strongly has implications for dating and relationship formation for those lower in self-concept clarity. To the extent that similarity contributes to compatibility (Sprecher, 2011), not ruling out the least similar individuals as strongly during first impressions scenarios could mean having a wider, more diverse dating pool and having more varied first-date experiences. A higher frequency of interactions with less compatible dates would presumably be less enjoyable and rewarding, which may negatively impact dating satisfaction and personal well-being. Furthermore, failing to effectively reduce the

dating pool could also lead to greater choice at any given time, and whilst choice is generally valued (Leotti et al., 2010), greater choice may hinder decision making (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Indeed, experimental research has shown that having access to more profiles in an online dating context (100 vs 30 potential partners) can lead to more searching behavior, which in turn is linked with poorer quality partner choices (Wu & Chiou, 2009; Yang & Chiou, 2010). Those lower in self-concept clarity could potentially be overwhelmed with choice or experience greater indecision if they have a wider dating pool. More importantly though, failing to rule out less-compatible others effectively once in dating relationships could mean increasing the likelihood of developing longer-term relationships with such individuals which could have serious implications for wellbeing (e.g., Dush & Amato, 2005).

We next consider three possible additional explanations for why people lower in self-concept clarity rate less similar targets more positively. First, their dissimilar targets may be more positive in the valence of their attitudes and traits. The idea is that because lower self-concept clarity is reliability associated with lower self-esteem and those lower in self-esteem tend to describe themselves in more negative terms, those lower in self-concept clarity likely describe themselves more negatively and their dissimilar targets may thus be described more positively. Greater liking for dissimilar others could represent a valence effect. To test this potential confound of valence, we applied our algorithms to self-report ratings of traits and attitudes using Study 1 participant information (N= 175) to re-generate *identical* targets and *dissimilar* targets. Results showed that using our paradigm, those lower, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity do not describe themselves less positively nor are their dissimilar targets more positively described in terms of attitudes and personality, rendering the alternative explanation unlikely (see supplemental materials for details).

Second, it is plausible that when one's personal attributes are less clear and well-defined, such a person may be more likely to identify with, or take-on, another's attributes. Indeed, there is evidence that people spontaneously integrate unique attributes of prospective romantic partners into their self-concepts and do so to a larger extent the more motivated they are to meet them (Slotter & Gardner, 2009; 2012). However, one study has shown that when self-concept clarity is threatened (i.e., temporarily reduced), individuals may not readily take on unique prospective partner characteristics, even when interested in them, (Emery et al., 2015). This finding suggests that lower self-concept clarity is not associated with greater identification with prospective partners in general, although it remains untested if this is the case with dissimilar targets in particular. And third, it is possible that dating dissimilar people may actually be beneficial for those with an unclear sense of self - perhaps such individuals, who have less well-defined self-concepts, are more open to the idea of dissimilar others as a way to develop and expand themselves. According to self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1986), shared novel experiences can lead to new learning, personal growth, and expanded life perspectives, for example. Perhaps via interactions with dissimilar others, one may come to have even more novel experiences. However, Emery and colleagues (2015) showed that those lower self-concept clarity individuals are less interested in self-expanding experiences because, the researchers argue, adding new content to a confused self may result in even more self-confusion. Thus, selecting, or being less discriminating about, dissimilar others for self-expansion purposes seems like an unlikely strategy for those lower in self-concept clarity.

Limitations and Future Directions

A vital question of the current work is its external validity. First, similarity was manipulated categorically rather than continuously as would occur in actual dating scenarios.

Although we tried to mitigate this in Study 4 with the inclusion of 2 more levels of similarity, it is unclear whether individuals low in self-concept clarity would continue to rate dissimilar others less harshly if similarity was encountered as continuous. We initially thought that by increasing levels of similarity it would become even harder for people low in self-concept clarity to evaluate targets because differences in similarity would be less obvious and thus harder to judge compared to the 3 fairly different categories of similarity in Studies 1-3. We hypothesize that in the real world where similarity is continuous, individuals lower in self-concept clarity find it harder to evaluate targets than they did in our online paradigms. It remains unclear, however, how evaluating targets in our paradigm transfers to evaluating people in actual dating scenarios.

Second, although our paradigm may relate to online dating, future research should seek to extend the current experimental lab findings to real world experiences and test if our findings highlight a real problematic tendency during dating for those lower in self-concept clarity – whether they are less choosy about less compatible romantic partners and whether this has an impact on personal and relationship wellbeing. One perspective is that dating is more challenging to navigate in the real world for such individuals (Kubin & Lydon, 2023, in review). More work along these lines is needed to gain greater insight into how self-concept clarity guides dating partner decisions. Finally, we note that we are not addressing theoretical issues about the similarity-attraction paradigm; rather, we are using the similarity-attraction effect to examine how self-concept clarity relates to compatibility judgements. Future work should move beyond similarity by examining the influence of self-concept clarity on compatibility more broadly.

Conclusion

The current series of experiments offers first empirical support for the idea that self-concept clarity guides compatibility evaluations and highlights that a clear and coherent personal identity may be particularly beneficial in helping individuals identify and rule out less-

compatible others (i.e., those less similar). The current work paints a bleaker picture for those who have a more confused sense of self. In being less discriminating about less compatible prospective partners, such individuals may ultimately increase their chances of having more negative dating experiences; they may end up dating incompatible others more frequently and/or end up developing relationships with less compatible others that tend to become dissatisfying.

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Bridge to Manuscript 2

Chapter 2 examined whether people who lack self-clarity also use similarity information less effectively when evaluating prospective romantic partners – whether they select similar (i.e., compatible) partners less often, and/or reject dissimilar (i.e., incompatible) ones more often. Across 4 online repeated measures experiments, I found that those lower, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity discriminated less about less similar targets, and that highly similar targets were most liked but equivalently regardless of one's level of self-concept clarity. These findings suggest that self-concept clarity may help guide rejection decisions about incompatible partners, but not necessarily help guide selection decisions about compatible ones. Study 4 also showed one possible reason for why individuals who lack self-clarity are less harsh in ruling out incompatible others: because they are less certain about their judgments for less similar targets.

However, in Chapter 2 we treated similarity as a proxy for compatibility so it remains unclear whether those lacking self-clarity are not only less strict about dissimilar others, but also less strict about incompatible others more broadly. Chapter 3 thus examines the effects of self-concept clarity on judgements of compatibility more directly in real world dating contexts. Additionally, findings reported in Chapter 2 derive from no-interaction lab experiments assessing attitudes about strangers from descriptive online profiles. It is unclear if results in Manuscript 1 are generalizable to partner selection in the real world, highlighting a problematic tendency for those low in self-concept clarity to date incompatible others more frequently. I conducted two retrospective studies (the second a pre-registered replication on OSF) with adults (Ages 25-45) asking people about their past dating experiences. I investigated whether individuals who lack self-clarity are more likely to date incompatible others more often, and if so, whether this is due to difficulty judging compatibility and indecision about dating decisions.

Manuscript 2

Self-concept clarity and the evaluation and selection of incompatible dating partners

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Publication details:

Kubin, D., & Lydon, J. (2023). Self-concept clarity and the evaluation and selection of incompatible dating partners. *Journal of Personal Relationships; manuscript in revision.*

Abstract

Compatibility between romantic partners plays a positive role in satisfying and stable relationships. Recent experimental findings (Author, 2023) suggest that those lower, versus higher, in self-concept clarity, find it more challenging to evaluate prospective romantic partners. The current research extends the previous findings to the real world and examines compatibility more directly. Across two retrospective studies (N = 340), after controlling for self-esteem, we found that those *lower*, versus higher, in self-concept clarity dated incompatible others more frequently, experienced greater difficulty judging compatibility, and were less decisive in their dating decisions. They also experienced greater dating-related negative affect but were not lower in past dating satisfaction. Exploratory mediation analyses further suggest that such individuals experience greater dating-related negative affect as a result of having dated incompatible others more often, and that they are more likely to date incompatible others because they find it harder to judge compatibility and are less decisive in dating. Results suggest that in the real world, those with a confused personal identity find it more challenging to evaluate their dating partners which may lead them to rule out incompatible ones less often.

Key words: self-concept clarity, compatibility, dating, relationships

Statement of Relevance

Compatibility is considered important for well-functioning relationships; previous experimental lab research suggests that people with an unclear self-concept are less discriminating about incompatible dating partners. We tested this possibility using real-world data, finding that across two retrospective studies, individuals lower in self-concept clarity find it harder to navigate partner selection which may lead them to date incompatible others more often. Findings expand the literature on self-concept clarity, highlighting its role in romantic partner selection.

Self-concept clarity and the evaluation and selection of incompatible dating partners

Those who succumb to [incompatibility in relationships] often enjoy neither an easy death nor a quick one. - Ellen Berscheid (1985, para. 1)

Compatibility between romantic partners is considered to play an important role in relationships being satisfying and persisting over time because compatible partners are those who interact in more positive, harmonious (Berscheid, 1985) and well-coordinated ways (Ickes, 1985). Recognizing compatibility with prospective partners during the early stages of relationship initiation and formation is, therefore, an important first step towards developing more successful relationships. However, assessing compatibility can be a challenging task and may be even more difficult for some individuals, such as those with a confused personal identity (Author, 2023), because it requires comparing self-attributes with those of another and less well-defined self-attributes may hinder comparisons (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993). Such individuals may have a harder time navigating dating and consequently may be more likely to date incompatible romantic partners.

Indeed, findings from a series of recent lab experiments by Author (2023) suggest that individuals who are lower, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity (i.e., those more confused about who they are; Campbell et al. 1996) find it more difficult to evaluate prospective partners in an online context and that they use similarity information less optimally when evaluating them - they rule out dissimilar others less strongly. Because similarity is theorized to contribute to compatibility (Sprecher, 2011), Author's (2023) findings suggest that those with a more confused personal identity may be less discriminating about *incompatible* dating partners more broadly. Research on individuals in committed relationships has shown that people lower, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity are less satisfied and committed in their relationships

(Lewandowski et al., 2010; Parise et al., 2019), however, it remains unclear if this is due, at least in part, to having made less optimal dating partner choices earlier in dating (i.e., choosing incompatible others more often). The current research is an effort to extend Author's (2023) experimental findings on the effects of self-concept clarity on evaluations of similarity to judgements of compatibility in real world dating contexts. We examined whether individuals *lower*, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity are more likely to date incompatible others, whether they find it more difficult to evaluate their dating partners in terms of compatibility, and whether their dating experiences are less satisfying.

Compatibility

If you ask someone who is currently single and looking for a relationship what they are looking for in a romantic partner, chances are high they would say someone who is *compatible.* Indeed, people overwhelmingly consider high value partners to be compatible ones (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014). Compatible individuals are colloquially referred to as being "well-matched", or described as "fitting" well together, much like two puzzle pieces that join effortlessly. For researchers, compatibility is a complex construct, broadly conceptualized as the infrastructure that allows for harmonious, positive, and functional interpersonal exchanges (Berscheid, 1985; Ickes, 1985). Although compatibility has largely been assumed from its' consequences such as satisfaction, commitment, and persistence (Berscheid, 1985), researchers generally agree that selecting well-matched partners is vital for relationship success (Berscheid, 1985; Byrne et al., 1986; Joel & Eastwick, 2018).

According to Sprecher (2011), there are four causal components theorized to contribute to compatibility**.** First, certain individual characteristics, such as emotional stability and extraversion, have been associated with relationship satisfaction (Barelds, 2005) and thus

presumably with compatibility. Second, joint characteristics reflect how both individuals' attributes combine or "match" and are core to matching theories of relationships (e.g., Levinger & Rand, 1985; Sprecher, 2011; Eastwick et al., 2022). Joint characteristics have been predominantly examined as self-other similarity. For example, an abundance of research has shown that people like others the more similar they are (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Lydon et al., 1988; Montoya et al., 2008) and perceiving similarity with one's romantic partner has also been strongly correlated with perceiving compatibility with them (Sprecher, 2013). Similarity presumably impacts compatibility largely because similarity feels validating (Byrne, 1971; Singh et al., 2007) and because two people are more likely to get along when they share a similar outlook on life (Burleson & Denton, 1992; Davis, 1981).

The third component of compatibility refers to the emergent characteristics that arise when two people interact, such as how well two people communicate which influences how smoothly they interact (e.g., Sunnafrank & Miller, 1981). Many researchers argue that emergent, or relationship, characteristics or processes have the strongest impact on couple functioning and well-being (and thus presumably on compatibility). For example, Eastwick and colleagues (2022) propose that when people assess compatibility with someone, above and beyond matching attributes, they are also critically tracking their numerous past interactions and evaluating how unique and positive they are. Relatedly, Reis and colleagues (2022) assert that people "match" when they have strong interpersonal chemistry (i.e., an "intense connection"), which they conceptualize as a special, more dynamic, type of compatibility. And finally, the fourth component of compatibility are environmental factors which are thought to affect couple functioning; for example, having supportive family and friends is associated with higher relationship quality presumably because one's social network treats members of a couple as a

functional 'unit', validates one's choice of partner and encourages persistence (Sprecher, & Felmlee, 1992). Taken together, formal theories suggest that individuals' conceptions of compatibility likely comprise of ideas about "matching" with romantic partners in terms of similarity and about interacting with them in unique, positive, functional, and synergistic ways.

Being able to identify and select compatible partners is, however, only one part of successful dating; being able to reject ill-suited partners is the other critical part (Byrne et al., 1986; Joel & Eastwick, 2018). Failing to rule out incompatible dating partners may mean having a wider, more diverse dating pool of potential partners - if one is open to dating compatible *and* less compatible others, this may result in having less rewarding or less enjoyable interactions more often during dating. A wider range of options may also mean more choices at any given time which may be overwhelming; indeed, past research examining decision making in online dating has shown that more choices leads to more searching behavior, which can hinder decision making (Wu & Chiou, 2009; Yang & Chiou, 2010). Failing to rule out incompatible prospects during dating may also increase the likelihood of sliding into more committed relationships with them, which is important to consider given that romantically involved people seem to be naturally pulled in the direction of developing relationships versus terminating them (Joel & MacDonald, 2021). Ultimately, failing to rule out incompatible others may increase one's chances of developing lower quality relationships which can have negative consequences for physical health (e.g., Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2013) and wellbeing (e.g., Kim & McKenry, 2002).

But determining compatibility can be challenging. During the early stages of dating, such as when deciding to make contact with someone or during initial dates, people have little information to base their compatibility judgments on. And as people advance their dating

relationships, they continuously learn new information about their dating partners which they must then integrate with self-information to determine if they are a 'fit'. Given that people's mental representations of themselves are complex (Markus & Kunda, 1986) to begin with, and that everyone likely has some incompatibilities with most people (Berscheid, 1985), re-assessments of incompatibility may not be so obvious. Furthermore, according to Author (2023), some individuals, such as those with an unclear personal identity, may have a harder time assessing compatibility with prospective dating partners because self-knowledge that is not well-defined or coherent may hinder similarity judgements and thus self-other comparisons; his idea was tested in the consumer decision domain by Setterlund & Niedenthal (1993) who theorized that when the self is less clear, when self-knowledge is less well-defined, the self may be a less accessible reference point and as a result a less useful one in a comparison. Author (2023) argues that a similar phenomenon may be happening for those lower in self-concept clarity during partner evaluations, that such individuals may use compatibility information less often, or optimally, when evaluating prospective partners because a confused self makes for a less useful reference point during comparisons.

Self-Concept Clarity

Self-concept clarity refers to the degree to which the contents that make up the self-concept are clearly defined, organized, and stable (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996). Self-concept clarity is typically measured via a self-report measure (Campbell et al., 1996) where lower levels of self-concept clarity reflect one's perception of having an unclear and confused sense of self. Research examining the effects of self-concept clarity for relationship well-being has demonstrated that lower levels of self-concept clarity are associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction, commitment (Lewandowski et al., 2010) and dyadic functioning

(Gurung et al., 2001) at the individual level, as well as the dyadic level (Parise et al., 2019). However, little is known about whether or how self-concept clarity influences compatibility evaluations during dating, a time when people are making important self-other comparisons as they decide who would, and would not, be a suitable, compatible match for them.

New research by Author (2023) begins to shed light on these questions. In their online experiments, participants rated descriptive profiles of prospective romantic others who were created to be dissimilar, moderately similar and highly similar to each participant in terms of traits and attitudes. Across four experiments, individuals *lower* in self-concept clarity judged dissimilar targets less negatively compared to those higher in self-concept clarity but rated highly similar targets as equivalently good matches. Lower levels of self-concept clarity also predicted greater difficulty evaluating online profiles of romantic targets and in one experiment it predicted less certainty about judgments for less similar targets. Together, these findings suggest that those lower in self-concept clarity find it more challenging to evaluate dating partners and that high self-concept clarity may help rule out *incompatible* others. Although Author's experimental findings are intriguing, one major limitation of their research is that their results derive from no-interaction lab experiments assessing attitudes about strangers from descriptive online profiles. It is unclear if such results extend to partner selection in the real world, highlighting a problematic tendency for those low in self-concept clarity. A second notable limitation is that they used similarity as a proxy for compatibility, but it is not yet known whether self-concept clarity predicts evaluations and the selection of incompatibility.

Current Research

The *first goal* of the proposed research was, therefore, to examine whether individuals lower, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity are more likely to select less compatible dating

partners. Because Author (2023; Study 4) found that lower levels of self-concept clarity predicted less certainty for match judgments for less similar targets and supplemental analysis across three of their experiments showed that it predicted greater self-reported difficulty evaluating online targets in profiles, the *second goal* was to test whether such individuals find it more challenging to evaluate their dating partners in terms of compatibility. Finally, the *third goal* was to examine if being less discriminating about incompatible dating partners has negative consequences for well-being. To test our research questions, we conducted two online retrospective studies asking individuals to report on their past dating experiences (Study 1, $N = 127$; Study 2, $N = 213$). We report both studies simultaneously because Study 2 was a pre-registered near-replication and because we merged data from both studies in order to create two more reliable outcome measures: the extent to which people dated compatible (PC) and incompatible (PINC) others. We hypothesized that, controlling for self-esteem (a reliably strong correlate of self-concept clarity; DeMarree & Bobrowski, 2017), *lower* levels of self-concept clarity would predict:

H1a: having dated incompatible others more frequently (Past *incompatible* dating partners; PINC), but that H1b, it would not predict frequency of having dated compatible others (Past *compatible* dating partners; PC).

H2a: greater judgement difficulty for compatibility with romantic partners, 2b, greater dating indecision, and 2c. more negative appraisals of dating partner choices.

H3a. lower levels of past dating satisfaction, and 3b. greater dating-related NA.

Additionally, we conducted exploratory mediation analyses testing whether those lower in self-concept clarity are more likely to date incompatible others and whether this in turn leads to higher levels of negative affect when reflecting on past dating experiences, and whether the

reason those lower in self-concept clarity are more likely to date incompatible others is because they find it more difficult to judge compatibility with romantic partners and because they are less decisive in their dating decisions.

Method

Both studies were advertised as an online questionnaire about people's past dating experiences and approved by our University Ethics Board. We recruited singles and those in committed relationships who were located in North America and between the ages of 25-45; we reasoned that people in this age range were old enough to have had some range of dating experiences they could report on but that this timeframe limited how far in the past that dating history might have occurred. Eligible participants had to have had *Some* (3), to *A lot* (5) of past dating experiences; ineligible participants reported having had *None* (1) or *A small number* (2) of them. Both datasets, syntax, and the Study 2 pre-registration are available at https://osf.io/arw2g/?view_only=f107a67cab064e3b9cfa6d0cfebba309

Participants

Study 1

One hundred twenty-seven individuals participated in Study 1; all were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online crowdsourcing platform, between October 6-8, 2021. Twelve participants were removed from analyses: 2 said not to use their data, 8 failed at least two attention checks, 1 responded with same values for numerous scales, and 1 was an inconsistent duplicate. The final analytic sample comprised of 115 participants (51.3% female; M_{age} = 33.97; *SD* = 5.44; 33% singles, 27.8% in committed relationships, and 39.1% engaged/married; 83.5% Caucasian; 6.1% Black; 4.3% Asian; 3.5% Latin American; 2.6% multi-ethnic).

Study 2

Study 2 was pre-registered and comprised of 213 participants; all were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) between January 19-22, 2022. Nine participants were removed from analyses: 2 completed the study in less than half time advertised, 3 failed at least two attention checks, 4 responded the same or extremely for most questions. The final analytic sample comprised of 204 participants (52.5% female; M_{age} = 34.44; *SD* = 5.34; 55.4% singles, 17.2% in committed relationships, and 27.5% engaged/married; 71.6% Caucasian; 11.3% Black; 4.4% Asian; 3.4% Latin American; .5% Indigenous/Aboriginal; 7.4% multi-ethnic; 1.5% prefer not disclose).

Power Analyses

A power analysis was performed for Study 2 for sample size estimation using G*Power (3.1.9.2) based on contemporary conventions for estimating a medium effect size of .20 (Gignac & Szodorai, 2016). The projected sample size needed to detect a medium effect (with alpha set at .05 and power set at 80%; two tailed *t*-test for multiple linear regression with 2 predictors) is approximately *N* = 191. We recruited a bit more than the power analysis indicates (just over 200 participants, deemed 'fair' for factor analysis by Comrey and Lee, 1992) to have an adequate sample for the factor analysis for the measures PC and PINC detailed next.

Measures

Self-Concept Clarity

Participants completed a 12-item measure assessing their self-perception of having stable and clear self-beliefs (Campbell et al., 1996), using a 5-point Likert scale from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (5). A sample item is "In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am". Study 1, α = .93; Study 2, α = .94.

Self-Esteem

Participants completed a 10-item measure assessing general feelings of self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965). A sample item is "I feel that I have a number of good qualities"; responses were made using a 4-point Likert scale, from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (4). Study 1, $\alpha = .92$; Study 2, $\alpha = .93$.

Judgement Difficulty

We created a composite called judgement difficulty from three items generated by our lab capturing difficulty judging romantic partners in terms partner fit. Two of the items were, "How difficult do you find it to judge how [compatible/similar] you are with potential romantic partners? and the third item was "In general, when evaluating potential dating partners, how difficult is it for you to judge whether someone might be a good romantic match for you?". Responses were made on a 1-7 Likert scale (1-*Not at all*; 7-*Extremely*). These items were strongly correlated in both studies: *r*s between .57 to .75; Study 1, $\alpha = .85$; Study 2, $\alpha = .84$.

Dating Indecision

Indecision about past dating partners was tested with a 2-item measure generated in-lab: "Often, I couldn't make up my mind when it came to deciding [whom to go out with] or [whether to keep dating someone]". Responses were made using a 1-7 Likert scale (1-*Strongly Disagree*; 7-*Strongly Agree*). The 2 items were correlated, (Study 1, $r = .37$ $p < .001$; Study 2: $r = .46$, $p < .001$).

Past Dating Satisfaction

This is a 2-item measure reflecting the degree to which one is satisfied with past dating experiences; The items are, "Overall, how satisfied are you with the dating experiences you've had during your life?" and "All things considered, which best describes the degree of happiness

that you have felt in your past as you dated people? For both items, responses were made using a 1-7 Likert scale; item 1 was anchored as *Very Dissatisfying* (1) to *Very Satisfying (7),* and item 2 was anchored as *Extremely Unhappy (1)* to *Perfectly Happy (7)*. The items were strongly correlated (Study 1, $r = .73$, $p < .001$; Study 2, $r = .60$, $p < .001$).

Dating-Related Negative Affect

This is a 12-item measure using items from the Affective Balance Scale (Derogatis, 1975); items were phrased in terms of how much individuals experience a specific emotion as they thought about their past dating experiences. Responses were made using a 1-5 Likert scale (1-*Not at all*; 5-*Extremely*). The items were: sad, irritable, hopeless, tense, ashamed, anxious, angry, unhappy, guilty, resentful, nervous, and regretful (Study 1, $\alpha = .95$; Study 2, $\alpha = .93$).

Past Choice Appraisal

This is a 4-item measure created by our lab reflecting the degree to which one perceives having selected their past romantic partners well versus poorly. Items are: In general, I have selected well the people that I have dated in my past; In general, I have chosen my past dating partners poorly (R); I have made some good dating decisions in my life; I have made some bad dating decisions in my life (R). Responses are made using a 1-7 Likert scale (1-*Strongly Disagree*; 7-*Strongly Agree*); higher levels indicate having made better partner choices. Reliability: Study 1, $\alpha = .85$, Study 2, $\alpha = .84$.

Frequency of Dating Past Compatible and Incompatible Partners

Based on compatibility theories (e.g., Berscheid, 1985; Sprecher, 2011), we created 13 items that we thought reflected the frequency of having dated past romantic partners who were either *compatible* or *incompatible*. We theorized that the frequency of dating compatible and incompatible others are distinct experiences, that it is possible for individuals to date compatible

and/or incompatible others. Participants were asked to think back on the past dating experiences in their lives to date, and to report on how often they dated people who were, for example, similar to them or those they did not click with. Responses were made using a 1-5 Likert scale, going from 1-*Never* to 5-*Always*. As per the factor analysis detailed in the results section, a 5-item subset was created to capture the frequency of having dated past incompatible dating partners (PINC), and a 4-item subset was created to capture the frequency of having dated past compatible dating partners (PC).

Data Analysis

Factor analysis was conducted for the development of two measures, having dated past compatible (PC) and incompatible (PINC) partners. Multiple regression with grand-mean centering was used to test our main predictions about self-concept clarity's association with various outcome measures (e.g. judgment difficulty, indecision, frequency of PINC), controlling for self-esteem. We also conducted two exploratory mediation analyses using Hayes (2012) PROCESS macro for SPSS with Study 2 data because of the larger sample size and thus greater power. All predictor variables in both mediation models were grand-mean centered.

Results

Factor Analysis: Development of PC and PINC

Because the sample size of Study 1 was small (n = 115) for an adequate factor analysis, in Study 2 we sought to recruit a minimum of 200 participants (deemed 'fair' for factor analysis by Comrey & Lee, 1992) to generate a more reliable measure of PC and PINC. We pre-registered a plan for conducting a confirmatory factor analysis with the same 13 items in Study 2 (n = 204) based on exploratory factor analysis findings from Study 1 data. However, we diverged from our plan because the Study 2 factor analysis revealed that two items on the theorized PINC

factor were loading inconsistently across studies and we reasoned that Study 1 provided a less reliable factor structure on account of small sample size. We therefore merged the datasets (n = 319) and generated the measures PINC and PC from this factor analyses which were used as outcome variables in both studies, reported in Table 1. The thirteen items were entered into a factor analysis (Oblimin rotation); results yielded a 3-factor solution. Items that loaded onto more than one factor (< .35) were suppressed. The 3 factors remaining were: a 5-items factor which we call *past incompatible dating partners* (PINC; α = .85), a 4-item factor which we call *past compatible partners* (PC; α = .83), and a two-item factor with a low eigen value. Given this latter eigen value, these items were dropped (identified with * in Table 1). Factors 1 and 2 were moderately negatively correlated (r = -.38); results support our theoretical idea that the frequency of dating *compatible* and *incompatible* others are distinct experiences.

Preliminary Analyses

In Table 2, we present the means and standard deviations for all main study variables for Study 2, reported for single and those in relationships separately, as well as correlations between all main study variables (see supplementary materials for corresponding Study 1 results). One concern we had was that it is possible that those currently in committed relationships, compared to singles, may recall past romantic experiences differently. That is, those in relationships will have currently 'succeeded' in the goal of developing a relationship, whereas singles have not. It is unclear if such a circumstance may influence the recall of past romantic experiences; *t*-tests were thus conducted to assess if relationship status was associated with key study variables. In Study 1, compared with those in relationships, singles reported significantly lower levels of past dating satisfaction (t(112) = - 2.56, p = .012), and marginally lower levels of self-esteem (t(113) = - 1.90, p = .060), and in Study 2, singles reported significantly lower levels of past dating

satisfaction ($t(202) = -4.00$, $p < .001$) and self-esteem ($t(202) = -2.34$, $p = .020$), less positive appraisals of past choices ($t(200) = -2.04$, $p = .043$), and marginally higher levels of judgement difficulty ($t(202) = 1.83$, $p = .070$). All main results subsequently reported for the outcome measures of past dating satisfaction, appraisal of past choices, and judgement difficulty did not differ when controlling for relationship status.

Main Analyses

Predicting frequency of dating compatible and incompatible others

As hypothesized (H1a), self-concept clarity predicted PINC in Study 1 ($b = -.17$, $t = -2.12$, $p = .036$) and Study 2 ($b = -.27$, $t = -4.39$, $p < .001$), and (H1b) there was no significant relationship between self-concept clarity and PC in Study 1 ($b = -.05$, $t = -.66$, $p = .514$) nor Study 2 ($b = .06$, $t = .98$, $p = .328$). Stated in terms of lower self-concept clarity, the results indicate that those lower in self-concept clarity dated incompatible others more often in their past but were equally likely to have dated compatible others, compared to those higher in self-concept clarity. Together, these two findings also support the idea that those lower in self-concept clarity may have a wider dating pool.

Predicting judgement difficulty, dating indecision, and past choice appraisal

Next, we tested whether self-concept clarity is uniquely associated with three different dependent measures reflecting challenges assessing dating partners. Across both studies, results support Hypothesis 2a, revealing that self-concept clarity predicted judgement difficulty for compatibility in Study 1 ($b = -.42$, $t = -2.92$, $p = .004$) and Study 2 ($b = -.52$, $t = -4.43$, $p < .001$) and Hypothesis 2b revealing that self-concept clarity predicted dating indecision (Study 1, $b = -.54$, $t = -3.64$, $p < .001$) and Study 2, $b = -.70$, $t = -5.39$, $p < .001$). And we found partial support for Hypothesis 2c: self-concept clarity did not predict appraisals of dating partner

choices in Study 1 (b = .10, t = .66, p = .510), but it did in Study 2 (b = .29, t = 2.52, p = .012). Results suggest that those lower in self-concept clarity find it more difficult to judge romantic partners in terms of self-other fit, that they are less decisive about whom to date and/or whether to continue dating someone, and though less consistently across studies, that such individuals may also appraise their past dating choices as being worse dating partner choices.

Predicting past dating satisfaction and dating-related NA

Third, we examined whether self-concept clarity was associated with two wellbeing variables, past dating satisfaction and negative affect experiences as one thinks about past dating experiences. Although we did not find support for Hypothesis 3a, self-concept clarity did not predict past dating satisfaction in Study 1 (b = -.22, t = -1.46, p = .147) nor in Study 2 (b = -.01, t = -.12, p = .908), we found support for Hypothesis 3b in both studies, self-concept clarity predicted dating-related NA (Study 1, b = -.23, t = -2.27, p = .025); Study 2, b = -.30, t = -4.20, p < .001). Although results suggest that those lower, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity are not any less satisfied with their past dating experiences, such individuals experience lower levels of wellbeing in that they are higher on negative affect when thinking about their past dating experiences.

Exploratory Mediation Analysis, Study 2

Because incompatible romantic partners are considered to be less rewarding partners and dating them may impact wellbeing, we examined whether lower levels of self-concept clarity predict greater dating-related NA through a greater frequency of dating incompatible others. Results revealed that, controlling for self-esteem, the relationship between self-concept clarity and dating-related NA was mediated by PINC. As illustrated by Figure 1, the association between self-concept clarity and dating-related NA, the direct effect, was significant (b = -.22,

t = -3.10, *p* =.002), as were the associations between self-concept clarity and PINC (*b* = -0.26, *t* = -4.28, *p* < .001), and PINC and dating-related NA (*b* = .29, *t* = 3.60, *p* < .001). To test the significance of this indirect effect of PINC, we used bootstrapping procedures. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect of PINC was statistically significant (*b* = -.08; 95% CI [-.17, -.03]. Results indicate, compared to those higher in self-concept clarity, those lower in self-concept clarity are more likely to have dated incompatible others which in turn results in experiencing more negative affect as they think about their past dating experiences. Of note, the indirect path via PINC on dating-related NA was also significant in Study 1 (*b* = -.11; 95% CI [-.26, .002]); see supplementary material.

Exploratory Parallel Mediation Analysis, Study 2

Next, we explored whether judgement difficulty and dating indecision explain how individuals lower in self-concept clarity might come to be less discriminating about incompatible dating partners. Results from the parallel mediation analysis revealed that, controlling for self-esteem, the relationship between self-concept clarity and PINC was mediated by both judgement difficulty and dating indecision. As illustrated by Figure 2, the association between self-concept clarity and PINC, the direct effect, was marginally significant (*b* = -.11, *t* = -1.77, *p* =.079). The association between self-concept clarity and judgement difficulty was statistically significant (*b* = -0.51, *t* = -4.34, *p* < .001), as was the association between self-concept clarity and dating indecision (*b* = -0.69, *t* = -5.30, *p* < .001). Furthermore, the bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect of judgement difficulty on PINC was statistically significant (*b* = -.09; 95% CI [-.17, -.04] as was the indirect effect of dating indecision on PINC (*b* = -.07; 95% CI [-.14, -.02]. Results indicate that those who are lower, versus higher, in self-concept clarity are likely to date incompatible others more frequently at least partly because they find it more difficult to evaluate

compatibility with dating partners as well as because they are less decisive in their dating decisions. Of note, the indirect path via dating indecision on PINC was also significant in Study 1 (b = -.05; 95% CI [-.14, -.0003]) although the indirect path via judgement difficulty was not significant (b = -.04; 95% CI [-.11, .003]); see supplementary materials.

Follow-up analyses

Although we reasoned, and found, that greater dating indecision predicted greater dating frequency with incompatible others, intuition may suggest the inverse, that when indecisive about dating partners, one may rather respond by being cautious and thus less open to pursuing such dating partners. Our Study 2 data does not support this intuitive idea: dating indecision was positively correlated with general dating frequency ($r(204) = .16$, $p = .022$), as well as with PINC ($r(202) = .16$, $p = .027$), but not with PC ($r(204) = -.08$, $p = .267$). These associations suggest that the more indecisive one is about their dating partners, the more one tends to date in general, and the more one dates incompatible others specifically. Additionally, when controlling for self-esteem, self-concept clarity was negatively correlated with general dating frequency (partial correlation, $r(195) = -.29$, $p < .001$), suggesting that those lower, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity may generally date more often.

General Discussion

The overall aim of the current research was to examine real world effects of self-concept clarity on evaluations of compatibility and the selection of incompatible dating partners. Across two retrospective studies on individuals' past dating experiences, those *lower*, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity reported it more challenging to evaluate compatibility and make dating decisions, and they were more likely to date incompatible, but not necessarily compatible, others; they also had more negative feelings about their dating experiences. Additionally, via two

exploratory path models, we sought to explain how those lower in self-concept clarity come to date incompatible others more often, and how dating incompatible others more frequently may impact well-being.

Our main results are consistent with, and extend, previous experimental work showing that individuals lower, vs higher, in self-concept clarity evaluate dissimilar ostensible targets less harshly and highly similar targets to the same positive degree (Author, 2023). Together, such findings suggest that higher self-concept clarity may be more about helping people rule out incompatible romantic partners, and less about helping rule compatible ones in**.** Compatible romantic partners are individuals with whom people have enjoyable and validating exchanges (e.g., Berscheid, 1985; Sprecher, 2011). And although compatibility judgements may generally be challenging to make due to limited dating-partner information earlier in dating, it may be that ascertaining high degrees of compatibility with another may in fact be fairly apparent to most because of how rewarding the exchanges are. Given the motivation to seek and find a mate and form a romantic relationship can be powerful (Fletcher et al., 2015; Fraley et al, 2005), when one is confronted with a compatible (i.e. highly rewarding) social partner, it might not require too much consideration to rule them in, regardless of how clear, versus confused, one may be about oneself. Incompatible romantic partners, however, may be more challenging to rule out because one is at the same time motivated to find a mate as well as motivated to avoid choosing an unsuitable one. These two simultaneously competing approach/avoid motivations may be effortful to navigate, requiring greater deliberation. People are also diverse and complex, and are likely to have some incompatibilities with most people especially as they get to know each other better (Berscheid, 1985), making re-assessments of incompatibility less obvious.

The finding that self-concept clarity helps individuals better discriminate incompatible others is an important one because researchers generally agree that successful dating means being able to reject, or rule out, less suitable partners (e.g., Byrne et al., 1986; Joel & Eastwick, 2018). Not ruling out an incompatible dating partner effectively could result in one sliding into a relationship with them, thus closing the door to meeting a more compatible partner who may be just around the corner. Indeed, Joel & MacDonald (2021) point out that people start to get attached to their romantic partners fairly early in dating (Heffernan et al., 2012; Fagundes & Schindler, 2012) which they argue promotes relationship progression. If those lower in self-concept clarity are less strict about ruling incompatible others out during dating, they may enter dating relationships more easily or invest in relationships more often with poorly matched partners.

Our findings also indicate that those lower in self-concept clarity find it more challenging to navigate dating**.** Specifically, they have a harder time judging compatibility with romantic partners (H2a) and are less decisive in their dating decision (whom to date, and/or whether to keep dating someone; H2b). And in Study 2 (H2c), but not 1, such individuals also perceived their past dating choices as worse choices. The tendency to date incompatible others more often may mean having a wider net in the dating pool and may, therefore, have more dating partner choices to navigate. Although people value having choices (Leotti et al., 2010), having many options may overwhelm an individual and lead to poorer choice making in dating (Wu & Chiou, 2009; Yang & Chiou 2010). More fundamentally though, having a confused personal identity may hinder comparisons during dating (Author, 2023), to the extent that a confused self makes for a poor reference point in a comparison (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993). The parallel mediation analysis was informative first because it provides some tentative evidence indicating

that those lower in self-concept clarity are more likely to go out with incompatible others *because* they find it difficult to determine compatibility with dating partners. Second, it also suggests that such individuals are more likely to date incompatible others *because* they are less decisive about dating partners. Dating indecision as a mechanism of reduced discrimination is in line with a past finding that those lower in self-concept clarity are less certain about their romantic 'match' judgments for less similar others (Study 4; Author, 2023); if people with an unclear sense of self are less certain about less similar (i.e., less compatible) prospective dating partners, they may also have a harder time making up their mind about whether they should date, and/or continue dating them.

The association between dating indecision and frequency of dating incompatible others (PINC) is less obvious. We had theorized that indecision about whom to date and/or whether to continue dating someone results in one consequently being more open to dating someone as a strategy to avoid missing an opportunity of meeting someone with whom it *might* work out. And indeed, our results support this idea. But the inverse also seems plausible, that greater dating indecision, or uncertainty about match judgments for that matter, could lead to avoidant (i.e., more cautious) decision making in dating thereby reducing dating frequency in general and with less compatible others. Research outside the relationships domain supports this alternative idea, showing that uncertainty is reliability associated with feelings of anxiety (e.g., Hirsh et al., 2012; Grupe & Nitschke, 2013), and higher levels of anxiety in decision making promotes the avoidance of risky choices and negative outcomes even when there are gains to be had (e.g., Maner et al., 2007; Maner & Schmidt, 2006). To the extent that indecision or judgment uncertainty engenders anxiety, it is possible that those with an unclear sense of self enact a more cautious selection approach in dating. Interestingly though, avoidant decision making may also

induce decision postponement (e.g., Anderson, 2003) and in the context of dating relationships, this could mean someone delaying rejecting an incompatible partner which could in turn increase the chances of relationship formation.

Furthermore, because this is a mating context and the motivation to seek and find romantic partners is deeply rooted and strong (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2015), it may be that indecision nudges people towards relationship initiation with less compatible others despite a lack of confidence or trust in one's dating decisions. While our supplemental findings should be interpreted cautiously because they were found in Study 2, but not in Study 1, they do provide some further evidence that dating indecision is associated with dating incompatible others more, rather than less, often, and that those lower in self-concept clarity may be dating more, rather than less, in general. Future research should examine whether motivation to find a mate pushes individuals who are indecisive in dating to date more often, or whether they tend to hold back, as well as whether and how an avoidant decision-making style impacts relationship development.

Findings are less clear about the impact of self-concept clarity on wellbeing in dating. Whereas across both studies we found that lower self-concept clarity predicted experiencing greater negative affect as one thought about their past dating experiences (H3b), it did not predict lower levels of past dating satisfaction in either study (H3a). First, we consider the null finding for dating satisfaction. If people lower in self-concept clarity are dating incompatible others more often, the logic is that they would have fewer satisfying experiences over time compared to those higher in self-concept clarity which would be reflected in a global rating of past dating satisfaction, however this was not found. One possibility for this null effect is that such a global evaluation may have been influenced by the more positive experiences people had while dating compatible others. Indeed, researchers have shown that global judgements of past experiences

are often influenced by peak moments and moments that occurred most recently (e.g., Kahneman et al. 1993; Fredrickson, 2000), and our findings not only suggest that those lower and higher in self-concept clarity tend to date compatible dating partners to the same extent, but that dating compatible others is also strongly associated with greater past dating satisfaction. Thus, it may be that peak experiences during dating are the more rewarding, and possibly more enduring, experiences with compatible dating partners which may be shaping global ratings of past dating satisfaction. A future study should test effects of self-concept clarity on moment-to-moment dating satisfaction to examine if those lower in self-concept clarity are less satisfied in their actual ongoing dating experiences and if they experience greater variability in dating satisfaction across their dating experiences.

Despite the null findings for past dating satisfaction, lower levels of self-concept clarity predicted greater negative affect when thinking about past dating experiences and our mediation analysis further indicates that this relationship is explained by an increased frequency of having dated incompatible others in Study 2. One reason we may have found effects of self-concept clarity for dating-related negative affect but not for dating satisfaction is that the former reflects an emotional response to past events whereas the latter may in fact reflect a cognitive evaluation of one's dating history which is consistent with how subjective wellbeing is conceptualized. Wellbeing is typically assessed via two components, global ratings of life satisfaction which are cognitive evaluations (Andrews & Withey, 1976) and are distinct from, though intricately related to, affective evaluations of events (Diener & Emmons, 1984), however they do not always map on to each other (Kahneman et al., 2004).

One major limitation of the current work is that the path models were exploratory and tested with cross-sectional retrospective data. Future research should seek to replicate the current

findings with a prospective design. Another limitation is that we assessed people's perceptions of how often they dated compatible and incompatible others, but their perceptions may be biased due to their difficulty assessing compatibility and/or memory biases; although challenging to do, future work should assess incompatibility with dating partners more objectively, perhaps via observer reports (i.e., friends' ratings).

Conclusion

Compatibility is considered a key ingredient for good relationships, but some people may have difficulty assessing it which may set them on a course for relationships with incompatible partners. Using real-world data, our findings expand upon the current state of the literature on compatibility demonstrating that self-concept clarity may be beneficial in helping individuals rule out *incompatible* dating partners, but not necessarily rule compatible ones in. Individuals lower in self-concept clarity may ultimately find it harder to navigate dating decisions and partner selection which may lead them to date incompatible others more often.

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Table 1

Factor Analysis of PC and PINC measures from Merged Data

Item	*F1*	*F2*	*F3*
I dated people who were different from me.		.40	-.52
I dated people I shared interests with	.48		-.36
I dated people who I got along with well. *			-.59
I dated people with whom I had chemistry. *			-.63
I dated people who were not a good fit for me		**.80**	
I dated people with whom I was not well-matched.		**.78**	
I dated people I did not have much in common with.		**.72**	
I dated people I was not compatible with.		**.81**	
I dated people I did not click with.		**.81**	
I dated people I was compatible with.	**.74**		
I dated people who were similar to me.	**.86**		
I dated people with whom I was well-matched.	**.79**		
I dated people who were good for me.	**.83**		
Eigenvalue of factor	4.99	2.13	1.01
% total variance explained by factor	38.39	16.41	7.75

Note. N = 319. Only factors loadings greater than .35 are reported; F1 = PC (Past compatible partners) and F2 = PINC (Past incompatible partners).

Table 2

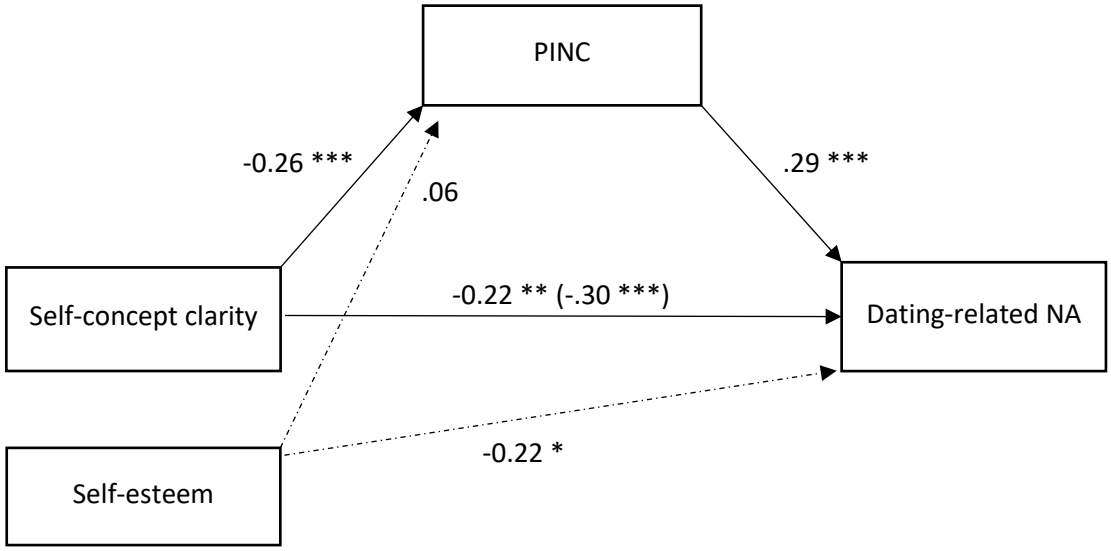
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Main Study Variables in Study 2

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	*M* (*SD*) Single	*M* (*SD*) In Relationship
1. Self-concept clarity	-								3.44 (.88)	3.35 (.96)
2. Self-esteem	.63**	-							2.85 (.68)	3.06 (.59)*
3. Judgement difficulty	-.39**	-.27**	-						3.69 (1.31)	3.36 (1.24) †
4. Dating indecision	-.38**	-.15*	.39**	-					3.73 (1.36)	3.95 (1.47)
5. Past choice appraisal	.30**	.27**	-.38**	-.35**	-				3.81 (1.23)	4.16 (1.19)*
6. Past dating satisfaction	.21**	.34**	-.19**	-.19**	.62**	-			4.05 (1.26)	4.70 (1.06)*
7. Dating-related negative affect	-.45**	-.38**	.32**	.32**	-.61**	-.52**	-		2.08 (.80)	1.89 (.80)
8. Past compatible partners (PC)	.22**	.26**	-.23**	-.24**	.67**	.50**	-.36**	-	3.26 (.66)	3.35 (.60)
9.Past incompatible partners (PINC)	-.34**	-.17*	.49**	.41**	-.61**	-.31**	.35**	-.42**	2.78 (.70)	2.69 (.61)

Note. $N = 204$; 113 single, 91 in relationships; † $p < .08$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Figure 1

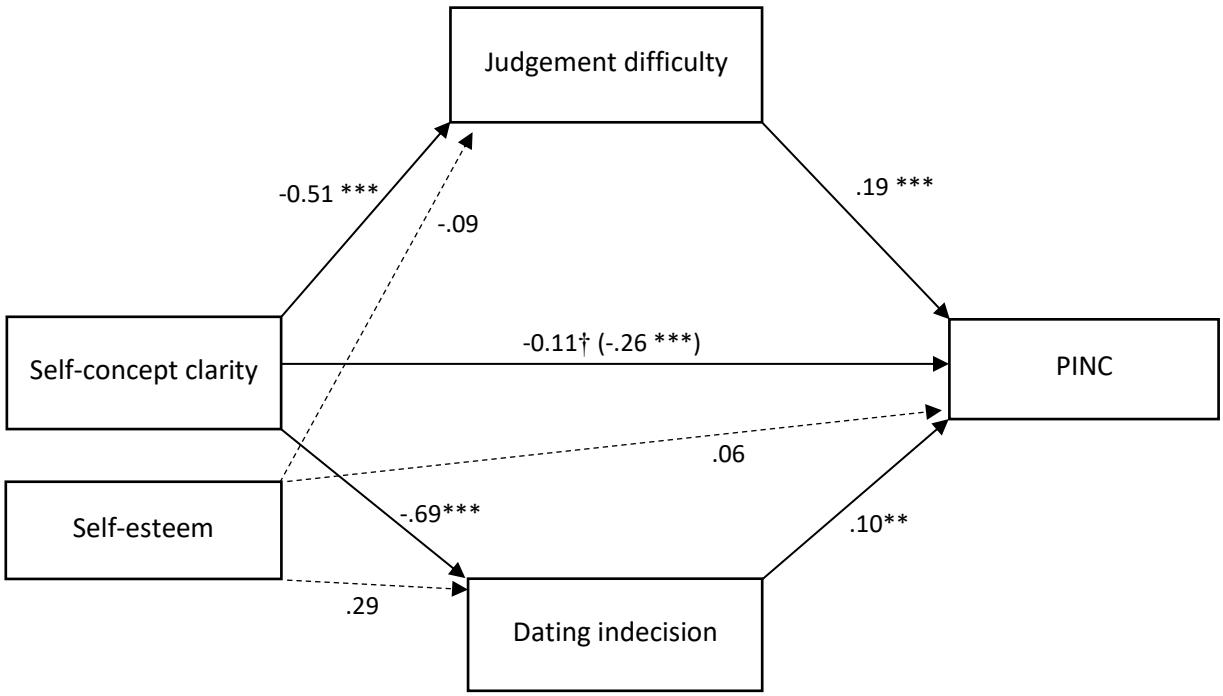
Path Model for the Relationship Between Self-Concept Clarity and Dating-Related NA mediated by PINC in Study 2



Note. Unstandardized regression coefficients for the relationship between self-concept clarity and dating-related NA mediated by PINC, controlling for self-esteem. In parenthesis is the direct effect before the mediator is entered into the model. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Figure 2

Parallel Path Model for the Relationship Between Self-Concept Clarity and PINC mediated by Judgement Difficulty and Dating Indecision in Study 2



Note. Unstandardized regression coefficients for the relationship between self-concept clarity and PINC mediated by judgement difficulty and dating indecision, controlling for self-esteem. In parenthesis is the direct effect before the mediators are entered into the model. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Bridge to Manuscript 3

Thus far in Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis, I presented empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis that individuals lower, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity are less discriminating about incompatible dating partners and the hypothesis that this weaker ruling out effect is because such individuals have a harder time evaluating compatibility and navigating dating decisions. In this previous work, I argued that individuals low in self-concept clarity find partner evaluation and selection more challenging because a poorly defined self-concept makes a poor reference point in a self-other comparison (Setterlund & Neidenthal, 1993), and comparisons are often made during dating to determine whether someone is a "match". If this is the case, then those lower in self-concept clarity likely use comparisons less optimally, or less often, when evaluating, and importantly rejecting, less compatible dating partners.

In Chapter 4, I examine an additional plausible explanation for why individuals with a confused personal identity find dating decisions harder to navigate and may consequently be less strict about ruling out incompatible others – because they do not know what they desire or seek in a romantic relationship (i.e., they lack *relationship clarity*). I suggest that the construct of self-concept clarity reflects a more general sense of self-clarity and hypothesize that individuals who lack self-clarity may be especially likely to also lack relationship clarity more specifically. Furthermore, I hypothesize that a lack of relationship clarity makes compatibility judgements and dating decisions more challenging, which in turn lowers discrimination for incompatibles dating partners. I tested these exploratory hypotheses using a merged dataset of the two retrospective studies reported in Chapter 3. Incorporated in both studies was a new self-report measure I had created, the relationship clarity scale. It assesses the extent to which one has a clear, versus confused, understanding of the type of romantic relationship one is looking for.

I first examined associations between relationship clarity, self-concept clarity, self-esteem, and variables that assessed decision making styles. I then extended key findings reported in Chapter 3 by testing whether relationship clarity is a mechanism through which self-concept clarity influences the selection of incompatible dating partners, and whether relationship clarity influences the selection of incompatible dating partners through judgement difficulty and dating indecision.

Manuscript 3

The role of relationship clarity for self-concept clarity during romantic partner selection

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Publication details:

Kubin, D., & Lydon, J. (2023). The role of relationship clarity for the selection of dating partners. *Manuscript in prep.*

Abstract

Recent research suggests that individuals lower, versus higher, in self-concept clarity are less discriminating about incompatible romantic partners because they find it more challenging to evaluate them (Kubin & Lydon, 2023, in revision). The current work extends these findings by testing whether a lack of *relationship clarity* (i.e., a poor understanding of what one seeks in a relationship) explains why those lower in self-concept clarity have greater difficulty evaluating partners and are subsequently less strict in ruling out incompatible ones. We merged data from two retrospective studies (N = 340; Age ranging from 25-45); supporting our two primary hypotheses, results from mediation analyses indicate first that relationship clarity partly explains the association between self-concept clarity and the frequency of dating incompatible others (PINC), and second, that the association between lower relationship clarity and greater levels of PINC is due to greater difficulty evaluating dating partners. Results suggest that those with a confused personal identity are more confused about what they seek in their romantic relationships which makes it more challenging to evaluate their dating partners and ultimately leads to ruling out incompatible ones less strictly.

Key words: relationship clarity, self-concept clarity, compatibility, dating, relationships

The role of relationship clarity for self-concept clarity during romantic partner selection

The self-concept is critical in adaptively guiding our choices and actions (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1987; McConnel, 2011). When it is less clear and poorly defined, it becomes a less useful guide (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1983). The self-concept is comprised of vast amounts of self-relevant information, including information about one's traits, goals, and roles (e.g., Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984; McConnell, 2011); presumably this includes information about one's relationship preferences, desires, and goals. As such, one potential consequence of having a confused self-concept (i.e., being low in self-concept clarity) is having a poor understanding of what wants and seeks in, or from, a romantic relationship. Although an abundance of relationship research has examined what people desire and expect from their relationships (e.g., Thibault & Kelley, 1959; Clark & Mills, 1993; Finkel et al., 2015), surprisingly little work has examined to what extent people have a clear vision or understanding of what they want from their relationships.

The current research therefore first tested whether, and to what extent, people have *relationship clarity* (i.e., a clear understanding about what they want and seek in a romantic relationship). Second, in hypothesizing that relationship clarity is one natural consequence of self-concept clarity, we sought to extend recent findings which demonstrate that individuals lower in self-concept clarity are less discriminating about incompatible partners because they find dating partner evaluations more challenging to make (Kubin & Lydon, 2023). We examined whether relationship clarity is a mechanism through which self-concept clarity influences dating partner evaluations and subsequent partner selection. We hypothesize that individuals lower in self-concept clarity are lower in relationship clarity, which makes it more difficult to evaluate prospective partners in terms of compatibility and makes one more indecisive, ultimately leading such individuals to become less discriminating about incompatible dating partners.

Self-Concept Clarity

The self-concept is a stable, yet malleable, organized mental network of self-relevant information (Markus & Wurf, 1987) stored in memory (e.g., Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984). Among the information stored are beliefs about one's preferences, traits, goals, social roles, and many other aspects of identity; when activated, this information guides one's decisions and actions (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1987; McConnell, 2011). When one's self-concept is organized, stable, and coherent, one is considered high in self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996). Someone higher in self-concept clarity has the subjective sense of having a clear and well-defined personal identity and is likely to endorse the statement "I know who I am". Conversely, someone lower in self-concept clarity is confused about who they are and is more likely to experience lower levels of psychological wellbeing, such as greater depression, stress (Treadgold, 1999), and neuroticism as well as lower self-esteem (Campbell et al., 1996; Campbell et al., 2003).

Recent research demonstrates a link between self-concept clarity and romantic partner evaluations and selection. One series of lab experiments show that individuals lower, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity are less harsh in evaluating dissimilar prospective partners. (Kubin et al., 2023). Other work using real-world retrospective data suggests that individuals lower in self-concept clarity find it more challenging to evaluate compatibility with dating partners and are less decisive in their dating decisions, which in turn makes them less discriminating about less compatible partners (Kubin & Lydon, 2023). These authors argue that people low in self-concept clarity find it more challenging to navigate dating decisions and partner selection because they have a harder time comparing themselves with prospective partners on account of having a confused self-concept. According to Setterlund & Niedenthal (1983), a confused self-concept hinders self-other comparisons. Given that people make

comparisons when deciding whether a prospective partner is a good, or poor, romantic match, a confused self-concept could hinder partner evaluations and selection.

Relationship Clarity

But another possible explanation for why individuals low in self-concept clarity may be less discriminating about incompatible dating partners is because such individuals do not have a clear understanding of what they desire and seek in romantic relationships. That is, they lack *relationship clarity,* and this lack of relationship clarity may be what is leading to lower standards for ruling out incompatible partners. To the extent that the self-concept contains all self-knowledge, it likely also contains some information about one's relationship goals and desires. Although it is possible and probable that some people who are high in general self-clarity may not be clear about the type of relationship they desire, we argue that lacking general self-clarity may increase the chances of lacking relationship clarity more specifically, as well as other more specific aspects of one's identity. In this manner, we suggest that the construct of self-concept clarity reflects a global or general sense of clarity, and that individuals who lack self-concept clarity may be especially likely to also lack relationship clarity more specifically. Indeed, researchers have shown that lower levels of self-concept clarity are also associated with lacking clarity about one's social status (Destin al., 2017), collective identity (Usborne & Taylor, 2010), and one's identity as a romantic couple (Emery et al., 2021).

The idea that a lack of general self-clarity may influence clarity about specific aspects of identity is also consistent with Light's (2017) theorizing about the role of self-concept clarity in goal pursuit. She suggests that individuals low in self-concept clarity may not only find it harder to create goals for themselves, but that their goals may also be vaguely and poorly defined. Consequently, according to Light, low self-concept clarity results in poor self-regulation

impairing goal pursuit. In the context of relationships, someone low in self-concept clarity may therefore not only have poorly defined relationship goals but also have low relationship clarity. This is important to consider given that seeking and developing close relationships is a major goal pursuit for many people (e.g., Reis et al., 2000; Hammersla & Frease-McMahan, 1990). Lacking relationship clarity may be what is making dating partner evaluations and selection less optimal for individuals who lack self-concept clarity.

Romantic Relationship Preferences

What do people desire and seek in romantic relationships? Several major relationship theories have been put forth to explain what people more fundamentally want or expect in their romantic relationships. One prominent social exchange theory, interdependence theory, states that people essentially want their romantic relationships to be satisfying which increases as the relative rewards gained from a relationship outweigh the relative costs (Thibault & Kelly, 1959; Kelly & Thibault, 1978). Clark and Mills (1993) argue that while some relationships are indeed characterized by the exchange of benefits, others are characterized by mutual care and concern for each other's wellbeing. This latter idea is consistent with another prominent theory, adult attachment theory, which states that people seek a secure and trusting emotional bond in a romantic relationship (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1986; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). And researchers also highlight that people seek relationships that help them fulfill their important needs (e.g., Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Finkel & Eastwick, 2015), ranging from lower order needs, such as those for safety and belonging, to higher order needs such as those for esteem and self-actualization (Finkel et al, 2014). According to Aron and Aron (1986), one important self-actualizing need that relationships help satisfy is that of self-expansion.

Understanding what people want in romantic relationships may also be gleaned indirectly via research on partner preferences. Presumably, when people think about what they want in their relationships, characteristics of partners come to mind for many people; partner attributes to some extent probably reflect interpersonal qualities or dynamics that then characterize the relationship. Indeed, Fletcher and colleagues (1999) found that ideal partner preferences to a large extent empirically overlap with ideal relationship preferences, such that people desire their partners, as well as their relationships, to be warm, loyal, and trusting, as well as vital, fun, and passionate. Other important ideal partner traits are those of kindness and intelligence (Li et al., 2002), and humor (Feingold, 1992). And when Eastwick and colleagues (2014) asked people what makes a mate a high value one, although many reported attractiveness, they also overwhelmingly reported compatibility as well as mates who are committed, caring, and who facilitate self-improvement. Taken together, in general people want rewarding, secure, trusting relationships. And although some people may prefer exchanges relationships, at least some of the time, others want caring relationships in which they are able to meet each other's various needs and improve each other's wellbeing. People also desire their relationships to be with likeable individuals who possess certain desirable personal attributes which presumably contribute to a rewarding relationship dynamic.

Clearly, plenty of research has shed light on what individuals generally want in their romantic relationships. However, people have idiosyncratic relationship preferences and desires, and every relationship has a unique dynamic (Murray & Holmes, 2009), and to our knowledge, no work has yet examined whether, or to what extent, people *know* what they want in, or from, their relationships. The assumption by researchers to date has been that people know their relationship preferences and expectations and reliably report these. Rarely have researchers

asked participants about the confidence or clarity of such preferences and expectations. It is both possible and probable that some people, at least some of the time, do not have a clear vision of what they want and seek in a relationship. Indeed, one may struggle to weigh and prioritize various partner and relationship characteristics and consequently not know what they want from their romantic relationships. And tangentially, an abundance of research on attitudes demonstrates that people often have uncertain attitudes about a diversity of attitude objects (Gross et al., 1995), such as about important social issues, (Abelson, 1988), consumer purchases (e.g., Bee & Madrigal, 2013), and the self (Baumgardner, 1990).

Not knowing what one wants or seeks in a relationship during dating may make it harder to make dating decisions and select suitable partners. For example, a lack of relationship clarity may increase dating indecision (i.e., make it harder to make up one's mind about whom to date, or whether to continue dating someone), as well as make it more difficult to judge how compatible one is with their dating partner. It may also engender uncertainty which may lead to both excessive worry about making wrong decisions (i.e., an anxious decisional style) and/or the postponement or avoidance of making decisions (i.e., an avoidant decisional style), as well as generally undermining one's faith in oneself as a decision maker (i.e., confident decision style). Both anxious and avoidant decisional styles are considered maladaptive because both have been positively associated with depressive symptoms (Leykin & DeRubeis, 2010), neuroticism and poorer decision competence in everyday life decision domains (Dewberry et al., 2013a). An avoidant decision style has also been linked to greater perceived stress (Thunholm, 2008). Some research also suggests that an anxious decision style may lead to more avoidant decision making; in other words, the more worried one is about making bad decisions the more they may postpone, or avoid, making them (Dewberry et al., 2013b).

Kubin and Lydon (2023) have suggested that avoiding or delaying making decisions during dating could result in someone failing to nudge a relationship forward with a compatible potential partner by, for example, not actively initiating activities (i.e., dates) with them. More consequentially, they suggest that decisional inaction could also result in someone failing to stop the advancement of a budding relationship with an incompatible person. For example, by failing to say no to activities with a dating partner one may end up spending more time with them, getting attached despite incompatibilities, thus letting the relationship naturally advance towards commitment. In this manner, decisional inaction may contribute to the progression bias in relationships (i.e., the tendency for relationships to develop, rather than end; Joel & McDonald, 2022). Thus, a lack of relationship clarity may have some negative consequences for partner selection and relationship formation.

Given the importance of selecting suitable partners for relationship satisfaction (Berscheid, 1985), and the importance of high quality relationships for health and wellbeing (e.g., Dush & Amato, 2005; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010), identifying a construct such as relationship clarity may help researchers explain not only why some individuals make the partner choices that they do, but will also allow us to extend past findings (Kubin & Lydon, 2023) and test whether low relationship clarity is another explanation for why those lower in self-concept clarity are more likely to select incompatible partners.

Overview of Current Research

This study's aims are two-fold. Because no previous research that we know of has yet measured whether, and to what extent, individuals vary in terms of knowing what they want and seek in a romantic relationship, our first aim was to create the *relationship clarity scale* to assess this likely reality. Our second and primary aim was to extend recent findings which demonstrate

that individuals low in self-concept clarity are less discriminating about incompatible partners because they find dating partner evaluations more challenging to make (Kubin & Lydon, 2023). These authors posit that a lack of self-clarity hinders comparisons with prospective partners which is what makes it harder for them to make compatibility judgements, although they did not directly test whether self-concept clarity impacts the ability to make comparisons. This inability is assumed to be reflected in the direct path from self-concept clarity to judgement difficulty in their mediation findings.

We hypothesize an additional explanation for why it may be more challenging for those who lack self-clarity to evaluate partners and rule out incompatible ones less strictly: because they lack relationship clarity. We conceptualize relationship clarity as one consequence of self-clarity, suggesting that it is likely that individuals confused about who they are in turn are confused about what they want in relationships. Of course, both explanations are possible, operating simultaneously: individuals lacking self-clarity may find it challenging to evaluate their dating partner because they find it harder to make comparisons and because they are confused about what they want in relationships. That said, our primary aim was to test relationship clarity as one mechanism through which self-concept clarity influences incompatible partner selection; as such, our hypotheses did not pit self-concept clarity and relationship clarity against each other in predicting compatibility judgements or the selection of incompatible mates.

We conducted exploratory analyses using the retrospective data reported by Kubin & Lydon (2023) which entailed asking individuals to report on their thoughts and feelings about their past dating experiences (Ages 25-45; $N = 340$). Because self-concept clarity has been linked to judgement difficulty, dating indecision, and the frequency of dating incompatible others (Kubin & Lydon, 2023), we examined whether relationship clarity is a unique predictor of these

main outcome measures as well as with three other variables reflecting dating decision making styles. Because we found evidence that relationship clarity predicts all main outcome measures, we explored whether relationship clarity explains whether individuals lower in self-concept clarity are less discriminating in dating incompatible partners (mediation 1). Because we found support for mediation 1, we then examined whether judgement difficulty and dating indecision explain how individuals lower in relationship clarity might come to be less discriminating about incompatible dating partners (Mediation 2).

Method

Participants and Procedure

In total, 340 participants were recruited from Amazon mechanical Turk, an online platform. Singles and those in relationships currently living in North America were invited to complete an online survey asking people about their past dating experiences. Eligible participants had to be between ages 25 and 45, and to have had *Some* (3), *A good number* (4), or *A lot* (5) of past dating experiences; ineligible participants reported having had *None* (1) or *A small number* (2) of them. Twenty-one participants were removed from analyses: 2 said not to use their data, 11 failed at least two attention checks, 5 responded with the same values for numerous scales, and 1 started the study twice, and 2 completed the study in less than half time advertised. The final analytic sample comprised of 319 participants (M_{age} = 34.44, *SD* = 5.34), just over half were female (52%), most were Caucasian (71.6%), and heterosexual (83.3%). Furthermore, 47.4% were single, whereas 21% were in committed relationships, and 31.7% were engaged or married. For demographic details, see Appendix.

Measures

Relationship Clarity

We generated a 5-item scale which assess the degree to which individuals have a clear, versus confused, vision or understanding of the kind of romantic relationship they are looking for by modifying items on the self-concept clarity scale (Campbell et al., 1996). These modified 5were chosen because they made theoretical and grammatical sense when translating them to the construct of relationship clarity. Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (5), and a mean is computed as an index of relationship clarity. All items are reported in Table 2.

Self-Concept Clarity

Participants completed the widely used 12-item measure assessing their self-perception of having stable and clear self-beliefs (Campbell et al., 1996), using a 5-point Likert scale from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (5). A sample item is "In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am"; $\alpha = .94$.

Self-Esteem

Participants completed a 10-item measure assessing general feelings of self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965). A sample item is "I feel that I have a number of good qualities"; responses were made using a 4-point Likert scale, from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (4); $\alpha = .93$.

Judgement Difficulty

Judgement difficulty captures difficulty one had in judging romantic partners in terms partner fit. Two of the items were, "How difficult do you find it to judge [how compatible you are/how similar you are] with potential romantic partners? and the third item was "In general, when evaluating potential dating partners, how difficult is it for you to judge whether someone

might be a good romantic match for you?". Responses were made on a 1-7 Likert scale, from *Not at all* (1) *to Extremely* (7); α = .84.

Dating Indecision

Indecision about past dating partners was tested with a 2-item measure generated in-lab: "Often, I couldn't make up my mind when it came to deciding [whom to go out with] or [whether to keep dating someone]". Responses are made using a 1-7 Likert scale, from *Strongly Disagree* (1) *to Strongly Agree* (7); *r* = .43.

Past Compatible and Incompatible Dating Partners

Participants were asked to think back on all of their past dating experiences to date, and to report on the extent in which they dated individuals who they were compatible and incompatible with. A five-item subset captured the frequency of having dated past incompatible dating partners (PINC). These items were: *I dated people…*1. who were not a good fit for me, 2. with whom I was not well-matched, 3. I did not have much in common with, 4. I was not compatible with, and 5. I did not click with. A 4-item subset captured the frequency of having dated past compatible dating partners (PC). These items were: *I dated people*…1. I was compatible with, 2. who were similar to me, 3. with whom I was well-matched, and 4. who were good for me. Responses were made using a 1-5 Likert scale, going from *Never* (1) to *Always* (5). Reliability for PINC (α = .85) and PC (α = .85).

Dating Decision Making Styles

We modified items from the Decision-Making Styles Questionnaire (Leykin & DeRubeis, 2010) to reflect three decision making tendencies (listed below) that one may engage in while dating. Participants were asked to think about how they make their dating decisions and to rate to what extent each item was *Very Untrue for You* (1) to *Very True for You* (5).

Dating Decision Confidence. This 5-item subscale assesses the degree to which one has confidence in their dating decisions. These items are: I have faith in my dating decision, I don't trust my ability to make important dating decisions (Reverse coded), I feel confident about my ability to make dating decisions, I think I am a good decision maker when it comes to dating, and I don't trust my ability to make important dating decisions (Reversed coded). A mean was used as an index, with higher levels indicating greater confidence; α = .83.

Anxious Dating Decision Style. This 4-item subscale assesses the extent to which one is anxious about making wrong dating decisions. These items are, I panic when I think that my dating decisions might be wrong; When making dating decisions, I am afraid that I might be wrong; I feel as if I'm under tremendous time pressure when making dating decisions; I feel very anxious when I need to make a dating decisions. A mean was used as an index, with higher levels indicating greater dating decision anxiety; α = .88.

Avoidant Dating Decision Style. This subscale assesses the degree to which one tends to avoid or delay making dating decisions, and is comprised of 1 item: I don't make dating decisions unless I really have to.

Results

Development of the relationship clarity scale

Internal consistency. As seen in Table 1, the reliability coefficient is high; α = .92. The interitem correlation matrixes indicated that all items were positively correlated (*r*'s ranging from .45 to .77 with a mean inter-item correlation of .60. A *t*-test revealed that females were significantly higher in relationship clarity (M = 3.72, SD = .87) than males (M = 3.49, SD = .97, t = -2.19, p = .029).

Factor Analysis.

To test whether the construct of relationships clarity (as measured by our new scale) was empirically distinct from the related construct of self-concept clarity, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis with items from both scales. Nineteen items were entered into a factor analysis (Oblimin rotation); results yielded a 3-factor solution (see Table 2). Although 1 item on the relationship clarity scale loaded onto F1 and F3, this item loaded more strongly onto F1, which we call Relationship Clarity Scale (RCS). Most self-concept clarity items loaded onto F2, which we call SCC, although 1 item loaded onto F2 and F3, and 1 item loaded only onto F3. Although this suggests there may be a diagnostic issue with the self-concept clarity scale, the overall alpha is high (.93) for this scale, and the purpose of this research was not to diagnose the SCCS, but rather to provide reliability evidence for the RCS. Factors 1 and 2 were positively correlated (r = .53); these results support the idea that relationship clarity and self-concept clarity are related but distinct constructs.

Table 1

Relationship Clarity Scale Statistics

	Total *N*		Females		Males		Interitem *r*		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	x	Range	α
RCS	3.60	.92	3.72	.87	3.49	.97	.60	.45-.77	.92

Note. N = 319; 52% female, 46.4% male, 1.6% other gender; x = mean inter-item correlation.

Table 2

Pattern Matrix from Principal Components Analysis of Relationship-Clarity and Self-Concept Clarity Scales

Item	F1	F2	F3
RC1: My beliefs about what I want in a relationship often conflict with one another. *R*		**.73**	
RC2: On one day I might have one opinion about what I am looking for in a romantic relationship and on another day, I might have a different opinion. *R*		**.78**	
RC3: I spend a lot of time wondering about what kind of relationship I am looking for. *R*		**.82**	
RC4: In general, I have a clear sense of what I want in a romantic relationship.		**.68**	.49
RC5: My beliefs about what I want in a relationship seem to change very frequently. *R*		**.85**	
RC6: If I were asked to describe the type of relationship I would like to have, my description might end up being different from one day to another day. *R*		**.77**	
RC7: Even if I wanted to, I don't think I could tell someone what I am really looking for in a romantic relationship. *R*		**.78**	
SCC1: My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another. *R*	.85		
SCC2: On one day I might have one opinion of myself and on another day I might have a different opinion. *R*	.83		
SCC3: I spend a lot of time wondering about what kind of person I really am. *R*	.76		
SCC4: Sometimes I feel that I am not really the person that I appear to be. *R*	.86		
SCC5: When I think about the kind of person I have been in the past, I'm not sure what I was really like. *R*	.84		
SCC6: I seldom experience conflict between the different aspects of my personality.			.86
SCC7: Sometimes I think I know other people better than I know myself. *R*	.71		
SCC8: My beliefs about myself seem to change very frequently. *R*	.79		
SCC9: If I were asked to describe my personality, my description might end up being different from one day to another day. *R*	.86		
SCC10: Even if I wanted to, I don't think I could tell someone what I'm really like. *R*	.75		
SCC11: In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am.	.44		.60
SCC12: It is often hard for me to make up my mind about things because I don't really know what I want. *R*	.70		
Eigenvalue of factor	9.90	2.11	1.19
% Total variance explained by factor	52.08	11.12	6.28

Note. N = 319. Only factors loadings greater than .30 are reported; F1 = Self-Concept Clarity and F2 = Relationship Clarity. Factors 1 and 2 are positively correlated, *r* = .53, as are Factors 1 and 3, *r* = .25, and Factors 2 and 3, *r* = .26; ***R*** denotes an item that has been reverse coded.

Table 3

Correlations for Key Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	*9*
1.Relationship clarity	-								
2.Self-concept clarity	.63**	-							
3.Self-esteem	.33***	-.62***	-						
4.Decision confidence	.38**	.38***	.40***	-					
5.Anxious decision making	-.50***	-.49***	-.46***	-.54***	-				
6.Avoidant decision making	-.35***	-.27***	-.17**	-.24***	.40***	-			
7.Judgement difficulty	-.48***	-.38***	-.28***	-.45***	.48***	.24***	-		
8.Dating indecision	-.43***	-.39***	-.20***	-.35***	.43***	.19**	.40***	-	
9. PC	.17**	.19**	.26***	.47***	-.24***	-.05	-.21***	-.21***	
10.PINC	-.35***	-.36***	-.27***	-.38***	.28***	.09	.43***	.38***	-.39***

Note. Analytic *N* = 319 (151 singles, 168 in relationships). PC = Past Compatible Partners, PINC = Past Incompatible Partners.

Correlates of relationship clarity

Correlations between main study variables were computed (see Table 3). Of note, relationship clarity was strongly correlated with self-concept clarity ($r(312) = .63$) and moderately correlated with self-esteem ($r(312) = .33$). Because people in relationships, compared to singles, might report fewer dating challenges on account of having 'succeeded' in the dating goal of finding a partners, we computed 10 *t*-tests on all key variables listed in Table 3 as a function of relationship status to address relationship status as a possible confound in main analyses. Results revealed that individuals in committed relationships were higher on self-esteem ($M = 3.10$, $SD = .60$) and dating decision confidence ($M = 3.17$, $SD = .72$) compared to singles (self-esteem, $M = 2.86$, $SD = .69$, $t = -3.26$, $p = .001$; dating decision confidence, $M = 2.89$, $SD = .81$, $t = -3.10$, $p = .002$). Relationship clarity did not differ as a function of relationship status ($t = -1.68$, $p = .094$); all other p's also $> .05$.

Unique effects of relationship clarity on decision making styles

The correlations in Table 3 indicate that both relationship clarity and self-concept clarity are positively associated with dating decision confidence and negatively correlated with anxious and avoidant dating decision styles; the magnitude of these correlations is similarly moderate-strong across variables making initial interpretations somewhat unclear. We thus conducted follow-up hierarchical regressions to examine whether relationship clarity was a unique predictor of each of these 3 outcome measures (Table 4). First, self-esteem was entered into Step 1 as a covariate because it was correlated with all three outcome variables. Self-concept clarity was entered in Step 2; interestingly, results from Step 2 indicate that self-concept clarity is a significant predictor of all three outcome variables. However, these associations are no longer significant when relationship clarity is entered into the 3rd Step of the model; results from this

step show that relationship clarity remains the only significant predictor of all three variables: decision confidence (b = .22, t = 3.83, p < .001), anxious decision style (b = -.38, t = -5.80, p < .001) and avoidant decision style (b = -.39, t = -4.43, p < .001). These results suggest that individuals who have a better understanding of what they want and seek in relationships are also more likely to trust their decisions, worry less about making wrong choices, and are less likely to delay making their dating decisions.

Table 4

Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Dating Decision Confidence, Anxious and Avoidant Dating Decision Styles

Variable	Decision Confidence			Anxious Decision Style			Avoidant Decision Style		
	B	*t*	*p*	*B*	*t*	*p*	*B*	*t*	*p*
Step 1									
Self-esteem	.51	7.45	<.001	-.73	-9.04	<.001	-.29	-2.82	.005
Overall		R^2_{adj} = .16			R^2_{adj} = .21			R^2_{adj} = .02	
Step 2									
Self-esteem	.34	3.96	<.001	-.40	-4.14	<.001	.01	0.04	.967
Self-concept clarity	.20	3.28	.001	-.38	-5.54	<.001	-.34	-3.82	<.001
Overall		R^2_{adj} = .19			R^2_{adj} = .28			R^2_{adj} = .06	
Step 3									
Self-esteem	*.37*	*4.46*	*<.001*	*-.44*	*-4.80*	<.001	*-.04*	*-0.30*	*.768*
Self-concept clarity	*.04*	*0.54*	*.588*	*-.12*	*-1.54*	.125	*-.08*	*-0.75*	*.453*
Relationship clarity	*.22*	*3.83*	*<.001*	*-.38*	*-5.80*	<.001	*-.39*	*-4.43*	*<.001*
Overall		R^2_{adj} = .23			R^2_{adj} = .35			R^2_{adj} = .12	

Note. Analytic n = 319. Self-esteem, self-concept clarity, and relationship clarity are grand-mean centered.

Unique effects of relationship clarity on outcome variables from past work

The correlations in Table 3 indicate that relationship clarity is associated with judgement difficulty, dating indecision, PC, and PINC in a highly similar pattern as self-concept clarity, making initial interpretations unclear. We conducted four hierarchical regressions to examine the effects of relationship clarity, above and beyond the effects of self-concept clarity, on four key outcome variables (see Table 5). In each analysis, self-esteem was entered in the first step, and self-concept clarity in the second step. In this manner, results of step 2 reflect findings from past research (Kubin & Lydon, 2023b). Results from the second step reveal that, controlling for self-esteem, self-concept clarity predicted PINC (b = -.23, t = -4.61, p < .001), judgement difficulty (b = -.46, t = -5.01, p < .001), and dating indecision (b = -.65, t = -6.52, p < .001).

When relationship clarity was added in the third step, relationship clarity was a significant predictor of PINC (b = -.15, t = -3.04, p = .003), as was self-concept clarity (b = -.09, t = -1.26, p = .031). Relationship clarity was also a unique predictor of dating indecision (b = -.42, t = -4.33, p < .001), whilst self-concept clarity remained a significant predictor (b = -.37, t = -3.13, p = .002). And finally, relationship clarity was the only significant predictor of judgement difficulty (b = -.52, t = -5.98, p < .001). There was a marginal unique association between relationship clarity and PC (b = .09, t = 1.81, p = .072) indicating that individuals higher in relationship clarity are marginally more likely to report having dated compatible others. These results indicate that individuals who have a better understanding of what they want in relationships are less likely to have dated incompatible others, are less indecisive in dating, and find it less challenging to evaluate compatibility with others.

Table 5

Hierarchical Regressions Predicting the Frequency of Having Dated Past Compatible Partners (PC), Frequency of Having Dated Past Incompatible Partners (PINC), Judgment Difficulty, and Dating Indecision.

Variable	PC			PINC			Judgement Difficulty			Dating Indecision		
	b	*t*	*p*	*b*	*t*	*p*	*b*	*t*	*p*	*b*	*t*	*p*
Step 1												
Self-esteem	.23	4.35	<.001	-.28	-4.71	<.001	-.56	-5.28	<.001	-.45	-3.75	<.001
Overall		R^2_{adj} = .06			R^2_{adj} = .07			R^2_{adj} = .08			R^2_{adj} = .04	
Step 2												
Self-esteem	.22	3.17	.002	-.08	-1.04	.299	-.17	-1.30	.195	.11	.78	.437
Self-concept clarity	.02	.45	.654	-.23	-4.61	<.001	-.46	-5.01	<.001	-.65	-6.52	<.001
Overall		R^2_{adj} = .05			R^2_{adj} = .13			R^2_{adj} = .15			R^2_{adj} = .16	
Step 3												
Self-esteem	*.23*	*3.31*	*.001*	*-.09*	*-1.26*	*.208*	*-.23*	*-1.86*	*.064*	*.06*	*0.47*	*.639*
Self-concept clarity	*-.04*	*-0.65*	*.518*	*-.13*	*-2.16*	*.031*	*-.10*	*-0.98*	*.326*	*-.37*	*-3.13*	*.002*
Relationship clarity	*.09*	*1.81*	*.072*	*-.15*	*-3.04*	*.003*	*-.52*	*-5.98*	*<.001*	*-.42*	*-4.33*	*<.001*
Overall		R^2_{adj} = .06			R^2_{adj} = .15			R^2_{adj} = .24			R^2_{adj} = .21	

Note. Analytic *n* = 319. Self-esteem, self-concept clarity, and relationship clarity are grand-mean centered.

Mediation Analyses

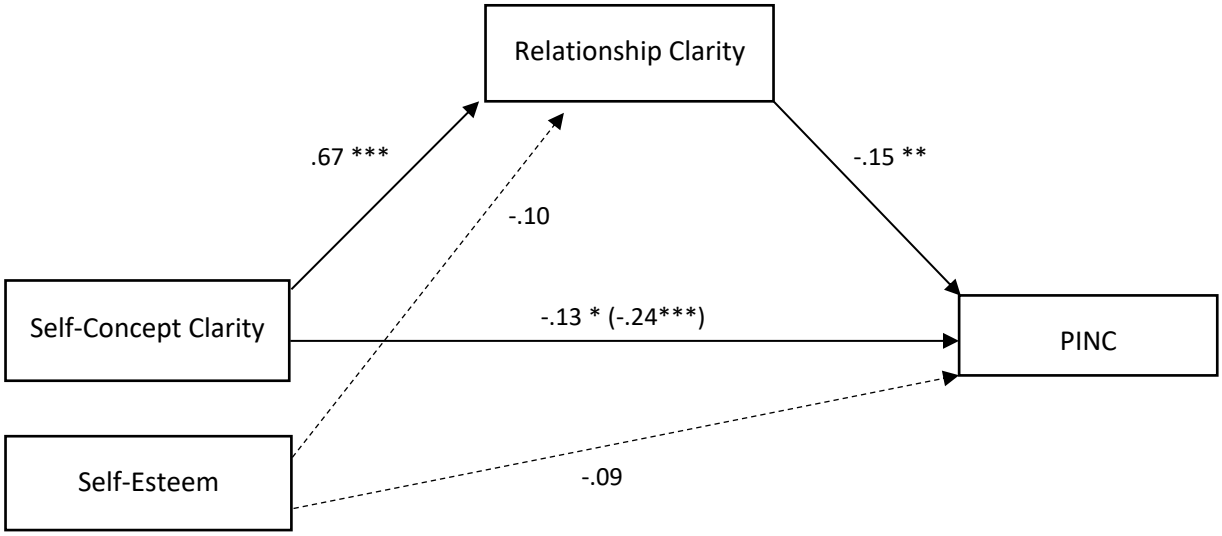
In an effort to extend past findings demonstrating a link between self-concept clarity and PINC (Kubin & Lydon, 2023b), we first explored whether relationship clarity explains whether individuals lower in self-concept clarity are less discriminating in dating incompatible partners (Mediation 1). Because we found evidence to support mediation 1, we then explored whether judgement difficulty and dating indecision explain how individuals lower in relationship clarity might come to be less discriminating about incompatible dating partners in a multiple mediation analysis in which each mediator is tested controlling for the other (Mediation 2). Hayes (2012) PROCESS macro for SPSS (v23) was used for both mediation analyses; all predictor variables are grand-mean centered.

Mediation 1

Results revealed that, controlling for self-esteem, the relationship between self-concept clarity and PINC was mediated by relationship clarity. As illustrated by Figure 1, the association between self-concept clarity and PINC, the direct effect, was significant (b = -.13, t = -2.16, p =.031), as were the associations between self-concept clarity and relationship clarity (b = .67, t = 11.70, p < .001), and relationship clarity and PINC (b = -.15, t = 3.60, p = .003). To test the significance of this indirect effect of relationship clarity, we used bootstrapping procedures. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect of relationship clarity was statistically significant (b = -.10; 95% CI [-.19, -.04]. These results indicate, compared to those higher in self-concept clarity, those lower in self-concept clarity are more likely to have a confused vision of the type of relationship they are seeking which in turn results in dating incompatibles others more frequently.

Figure 1

Path Model for the Association Between Self-Concept Clarity and Frequency of Having Dated Past Incompatible Partners (PINC) mediated by Relationship Clarity



Note. Unstandardized regression coefficients for the relationship between self-concept clarity and PINC mediated by relationship clarity, controlling for self-esteem. In parenthesis is the unstandardized regression coefficient of the direct effect before the mediator is entered into model. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

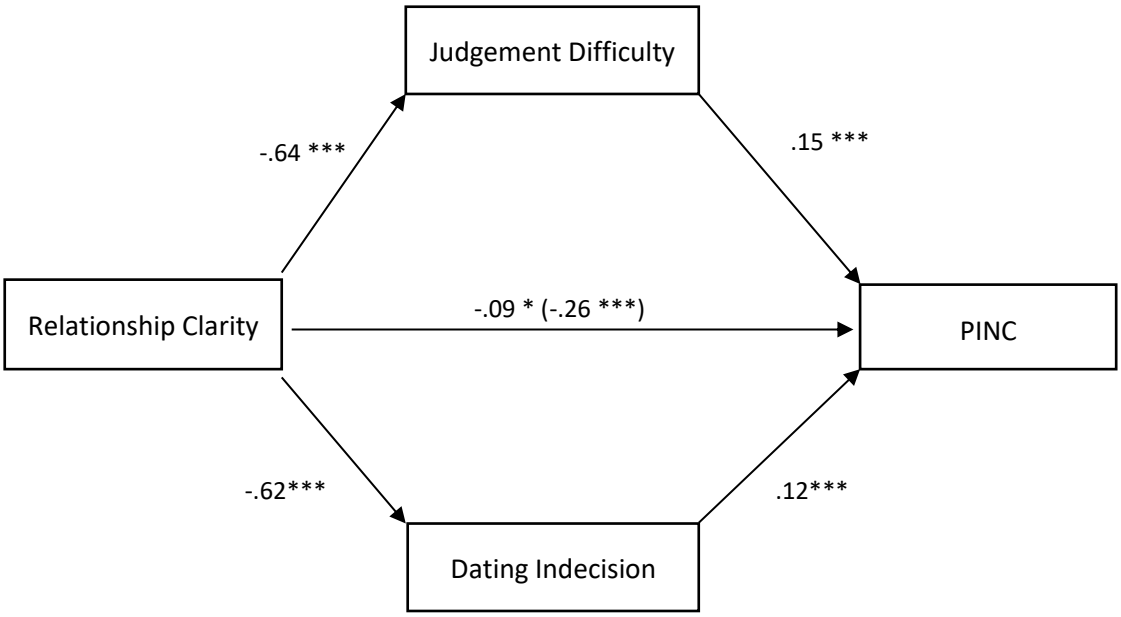
Mediation 2

Results revealed that the relationship between relationship clarity and PINC was mediated by both judgement difficulty and dating indecision. As illustrated by Figure 2, the association between relationship clarity and PINC, the direct effect, was significant (b = -.09, t = -2.01, p =.046). The association between relationship clarity and judgement difficulty was statistically significant (b = -0.64, t = -9.39, $p < .001$), as was the association between relationship clarity and dating indecision (b = -0.62, t = -8.06, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect of judgement difficulty on PINC was statistically

significant (*b* = -.10; 95% CI [-.15, -.05] as was the indirect effect of dating indecision on PINC (*b* = -.07; 95% CI [-.13, -.04]. These results indicate that those who are lower, versus higher, in relationship clarity are likely to date incompatible others more frequently partly because they find it more difficult to evaluate compatibility with dating partners and because they are more indecisive in dating.

Figure 2

Path Model for the Association Between Relationship Clarity and Frequency of Having Dated Past Incompatible Partners (PINC) mediated by Judgment Difficulty and Dating Indecision



Note. Unstandardized regression coefficients for the relationship between self-concept clarity and PINC mediated by relationship clarity, controlling for self-esteem. In parenthesis is the unstandardized regression coefficient of the direct effect before the mediator is entered into model. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Supplemental analyses

Because anxious dating decision making was associated with both relationship clarity and PINC, we explored whether the link between relationship clarity and PINC was mediated by anxious dating decision making. We did not find evidence for mediation: the association between relationship clarity and PINC, the direct effect, was significant (b = -.21, p < .001), as was the association between relationship clarity and anxious decision making (b = -.56, t = 10.15, p < .001); the association between anxious decision making and PINC was marginally significant (b = .08, t = 1.85, p = .065). The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect of relationship clarity was not significant (b = -.04; 95% CI [-.091, .001]. These results suggest that although those lower in relationship clarity are more likely to worry more about their dating decisions, this style of worry about dating decisions does not increase the likelihood of dating incompatible others more often.

We also explored whether the link between relationship clarity and PINC was mediated by dating decision confidence, because decision confidence was also associated with both relationship clarity and PINC. Results revealed evidence for mediation: the association between relationship clarity and PINC, the direct effect, was significant (b = -.15, t = -3.47, p =.001), as were the associations between relationship clarity and decision confidence (b = .33, t = 7.04, p < .001), and decision confidence and PINC (b = -.25, t = -5.14, p < .001). The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect of decision confidence was statistically significant (b = -.09; 95% CI [-.13, -.05]. The results suggest that those who lack relationship clarity do not trust their ability to make dating decisions which in turn leads them to date incompatible others more often. Given the correlational nature of this analysis, the inverse may however also be true, that dating incompatible others leads individuals to distrust their ability to make dating decisions.

Discussion

Past work has shown that individuals lower in self-concept clarity are less discriminating about dissimilar prospective partners (Kubin et al., 2023) and actual incompatible dating partners (Kubin & Lydon, 2023) because as these authors argue, such individuals may find self-other comparisons more challenging to make (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1983). The current work extends these findings by testing whether *relationship clarity* (i.e., a clear, versus confused, understanding of what one seeks in a relationship) is another possible explanation for why those low in self-concept clarity are less strict in ruling out incompatible partners. Our main study hypothesis was that individuals who lack self-clarity also likely lack clarity about the kind of relationship they desire which leads them to be less selective about incompatible partners. Although no causal relationships were established in this study due to its correlational nature, our findings provide support for this idea: relationship clarity partially mediated the association between self-concept clarity and the frequency of dating incompatible others (PINC).

We posit that the construct of self-concept clarity may reflect a global or general sense of clarity about one's personal identity, broadly affecting clarity about many different more specific aspects of personal identity, one of which is relationship clarity. Although we conceptualize self-concept clarity as overarching, or superordinate, to relationship clarity, it is plausible that both mutually influence each other, that unclear self-knowledge undermines clarity about various more specific identities, and that unclear specific identities undermine overall self-concept clarity. Accordingly, someone high in self-concept clarity is likely to have greater clarity about many more self-aspects than someone low in self-concept clarity. Of course, it is quite plausible that some individuals high in self-clarity may not have a clear understanding of what they want in a romantic relationship, perhaps because they are less experienced in relationships or because

they prioritize and thus contemplate them less; we suggest that those who lack self-clarity may be especially likely to lack relationship clarity because they are more generally confused about who they are and what they want. Results from mediation 1 suggest that both self-concept clarity and relationship clarity may be fundamental for effectively rejecting incompatible prospective partners and that self-concept clarity may act as a gateway to relationship clarity.

Results from mediation 2 further suggest that lacking relationship clarity makes it more challenging to evaluate dating partners in terms of compatibility and renders one less decisive in dating, both of which may lead to being less discriminating about incompatible mates. Perhaps when someone does not know what they want in, or from, a relationship, they might not know what partner attributes to focus on, or look for, or they might not know which self and other attributes to compare and how best to compare them. Kubin and colleagues (2023) had theorized that because a confused self-concept makes for a poor reference point in a self-other comparison (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993), compatibility judgments would be more challenging for those lower in self-concept clarity. Interestingly, results from the hierarchical regression analysis indicate that the association between self-concept clarity and judgement difficulty is no longer significant when relationship clarity is entered into the model. Our findings suggest that compatibility judgements are more difficulty because of low relationship clarity. That is, someone who lacks self-concept clarity is likely to also lack relationship clarity, and that relationship clarity is what is making compatibility judgments more challenging.

In the case of dating indecision, the hierarchical regression analysis showed that both self-concept clarity and relationship clarity were significant predictors suggesting that dating indecision may stem from both a lack of general self-clarity as well as a lack of relationship clarity. Individuals who lack self-clarity may be generally less decisive and therefore less

decisive across various contexts, one of which is the relationship domain; but lacking an understanding of what one seeks in a relationship could more directly make it harder for someone to make up their mind about whom to date, and whether to continue dating someone. Without adequate or useful self -knowledge to help guide one's romantic decisions, someone lacking relationship clarity probably becomes a less effective or adaptive decision maker in the dating context. Indeed, we found that lower relationship clarity also predicts lower dating decision confidence, and greater anxious and avoidant dating decision styles.

Kubin and Lydon (2023) suggested that dating indecision may lead individuals to delay or avoid making dating decisions and that this is of greatest consequence when the decision to reject an unsuitable partner is delayed or not made. Although lower levels of relationship clarity predicted greater avoidant dating decision making, no association was found between avoidant decision making and the likelihood of dating incompatible others (PINC). These finding suggests that, although individuals who lack relationship clarity may delay or avoid making decisions, decisional delay and avoidance may not necessarily hinder the rejection of incompatibles. Perhaps in delaying decisions, such as when one is trying to decide whether to reject an incompatible prospect, one ends up putting the decisional onus on the partner and hopes that the partner makes a decision. And given the incompatibility, such a partner is more likely to reject than select, thus terminating the beginning of a potential dating relationship. Or, by postponing or avoiding dating decisions, it slows a developing relationship down such that a fledgling dating relation may never gain enough momentum to develop and may just peter out. Both possibilities may explain why avoidant decision making is not associated with a higher likelihood of dating incompatible others.

Our findings also show that relationship clarity predicts greater anxious dating decision. Because anxious decision making also predicts the likelihood of dating incompatible others (PINC), we conducted supplemental mediation analyses to see if greater decision anxiety would explain the association between relationship clarity and PINC. Although there was a strong link between RC and anxious decision making the link between anxious decision making and dating incompatible others was marginal and the mediational analysis not significant. We thus interpret these results with extra caution. These findings suggest that although those who lack relationship clarity worry more about their dating decisions, this worry does not in turn hinder the rejection of incompatibles. Perhaps worry about bad decisions makes one attentive to the possibility of incompatibilities existing, so that incompatibilities are not any more likely to be missed. And even though both anxious and avoidant dating decision making might not increase the likelihood of dating incompatible people, research suggests that these decisional styles are negatively linked to wellbeing (e.g., Leykin & DeRubeis, 2010; Bavolar & Orosova, 2015) which means they may make dating more stressful to navigate for individuals who are not clear about the type of relationship they want, which tend to be those low in self-concept clarity.

Interestingly, supplemental analyses revealed that the association between relationship clarity and PINC is mediated by dating decision confidence suggesting that those who lack relationship clarity are more likely to date incompatible people because they do not trust their ability to make good dating decisions. Intuitively it makes sense that someone would not have faith in their decision making skills in dating when they lack adequate knowledge about their preferences and desires to help guide their choices. Outside of relationship research, low self-efficacy (i.e., beliefs about one's ability to take a course of action; Bandura, 1977; 1997) has been linked to making poorer complex decisions (e.g., Bandura & Wood, 1989; Wood &

Bandura, 1989). Lacking confidence as a decision maker in dating may mean taking a more random or permissive approach to partner selection; one may not want to miss out on selecting a partner who is a good 'fit', so one errs on the side of not rejecting them even though they don't trust their decision skills. Such a strategy would likely increase one's chances of dating less suitable partners more often and could ultimately result in someone developing a committed relationship with an incompatible partner as well as considerably prolong finding a better, more suitable partner. Given the correlational nature of this analysis, the inverse may however also be true, that dating incompatible others more frequently leads individuals to distrust their ability to make dating decisions; furthermore, it is plausible that decision confidence and the quality of partner selection mutually reinforce each other.

Although the current findings suggest that a lack of relationship clarity is one reason why those low in self-concept clarity find dating decisions and partner selection more challenging, our data also suggest this is likely not the only mechanism at play. We observed a direct effect of self-concept clarity on PINC as well as dating indecision, after controlling for relationship clarity, which may reflect the ability to engage in self-other comparisons. Those with a confused self-concept may have a harder time engaging in comparisons (Setterlund & Neidenthal, 1993), and although this mechanism has never been tested in the dating context, it may explain why such individuals are more likely to date incompatible others (Kubin et al., 2023). Future work should test whether a lack in self-concept clarity impairs the ability to make self-other comparisons, and if so, how might this unfold at a micro level.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study offers preliminary evidence for the idea that relationship clarity may be one downstream consequence of self-concept clarity, and that relationship clarity explains why

those low in self-concept clarity are more likely to date incompatible others. Even though this primary hypothesis was supported by our data, no causal conclusions can be made in the current research as it is cross sectional and exploratory. It is possible that lacking relationship clarity renders one's overall personal identity even more confused, or that both constructs simply reflect clarity about some aspect of identity. Future work should examine whether self-concept clarity is superordinate to relationship clarity, and also whether self-concept clarity and relationship clarity mutually influence each other. We speculate that relationship clarity is downstream to self-concept clarity, but that being low in relationship clarity may in turn weaken self-clarity and high relationship clarity may in turn bolster self-clarity. Indeed, many theorists agree that one's identity is largely defined by one's social interactions and relationships, that the self-concept shapes and, is shaped by, our significant relationships (e.g., James, 1890; Aron et al., 1991; Hoyle et al., 1999; Andersen & Chen, 2002). Further evidence for the direction of causal relations proposed here might be derived from longitudinal and experimental research. As a starting point, researchers might try to manipulate self-concept clarity and examine to what extent it influences changes in relationship clarity, and vice versa to manipulate relationship clarity and examine to what extent it influences changes in self-concept clarity. If self-concept clarity is superordinate to relationship clarity, we would expect to see stronger effects of the self-concept clarity manipulation on relationship clarity than vice versa, of the relationship clarity manipulation on self-concept clarity.

Other important limitations of the current work are that this was a retrospective study that relied on self-report questionnaires; it is unclear whether memory biases may be different for those lower, versus higher, in both self-concept clarity and relationship clarity (e.g., such individuals may recollect compatibility differently with past dating partners) and to what extent

self-reports of past dating experiences spanning many years represent accurate reality. Future research should seek to replicate the current findings with a prospective design, as well as try to assess compatibility with dating partners more objectively (e.g., via friends' ratings).

Conclusion

The current research demonstrates that people can differ in terms of relationship clarity (i.e., how clear, versus confused, they are about what they want and seek in a romantic relationship) and suggests that relationship clarity is a mechanism through which self-concept clarity influences dating partner evaluations and subsequent partner selection. Those who lack self-clarity are more likely to lack relationship clarity, which may render an individual less adaptive when it comes to making dating decisions. Lacking relationship clarity may also make it more difficult to evaluate prospective partners in terms of compatibility and lead to dating indecision, which may ultimately lead such individuals to become less discriminating about incompatible dating partners.

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Appendix

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Variables

Variable	%
Gender	
Female	52.0
Male	46.4
Genderqueer	0.9
Transgender	0.3
Prefer not to disclose	0.3
Sexual Orientation	
Heterosexual	83.3
Homosexual	4.1
Bisexual	9.7
Pansexual	1.9
Other	0.6
Prefer not to disclose	0.3
Relationship status	
Single	47.3
Committed relationship	21.0
Engage/married	31.7
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	75.9
Asian	4.4
Latin American	3.4
Black or African American	9.4
Aboriginal/Indigenous/Native American	0.3
Multi-ethnic	5.6
Prefer not to disclose	0.9

Note. Total sample = 340; descriptive statistics are for analytic sample, n = 319.

General Discussion

Past work has shown that self-confusion reduces the use of a decision-making strategy maximizing self-other similarity (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1983) because, according to these authors, self-confusion impairs self-other comparisons. Given that people frequently make self-other comparisons during dating as they decide which prospective partners might be a compatible "match", the current work sought to examine whether individuals are less discriminating about the compatibility of prospective partners when they have a confused personal identity (i.e., are low in self-concept clarity). Having demonstrated early in my program of research (Studies 1-3 of Chapter 2) evidence for a pattern suggesting that individuals low in self-concept clarity discriminate less when it comes to incompatible potential partners, but not compatible ones, I then sought to conceptually replicate this pattern and examine possible mechanisms that explain why such individuals are less likely to rule out incompatible prospects.

Summary of findings

Chapter 2 presented a series of four studies using a novel repeated measures online experimental paradigm I designed (based on Byrne, 1971) to investigate associations between self-concept clarity and the selectivity of compatible and incompatible partners. I operationalized compatibility as self-other similarity and manipulated the similarity levels of online ostensible targets in a faux dating-app study. Results across studies revealed that singles lower, compared to higher, in self-concept clarity are less harsh in their evaluations of less similar targets, and that in 3 of the 4 studies, self-concept clarity was not associated with evaluations of highly similar targets. Results of Study 4 also suggest that one reason for this weaker ruling out effect by those low in self-concept clarity is because they are less certain about their judgements for dissimilar

others. These findings suggest that self-concept clarity may help individuals rule out incompatible dating partners, but not necessarily help rule in compatible ones.

Chapter 3 extended the lab findings of Chapter 2 to real world dating contexts, examining compatibility more directly and exploring mechanisms for the association between low self-concept clarity and a lower selectivity threshold for incompatible partners more extensively. We conducted two retrospective studies asking adults (Ages 25-45) about their past dating experiences. We found that lower levels of self-concept clarity predicted having dated incompatible partners more frequently, but not having dated compatible partners less frequently, which is consistent with the findings of Chapter 2. We also found that judgement difficulty and dating indecision mediated the relationship between low self-concept clarity and greater frequency of having dated past incompatible partners. Lastly, although low self-concept clarity predicted higher levels of dating-related negative affect, it did not predict past dating satisfaction.

Finally, Chapter 4 extended my theorizing on the construct of self-concept clarity. I proposed a new construct, relationship clarity, and argued that individuals who are generally unclear about themselves (low self-concept clarity) are also likely to be unclear about the type of relationship they want (low relationship clarity). I merged data from the two retrospective studies reported in Chapter 3 and found support for the two primary hypotheses: relationship clarity partly explained the association between self-concept clarity and the frequency of dating incompatible others, and the association between lower relationship clarity and greater frequency of dating incompatible others was mediated by greater difficulty evaluating dating partners. Taken together, the research in this thesis suggests that individuals lacking self-concept clarity have a harder time navigating dating and supports my primary hypothesis – that individuals lacking self-concept clarity discriminate less when it comes to incompatible dating partners.

Theoretical Contributions and Implications for Self-Concept Clarity Research

MacIntyre and colleagues (2017) had put forth an initial call for self-concept clarity researchers to examine whether self-concept clarity helps individuals use proto-type matching to make better choices about romantic partners (i.e., to choose similar others). With the research in this thesis, I have taken on this challenge focusing more directly on compatibility and framing it from the perspective of those lacking self-concept clarity, asking: Does low self-concept clarity hinder individuals' selection of compatible dating partners and/or rejection of incompatible ones? In the current work I assumed that people most often make direct comparisons between themselves and dating prospects (*Am I similar to Robin?*) as they judge whether they "match" with them rather than use prototype matching (*Am I similar to the type of person who would date or partner with Robin?*) because the latter is indirect and seems more effortful and cognitively complex. The present research empirically demonstrates for the first time that self-concept clarity is associated with romantic partner selectivity, in that low self-concept clarity predicts less harsh evaluations of less similar others (across 4 experiments; Chapter 2), and a greater likelihood of having dated incompatible others (across 2 retrospective studies; Chapter 3). Thus, to answer MacIntyre and colleagues' (2017) question, yes it seems that self-concept clarity may help individuals make better partner choices by helping them rule out incompatible others, but not necessarily help rule in compatible ones.

The current research also contributes to the literature in providing empirical evidence for several mechanisms explaining why low self-concept clarity hinders the rejection of incompatible partners. Our findings suggest that uncertainty about match judgment for dissimilar others (Chapter 2), difficulty judging compatibility and dating indecision (Chapter 3), as well as a lack of relationship clarity (Chapter 4), each partly explain why those who lack self-concept

clarity are less discriminating about incompatible dating prospects. Taken together, these findings support the theorizing that self-confusion impairs self-other comparisons which in turn impact judgements of self-other "fit" (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1983). When one compares themselves to a prospective mate to assess compatibility, one predominantly gauges to what extent various self and other characteristics and interaction styles align (e.g., Sprecher, 2011; Eastwick et al., 2022). Setterlund and Niedenthal (1993) hypothesized that poorly defined self-attributes make the self a poor reference point in a comparison which reduces maximal self-other "fit"; in the dating context, this would mean that compatibility judgements, and subsequent partner selection, are likely impacted in those lacking self-concept clarity. Indeed, our findings support these ideas. However, it should be noted that self-reports of difficulty judging compatibility and uncertainty about one's judgements does not necessarily mean that self-other comparisons are impaired, per say. Those lacking self-concept clarity may be *as* able to make comparisons as those high in self-concept clarity, but just rely on them less, or utilize them less advantageously, because such individuals do not trust themselves to make good decisions and experience uncertainty and indecision. That said, if comparisons are impaired, I expect that people are indeed likely to report they have difficulty judging compatibility and are less certain in their judgements.

Thus, the question remains as to whether self-confusion actually impairs self-other comparisons or whether it influences the advantageous use of comparisons because of other characteristics or processes that come with lacking self-clarity. My speculation is that both are at play, that self-confusion likely impairs self-other comparisons because self-attributes that are unclear are harder to compare to attributes of another person; at the same time, lacking confidence as a decision maker, being uncertain about one's judgments, and not being clear

about one's relationship preferences and desires, may directly impact judgements of fit, even if one made an adequate comparison.

Why might self-concept clarity help discriminate among incompatible, but not compatible, partners? One possibility is that highly similar others are obvious good (or better) matches, even for those low in self-concept clarity, because interactions with them are smoother and more rewarding (Byrne & Clore, 1970). Information signaling compatibility may also be easier to evaluate, whereas information signaling incompatibility may be harder to judge because it is a more complex comparison. In his feature-matching model of similarity judgements, Tversky (1977) argues that people initially estimate how many features are shared or aligned, and then focus on the unique 'left-over' features which reduce similarity. Thus, when many features are aligned, in the case of highly similar others, those judgements should be simpler and thus faster; however, when many features are not aligned, in the case if dissimilar others, more mental computation may be required.

Perhaps Tversky's (1977) feature-matching model of similarity may be extended to compatibility since both similarity and compatibility are judgments of self-other "fit". Individuals lacking self-concept clarity may, in essence, have a harder time assessing incompatibility because assessing it is not only more complex than is assessing compatibility, but likely harder to do when self-attributes are unclear and poorly defined. Indeed, our findings show that people low in self-concept clarity are less certain about their judgements of self-other fit for less similar targets, but not for more similar targets (Chapter 2). Additionally, most people make some concessions about the less desirable qualities in prospective mates, figuring out what they are willing to live with and what are deal-breakers (Jonason et al., 2015) which likely adds further complexity to evaluations of incompatibility.

The findings in this thesis also add to the budding literature showing links between self-concept clarity and decision making. Lower levels of self-concept clarity have previously been linked to making poorer social decisions in hypothetical economic games (Ugurlar & Wulff, 2022), and tangentially with exhibiting lower levels of self-control, such as reduced focus, perseverance, and performance on a task (Jiang et al., 2022). The current work now links low self-concept clarity with less adaptive decision making in dating contexts, specifically with greater indecision about dating partners (Chapter 3 and 4), maladaptive decisional styles (Chapter 4), and with making worse decisions about dating partners (Chapter 3).

Finally, the current work also contributes to literature in which researchers have begun extending the construct of self-concept clarity to other aspects of identity. Researchers have shown that individuals can have, or lack, clarity about their collective identity (Usborne & Taylor, 2010), social status (Destin et al., 2017), as well as their joint identity as a couple (Emery et al., 2021) and personal identity in the construct of self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996). These clarity constructs may be organized in terms of levels of construal (Emery et al., 2021). Brewer & Gardner (1996) theorized that people construe themselves at three levels of analysis, at the individual, interpersonal, and group level. As such, self-concept clarity reflects the individual level, couple identity clarity the interpersonal level, and collective identity clarity and social status clarity the group level. I extend theorizing on the construct of self-concept clarity by proposing that self-concept clarity reflects a global sense of clarity about one's personal identity which has the potential to impact clarity about more specific aspects of identity. I propose that one such specific aspect is *relationship clarity*, the extent to which individuals are more, or less, clear about what they want in, or from, a romantic relationship.

In my theorizing, both self-concept clarity and relationship clarity reflect self-construal at the individual level but differ in terms of specificity. My findings suggest that self-concept clarity might act as a gateway to relationship clarity, such that individuals who are generally more confused about who they are, are likely to be confused or unclear about what they more specifically want in a relationship and that this lead them to select incompatible dating partners more often. But it is also possible that there exists a bi-directional association whereby relationship clarity feeds back into one's general sense of self-clarity. In this manner, low relationship clarity may weaken self-concept clarity, whereas high relationship clarity may bolster it. Future work would do well to examine whether, and to what extent, such a bi-directional relationship exists and whether self-concept clarity is indeed overarching, or global, to relationship clarity. Even if self-concept clarity is overarching, there likely exist some individuals who despite being high in self-concept clarity are nevertheless unclear about what they want in a relationship, perhaps as a result of being less knowledgeable about relationships or being disinterested in them. While being high in self-concept clarity does not guarantee that one is high in relationship clarity, our findings suggest that one is more likely to be so.

One final implication of note considers that self-concept clarity can change. Although the current thesis focused on self-concept clarity as a stable individual difference variable (Campbell et al., 1996) that can impact decisions and actions (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1983; Ugurlar & Wulff, 2022), some research has demonstrated that self-concept clarity can fluctuate as a function of situational factors. Specifically, social role transitions (Light & Visser, 2013) and romantic break-ups (Slotter et al., 2010) have been associated with reductions in self-concept clarity. It may thus be important to consider whether individuals chronically higher in self-concept clarity may nonetheless be hindered in ruling out incompatible dating partners less

effectively when they are on the dating market after having recently experienced a major role change (e.g., lost a job, graduated from school, or became an empty nester) or broken up with a romantic partner. The current work suggests it may be a good idea to hold off on entering new dating relationships to the extent that one's self-concept clarity plummets post break up or when experiencing important role transitions.

Relatedly, might relationship clarity also decrease when going through major role transitions or post romantic break-up? In the case of break-ups, in addition to such experiences disrupting one's identity and thus self-concept clarity (Slotter et al. 2010; Slotter & Emery, 2017), perhaps post break-up people are more likely to question their relationship preferences, desires, and goals, which may lower their relationship clarity. Might lower relationship clarity then in turn lower self-concept clarity, potentially at least partly explaining why self-concept clarity dips post break-up? In the case of role transitions, changes in social roles can destabilize one's routines (Light & Visser, 2013) and induce self-concept change (Slotter & Walsh, 2017) which can reduce self-concept clarity. Perhaps during such life transitions people are more likely to question other aspects of their identities, such as their relationship preferences, desires, and goals such that they also experience lower relationship clarity. That is, could there be a spill-over effect of having reduced self-clarity due to a role change which might render an individual less clear about what they want in a romantic relationship? Future work would do well to consider whether, and how, contextual changes might nonetheless undermine partner selection for those typically higher in self-concept clarity.

Theoretical Contributions and Implications for Relationship Research

The current findings also expand the vast literature on intimate relationships by potentially offering a new explanation for why some people end up in less fulfilling, lower

quality relationships. Researchers have, to date, demonstrated that individual differences reflecting feelings of personal insecurity predict settling for less desirable partners and relationships; these include, attachment anxiety (McClure et al., 2010), low self-esteem (Hirschberger et al. 2002), negative view of self as romantic partner (e.g., Regan, 1998), and fear of being single (Speilmann et al., 2013). The current work expands this literature by offering a social cognitive explanation for why some individuals settle for less in relationships. Our findings, which control for self-esteem, suggest that individuals with a confused personal identity have a harder time assessing compatibility, making decisions about prospective mates, and are less clear about what they want in a relationship. Consequently, they may end up selecting incompatible dating partners more often. Perhaps some of these incompatible dating partners end up becoming more serious partners for individuals lacking self-concept clarity.

Although past work suggests that individuals lacking self-concept clarity are less satisfied in existing relationships (e.g. Lewandowski et al., 2010; Parise et al, 2019), and our findings suggest such individuals are less discriminating about incompatible partners during dating, the current work cannot answer whether individuals low in self-concept clarity are more likely to develop committed relationships with incompatible individuals they dated. Quite plausibly, incompatible dating partners might also eventually get weeded out in the dating process by individuals with a confused personal identity. However, drawing on recent research sheds light on this situation. Joel and MacDonald (2022) posit that people make many decisions in the early stages of relation formation that tend to push relationships along rather than ending them. For example, they point out that people start to get attached in the first few weeks and months of dating (Heffernan et al., 2012; Fagundes & Schindler, 2012) and become more and more reliant on each more over the course of dating (Reis et al., 2004). To the extent that individuals lacking

self-concept clarity are less strict about ruling out incompatible prospective partners earlier in dating, they may increase their chances of sliding into relationships with incompatible partners simply because they gave them a chance by not ruling them out earlier on. Future research should aim to connect these findings by examining longitudinally whether individuals who lack self-concept clarity are more likely to develop committed relationships with incompatible partners because they were less likely to reject incompatibles during dating.

Strengths

One major strength of the current work is that we controlled for self-esteem across all main analyses across studies. This not only allowed us to test a cognitive interpretation of partner selectivity as discussed previously, but it also meets the new standard for self-concept clarity research which is to control for self-esteem to be able to make any claims about the effects of self-concept clarity given the two are moderate to strongly associated throughout the literature (in the current thesis, *r*s ranged between .56 to .63). Another major strength across studies is that we collected large samples, ensuring that our studies were adequately powered. In particular, we used a repeated measures experimental design for all studies in Chapter 2 which helped leverage power and garner greater sensitivity to detect small effect sizes. In addition to the empirical strength of an experimental method, we also employed a complementary retrospective method which allowed us to extend rigorous lab findings to individuals' experiences in the real world. A final strength of note is that we pre-registered three of our studies (Study 3 and 4, Chapter 2; Study 2, Chapter 3) and made available our data and syntax on the Open Source Framework (OSF) framework for researchers to test and use.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite our efforts to extend our lab findings to real world settings, we are nevertheless restricted in drawing conclusions about the influence of self-concept clarity and choice behavior in real dating contexts. The overarching goal was to test associations between self-concept clarity and the discriminant *selection* of mates; however, the current work is limited in answering this overarching question because we tested individuals' *evaluations* of potential dating partners (Chapter 2), and individuals' recall of selecting dating partners *in the past* (Chapters 3 and 4). Retrospective reports may be biased and therefore less accurate. One reviewer of manuscript 2 noted that perhaps individuals lacking self-concept clarity have negative memory biases which lead them to merely *perceive* they had dated incompatible people more often, citing evidence that self-concept clarity is associated with depressive symptoms (Richman et al., 2016) and negative affect (Campbell et al., 1996). Although lower self-concept clarity predicts greater dating-related negative affect in manuscript 2, supporting the idea of a negative memory bias, it does not predict past dating satisfaction which weakens that argument. Because it remains unclear whether people low in self-concept clarity actually date incompatible partners more often, or just perceive that they do, I conducted the following additional analysis.

I re-run the regression analysis reported in manuscript 2 and controlled for both dating-related negative affect and self-esteem, the latter being reliably associated with depression (meta-analysis; Sowislo et al., 2013). Controlling for both should help to some extent in testing whether a negative memory bias better explains why people low in self-concept clarity recall having dated incompatible others more often. Results from a hierarchical regression show that both greater dating-related negative affect ($p < .001$) and lower self-concept clarity ($p = .004$) predict a greater frequency of having dated incompatible others (PINC), but that self-esteem does not ($p = .767$; see Appendix). Although this analysis does not specifically test negative memory bias, it

provides some evidence to suggest that those who lack self-concept clarity may indeed have a negativity bias but that this bias does not fully account for why such individuals recall having dated incompatible partners more often; self-concept clarity remained a significant predictor of PINC above and beyond two measures reflecting negative affectivity. Future work should examine the effect of self-concept clarity on the selection of incompatible dating partners prospectively and longitudinally to get at choice behaviour and it should also try to account for the possibility of negative memory bias in those lacking self-concept clarity.

Another major limitation of the current work is that we cannot rule out the possibility that motivation may explain why individuals low in self-concept clarity rule out incompatibles less strongly. Perhaps individuals who lack self-concept clarity are more motivated to find romantic partners, and thus discriminate less, because they may have been less successful during dating in the past. After all, one assumption of the current work is that people who lack self-concept clarity have less enjoyable dating experiences on account of dating incompatible others more often. Unfortunately, we did not measure motivation to find romantic partners in the studies in this thesis so we cannot rule this possibility out. That said, it is worth considering that the experimental studies (Chapter 2) are arguably low stakes settings, in that participants did not get a chance to meet any of the ostensible targets. Given this low-stakes context, we speculate that motivation would not have exerted a strong influence on the evaluation of target individuals. We reason that the effect of self-concept clarity on the evaluation of dissimilar targets is better explained as the result of impaired processing of self-other attributes. Future work would do well to examine whether motivation better explains our primary findings. It may well be that both motivation and cognitive impairment work in concert in high stakes dating contexts. Perhaps

those who lack self-concept clarity rule out incompatibles *much* less often in high stakes contexts because they have difficulty making comparisons *and* are more motivated to find partners.

Another limitation of this thesis is the samples. Although we made attempts to recruit a diverse sample across the experimental studies (online MTurk workers, Ages 25-40, and undergraduates) and the retrospective studies (MTurk workers, Ages 25-45), these samples nonetheless reflect predominantly younger, white, heterosexual, and in the case of college students higher in socio-economic class and more educated. These samples limit the generalizability of our results. Furthermore, in the experimental studies (Chapter 2), we analyzed data from only males and females; we did that to control for gender in the analyses because males are generally less selective in mating. Although only a few participants were excluded on account of not identifying as male or female, future work should consider and test whether, or to what extent, self-concept clarity influences partner selectivity across more fluid gender identities.

A final limitation of note in this thesis is the lack of evidence demonstrating links between low self-concept clarity and the quality or satisfaction of dating experiences. A guiding hypothesis of the current work has been that dating incompatible partners would be linked to less rewarding dating experiences because incompatibility among partners is thought to make interactions less harmonious and satisfying (e.g., Berscheid, 1983). Although it was not a primary goal of the current work, in the retrospective studies (Chapter 3) we tested links between self-concept clarity and past relational wellbeing (i.e., dating satisfaction and dating-related negative affect). We did not find evidence that individuals low in self-concept clarity were less satisfied with their past dating experiences, however, we did find that such individuals reported greater negative affect as they thought about their past dating experiences. These mixed findings are challenging to think about given the retrospective nature of the data. We reasoned that one

possibility for the null effects of self-concept clarity on past dating satisfaction is that past dating satisfaction reflects a global judgement that may be influenced more by positive, than negative, past moments. This idea is consistent with theorizing that "highs" (i.e., peak experiences) tend to influence global judgements of past experiences to a greater extent than non-high moments (e.g., Fredrickson, 2000). Thus, those lacking self-concept clarity may remember their dating experiences as generally positive, at least as positive as those high in self-concept clarity. Another possibility is that those lacking self-concept clarity may be viewing less rewarding past dating experiences as more satisfying than they were to enhance their unsteady sense of self-worth. Doing so might instill confidence in themselves as good mate material, promoting hope for future relationship success. Future work would greatly benefit from examining whether there indeed exist negative consequences on relational wellbeing and dating satisfaction for those lacking self-concept clarity, using prospective, longitudinal designs.

Other Promising Future Directions

The current work is foundational in providing evidence for a basic phenomenon across 6 studies (Chapter 2 and 3), that individuals are less discriminating about incompatible partners when they lack a clear personal identity. These findings open the door to other promising and exciting areas of future research not yet mentioned. First, future work may want to examine links between self-concept clarity and the use of prototype matching, as proposed by MacIntyre and colleagues (2017). As already mentioned, the current work assumes that people make direct comparisons much more often than they use prototype matching when evaluating potential partners. However, it remains unclear to what extent people may, or may not, have used prototype matching in our experimental studies or in general when evaluating prospective partners. Prototype matching is cognitively more complex (*Am I similar to the type of person*

would date or partner with Nico?) than a direct comparison (*Am I similar to Nico?*). I argue that people compare themselves directly *most* often because it is easier to do. But perhaps both mental strategies are used to evaluate compatibility with potential partners. Future work may want to take a more fine-grained approach in examining whether people use prototype matching in partner evaluations and how frequently it may be used relative to direct comparisons.

Another exciting avenue of research would be to examine what guides the unclear self during dating. If self-knowledge that is unclear or poorly defined hinders dating decisions and partner selection, what do individuals who lack self-concept clarity use when making decisions about prospective partners? Because research has shown that lower levels of self-concept clarity are associated with lower self-awareness (Campbell et al., 1996) and greater compliance with external sources of information such as recommendation information regarding consumer products (Lee et al., 2010), Light (2017) proposed that a lack of clarity about the self may lead to a greater reliance on external cues to guide self-relevant decisions and actions. In the context of dating, one possible and likely source of external information that may influence someone's partner decisions is recommendation information, or advice, such as from friends, family, dating coaches, as well as from computer-based matching algorithms that recommend supposed compatible matches. Might recommendation information have a stronger influence on partner selection for individuals who are low, compared to high, in self-concept clarity? On the one hand, those who lack self-clarity may benefit from useful advice (e.g., to rule out an incompatible prospect early); on the other hand, such individuals may be more likely to take bad advice (e.g., to continue dating an incompatible person). Future work should thus seek to examine whether those low in self-concept clarity are more susceptible to the influence of advice about whom they should date and whether this may have positive and/or negative consequences.

Relatedly, perhaps people low, compared to high, in self-concept clarity are more influenced by lower-order salient external cues, such as attractiveness, to a greater extent. People notice other's attractiveness almost immediately without mental effort (Berscheid & Walster, 1974) and attractiveness is one of the strongest predictors of attraction (e.g., Sprecher, 1989). It is plausible that individuals low in self-clarity may select physically attractive, though incompatible, people more often because they are less able to effectively use self-information to judge the incompatibility yet are drawn in by the physical beauty. Future work may want to investigate the effects of salient external cues such as attractiveness, but also other desirable cues (e.g., status, money) in guiding those who lack self-concept clarity during mate selection. I hope that future research answers some of these open empirical questions.

Conclusion

Most researchers and lay folks agree that selecting compatible romantic partners is important for relationship success, but so is rejecting incompatible ones. The main objective of the current thesis was to examine whether individuals with a confused personal identity select dating partners less well in terms of compatibility. The present research is the first to empirically demonstrate that self-concept clarity influences compatibility judgements and decisions about prospective partners. Specifically, our findings suggest that self-concept clarity may be beneficial in helping individuals rule out incompatible dating partners, but not necessarily help them rule in compatible ones. Those who lack self-concept clarity seem to have a harder time assessing compatibility, making decisions about prospective partners, and lack a clear understanding of what they seek in a relationship. By better understanding how a clear, vs confused, sense of self guides romantic partner decisions, this research may ultimately shed light

on why some people end up in unsatisfying dating and committed relationships and suggest novel interventions to improve relationship initiation decisions.

Appendix

Table A1

Hierarchical regression predicting frequency of dating incompatibles in the past (PINC)

Variable	*Unstandardized B (SE)*	*t*	*p*
Step 1			
Self-esteem	-.29 (.06)	-5.11	< .001
Overall		R^2_{adj} = .076	
Step 2			
Self-esteem	-.13 (.06)	-2.24	.026
Dating-related negative affect	.34 (.05)	7.47	< .001
Overall		R^2_{adj} = .217	
Step 3			
Self-esteem	*-.02 (.07)*	*-0.30*	*.767*
Dating-related negative affect	*.30 (.05)*	*6.49*	*< .001*
Self-concept clarity	*-.15 (.05)*	*-2.94*	*.004*
Overall		R^2_{adj} = .236	

Note. Analytic *n* = 317. Self-esteem, dating-related negative affect, and self-concept clarity, are grand-mean centered.

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Supplemental Material for Manuscript 1 (Chapter 2)

Target Generation

Participant self-reported information from the personality and attitudes measures was used to generate target profiles that vary in terms of similarity with respect to each participant. A computer algorithm calculated and generated target profiles that were roughly 90%, 50% and 10% similar to the participant self-reported ratings on personality and attitudes. The algorithm was written in JavaScript, using Atom as a text-editor (open source), and was integrated into Qualtrics software. We computed similarity as follows (explained here for personality traits only, but the same was done for attitudes): 8 of the 20 personality traits the participant self-reported on were randomly selected to be input into each target profile.

To create a roughly 90% similar target (High algorithm; 6, 1, 1, 0), six of the 8 traits were identical in response to that of the participant, one was 1 point away, and 1 was 2 points away.

To create a roughly 50% similar target (Moderate 1 algorithm; 1, 3, 3, 1), one of the 8 traits was identical in response to that of the participant, three were 1 point away, three were 2 points away, and one was 3 points away. Because creating a 50% similar target is less obvious computationally, we created a second way to compute a 50% similar other (Moderate 2 algorithm; 2, 2, 2, 2): 2 traits were identical in response to that of the participant, two were 1 point away, two were 2 points away, and two were 3 points away.

To create a roughly 10% similar target (Low algorithm; 0, 1, 1, 6), six of the 8 traits were 3 points away in response to that of the participant, one was 2 points away, and one was 1 point away. The concept behind these algorithms is based on a long line of research that has used a similar approach (Byrne, 1971).

In total, all participants viewed 12 target profiles, 3 of each type of algorithm. To be clear, while personality traits and attitudes were both computed in term of similarity, the intention was to manipulate similarity in general. We were not specifically interested in either attitudes or personality traits per se. Thus, the algorithm was applied separately to traits and attitudes, but

applied equally for traits and attitudes together, such that a highly similar other was similar in terms of both traits and attitudes.

Pilot Study

Of the 192 participants (78.4% female; M_{Age} = 20.22, *SD* = 1.57; 57.8% Caucasian), 9 were excluded from analyses (2 stopped early, 1 experienced technical difficulty, 4 were in committed relationships and 2 were suspicious stating the targets were not real people). The final analytic sample = 183. We used a very similar procedure to that outlined for Studies 1-3, except that participants rated 4 targets at each level of similarity thus rating 16 targets in total. Targets were presented one at a time in random order, but unlike our main studies in which participants rated targets on the same page that they viewed them, each target was first presented on the screen and ratings of each target were made on the subsequent page. This was done so that participants could not study the targets too closely as they rated how similar they thought they were to each target; rather, they formed an impression of each target and then on a separate page judged similarity with each target. Our dependent measure, perceived similarity, was assessed with 1 item: *How similar to you is the person whose profile you just saw?* Responses were made on a 7-point Likert scale, from 1-*Not at all* to 7-*Extremely*.

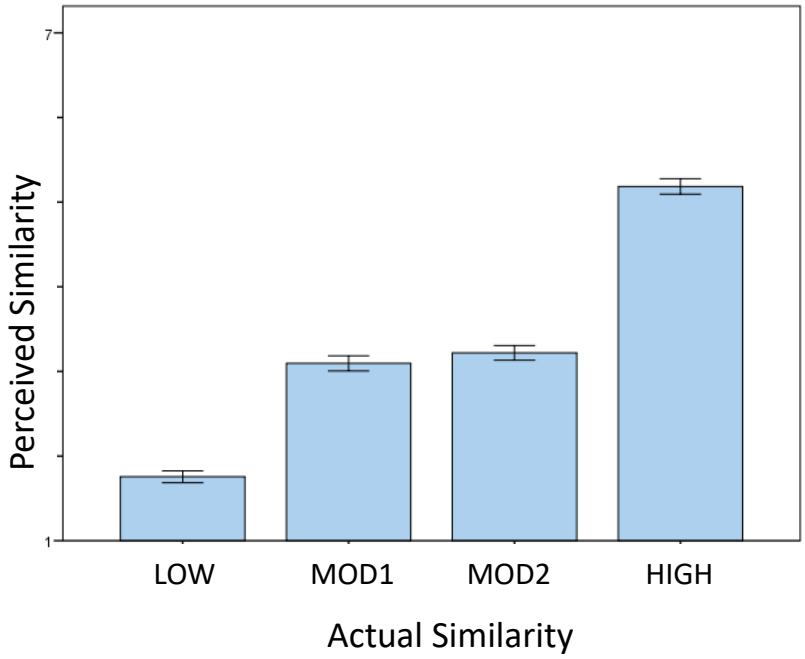
To obtain simple effects of self-concept clarity for the three other unique types of targets (Moderate 1, Moderate 2, and High Similarity) on PS, as well as interactions of SCC by level of similarity, we recoded the reference group and refit models 3 and 4. Below in Table S3 are summarized the simple effects that were obtained for each type of target. Additionally, no interaction of SCC by level of similarity were significant (all *p*'s > .05). These results also did not change when the nine participants who were exclude were kept in the analyses.

Table S1
Demographic information for Studies 1-4

Variable	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4
	N = 184	*N* = 170	*N* = 174	*N* = 252
Gender (%)				
Female	48.4	60.0	49.4	43.3
Male	50.0	39.4	47.7	53.6
Genderqueer	0.5	0.6		2.0
Transgender	1.1		2.3	1.2
Other			0.6	
Ethnicity (%)				
Caucasian	58.7	63.5	58.6	61.5
Asian	11.9	21.8	14.9	6.8
Latin American	7.6	1.8	6.9	6.0
Black or African American	14.7	2.4	9.8	19.0
Multi-ethnic	5.4	8.2	8.6	4.8
Prefer not to disclose	1.1	2.4	0.6	1.2

Note. Demographics reported for complete samples.

Figure S1
Estimated means of perceived similarity for each algorithm for manipulation check Pilot Study



Note. *N* = 192; Estimated mean ratings of perceived similarity plotted by level of similarity. Perceived similarity is expressed in Likert scale units ranging from 1-7. Error bars represent standard errors.

Table S2

Multilevel model parameters predicting perceived similarity with low similarity condition as reference group in Pilot Study

	Step 1	**Step 2**	**Step 3**	**Step 4**
Parameter	Estimate (*SE*)	Estimate (*SE*)	Estimate (*SE*)	Estimate (*SE*)
Fixed effects				
Intercept	3.32 (.04)***	1.76 (.05)***	1.76 (.05)***	1.75 (.05)***
D1 (Low vs Mod1)		1.33 (.06)***	1.33 (.06)***	1.33 (.06)***
D2 (Low vs Mod2)		1.46 (.06)***	1.46 (.06)***	1.46 (.06)***
D3 (Low vs High)		3.45 (.07)***	3.46 (.07)***	3.46 (.07)***
SCC_gmc				**.08 (.08)**
SE_gmc			-.01 (.09)	-.08 (.11)
D1 x SCC_gmc				-.09 (.10)
D2 x SCC_gmc				-.03 (.10)
D3 x SCC_gmc				-.21 (.12)
D1 x SE_gmc			-.05 (.10)	.03 (.13)
D2 x SE_gmc			-.05 (.11)	-.03 (.14)
D3 x SE_gmc			.24 (.13)	.41 (.17)*
Random effects				
Intercept - T_o^2	.11 (.03)***	.21 (.03)***	.21 (.03)***	.21 (.03)***
Residual - σ^2	2.81 (.07)***	1.04 (.03)***	1.04 (.03)***	1.05 (.03)***
D1 random slopes		.09 (.05)*	.09 (.05)*	.10 (.05)*
D2 random slopes		.13 (.05)**	.13 (.05)**	.13 (.05)**
D3 random slopes		.47 (.08)***	.45 (.08)***	.46 (.08)***

Note. Model 1 = null model; Model 2 = with level-1 predictors capturing similarity as dummy coded variables (Low similarity is reference group); Model 3 = with SE (grand-mean centered) and interactions between SE and level-1 predictors; Model 4 = with SCC (grand-mean centered) and interactions between SCC and level-1 predictors; *p <.05; **p <.01; *** p <.001.

To obtain simple effects of self-concept clarity for the three other unique types of targets (Moderate 1, Moderate 2, and High similarity) on PS, as well as interactions of SCC by level of similarity, we recoded the reference group and refit models 3 and 4. Below in Table S3 are summarized the simple effects that were obtained for each type of target. Additionally, no interaction of SCC by level of similarity were significant (all p's > .05).

Table S3
Summary table of simple effects of self-concept clarity on perceived similarity for the four unique types of similar targets from the full models in the Pilot Study

	Step 4		
	With SE & SCC in Model		
Similarity	*b (SE)*	*t*	*p*
Low	.08 (.08)	1.00	.316
Moderately (1)	-.01 (.08)	-0.09	.930
Moderately (2)	.05 (.08)	0.59	.556
High	-.13 (.08)	-1.58	.115

Note. $N = 192$; Each of the 4 estimated effects (unstandardized regression coefficients) SCC for a unique type of target shown were generated by 4 different multilevel regression analyses; Model 3 includes level-1 predictors (similarity/dummy coded), SCC, and SCC by similarity interactions; Model 4 additionally includes SE and SE by similarity interactions (as per models outlined in Table S2).

Dependent Measures in Studies 1 to 3: Attraction and Match Judgements

We had created a composite dependent measure – Overall Evaluation – because the pattern of results was very similar for both separate outcome variables (Attraction and Match Judgments) across studies, because the two variables were highly correlated across studies within levels of similarity (*r*'s range from .74 to .90), and because we placed these two measure one after the other such that responses for attraction may have driven responses for match judgements. Ultimately we did this to simplify reporting of results. We report the two instances in which the pattern of results differs across studies as a function of attraction versus match judgements.

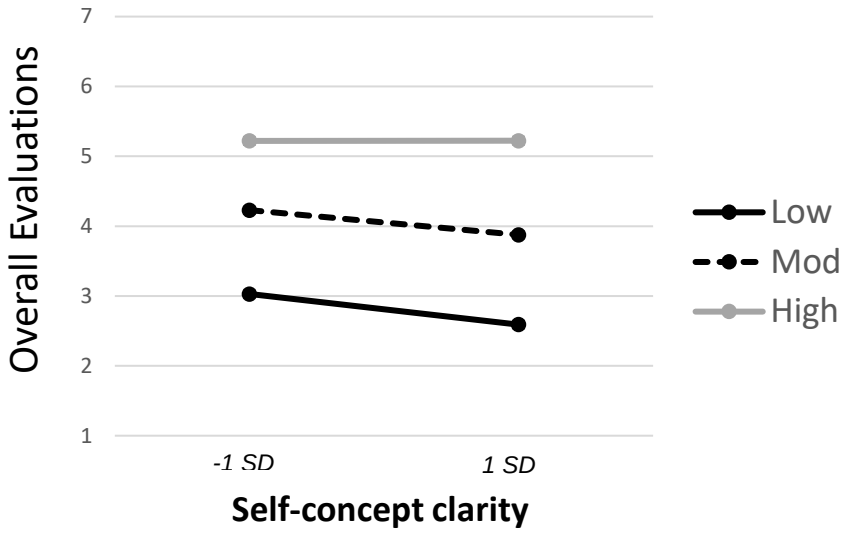
First, a difference in simple effects analyses for dissimilar targets was found in Study 2 when comparing attraction and match judgements: there was a significant simple effect of self-concept clarity for match judgements ($b = -.35$, $SE = .12$, $t\ (411.00) = -3.05$, $p = .002$, CI [-.58, -.13]), but not for attraction ($b = -.16$, $SE = .11$, $t\ (474.06) = -1.54$, $p = .125$, CI [-.37, .05]). Simple effects analyses of self-concept clarity on attraction and match judgements did not differ statistically from one another in Studies 1 and 3. Second, a difference in simple effects analyses for highly

similar targets was found in Study 3 when comparing attraction and match judgements: there was a significant simple effect of self-concept clarity for attraction (b = .22, SE = .19, t (345.70) = 2.38, p = .018, CI [.04, .41]), but not match judgements (b = .16, SE = .11, t (384.26) = 1.52, p = .130, CI [-.05, .37]). Results were comparably the same (similar beta weights and p values) for simple effects of self-concept clarity on attraction and match judgements in Studies 1 and 2.

Merged Data (Studies 1-3): Follow-up Analyses

We merged the data from Studies 1-3 to test the reliability of the interaction between SCC and Low vs High Similarity on overall evaluations and to clarify whether the slope of SCC is steeper for dissimilar compared to high similar targets. We re-fit the same full models as that used in Studies 1-3. As seen in Figure S2, and detailed in Table S4, were found a significant interaction between Low vs High Similarity X SCC on overall evaluations (b = .28, p < .001), and between SCC and Mod vs High Similarity (b = -.23, p < .001) on overall evaluations, suggesting that as SCC increases, the relationship between similarity-overall evaluations becomes stronger. However, the interaction between Low vs Mod Similarity X SCC was not significant (b = .06, p = .320) suggesting that the slopes of SCC do not become steeper going from moderate to low levels of similarity. Finally, as expected, we found a simple effect of SCC for low similarity targets (b = -.29, p < .001), but also for moderately similar targets (b = -.23, p < .001), but not for highly similar targets (b = -.01, p = .904).

Figure S2



Note. N = 506; simple slopes of SCC on overall evaluations plotted descriptively using merged data set.

Table S4

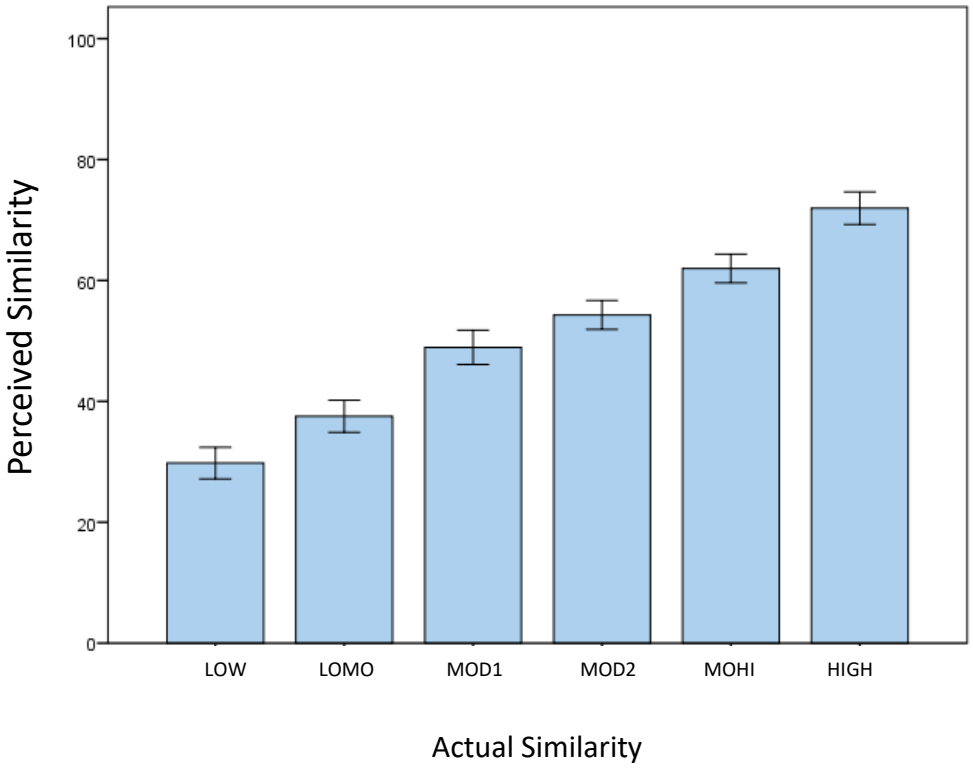
Parameter estimates from full multilevel models using merged data (Studies 1-3) predicting overall evaluations.

Parameter	Model 1 Low Similarity = ref. group		Model 2 Mod Similarity = ref. group		Model 3 High Similarity = ref. group	
	b (*SE*)	*p*	*b* (*SE*)	*p*	*b* (*SE*)	*p*
Fixed effects						
Intercept	2.81 (.04)	< .001	4.05 (.03)	< .001	5.24 (.04)	< .001
$D^1$1	1.24 (.04)	< .001	-1.24 (.04)	< .001	-1.19 (.04)	< .001
D2	2.43 (.04)	< .001	1.19 (.04)	< .001	-2.43 (.05)	< .001
Self-esteem	.18 (.08)	.023	.21 (.07)	.001	.19 (.08)	.013
Gender	-.36 (.07)	< .001	-.40 (.06)	< .001	-.13 (.07)	.085
Self-concept clarity	**-.29 (.06)**	< .001	**-.23 (.05)**	**< .001**	**-.01 (.06)**	**.904**
D1 x Self-esteem	.04 (.07)	.608	-.04 (.08)	.654	.03 (.07)	.722
D2 x Self-esteem	.01 (.09)	.904	- .03 (.08)	.733	-.01 (.09)	.912
D1 x Gender	-.04 (.07)	.610	.03 (.08)	.662	-.27 (.07)	< .001
D2 x Gender	.24 (.09)	.007	.27 (.08)	< .001	-.23 (.09)	.009
D1 x Self-concept clarity	.06 (.06)	.320	-.06 (.06)	.370	-.22 (.06)	< .001
D2 x Self-concept clarity	.28 (.07)	< .001	.22 (.06)	< .001	-.28 (.07)	< .001
Random effects						
Intercept	.32 (.03)	< .001	.34 (.03)	< .001	.29 (.03)	< .001
Residual	1.14 (.02)	< .001	1.11 (.02)	< .001	1.12 (.02)	< .001
D1 – random slopes	.05 (.03)	.059	.23 (.05)	< .001	.08 (.03)	.005
D2 – random slopes	.19 (.04)	< .001	.16 (.04)	< .001	.27 (.05)	< .001

Note. SE and SCC are grand-mean centered; gender is contrast coded (male = -.5, female = .5); D^1 designates a dummy coded variable; *Model 1*, D1 = Low vs Mod Similarity, D2 = Low vs High Similarity; *Model 2*, D1 = Mod vs Low Similarity, D2 = Mod vs High Similarity; *Model 3*, D1 = High vs Mod Similarity, D2 = High vs Low Similarity.

Figure S3

Estimated means of perceived similarity for each algorithm for Manipulation Check Study 4



Note. Manipulation check for Study 4; *N* = 76; 54% female; Mean Age 24.22, *SD* = 2.98; Estimated mean ratings of perceived similarity plotted by level of similarity. Perceived similarity is expressed in Likert scale units ranging from 0-100. Error bars represent standard errors.

Valence Check to Address Alternative Explanation

To address the potential confound of target valence, we applied our algorithm to self-report ratings of traits and attitudes using Study 1 participant information (*N*= 175) to re-generate two types of target profiles: *identical* targets and *dissimilar* targets. Fifteen volunteer raters judged how positively the original participants described themselves and another set of fifteen raters judged how positively described the dissimilar targets were. For both versions, volunteers answered the question, "*How positively does this person describe themselves?*", making responses on a 7-point Likert scale from 1-*Very Negatively* to 7-*Very Positively*. Each volunteer rated all 175 identical or dissimilar targets in random order, one at a time.

Results showed that self-concept clarity was not associated with valence of identical (*r(170)* = .10, *p* = .214; ICC = .72 for 15 raters) nor with dissimilar targets (*r(169)* = .10, *p* = .216; ICC = .74 for 15 raters). These null associations held when controlling for self-esteem, as observed in partial correlations (Identical targets, *r(167)* = -.05, *p* = .522; Dissimilar targets, *r(166)* = .09, *p* = .227). Thus, using our paradigm, those lower compared to higher in SCC do not describe themselves less positively nor are their dissimilar targets more positively described in terms of attitudes and personality, rendering the alternative explanation unlikely.

Pair-wise Comparison: Follow-up Analysis in Study 4

We conducted a follow-up analysis in Study 4, testing an interaction between SCC and similarity (going from lowest to highest level of similarity). We used effect coding for the variable similarity (L, L/M, M1, M2, M/H, H; -1, 0, 0, 0, 0, 1) in our model. We found no evidence for this interaction (*b* = .03, *SE* = .07, *t* (228.87) = 0.56, *p* = .579, CI [-.10, .17]) which suggests that that the relationship between similarity-match judgements does not change as a function of SCC.

Multilevel Modeling Approach

A multilevel modeling approach was used and executed using the MIXED procedure in SPSS, Version 23. This type of analysis is well-suited for analyzing data that exhibits a hierarchical nesting structure (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Snijders & Boskers, 2012), and Hoffman and Rovine (2007) advise its use when analyzing data from experimental designs with repeated measures because this analytic method does not require an assumption of independence to be met (Hoffman & Rovine, 2007). This study's data was hierarchically nested as follows: trials were nested within similarity conditions which were nested within individuals. Multilevel regression models were estimated using full information maximum likelihood (ML) and the variance components (VC) option. We collected as much data as possible given our resources to ensure an adequate sample. Although multilevel analyses can vary greatly in terms of complexity, it has been recommended there are at least 50 level-2 units when conducting such analyses to avoid biased estimates of level-2 standard errors (Maas & Hox, 2005). Our analytic samples consisted of 163 to 229 level-2 units (participants) across the four studies.

Study 1, 2, and 3

To test the study hypotheses, a series of multilevel models were conducted for the outcome variable *overall evaluations*. This series followed a 4-step model building sequence: *first*, a null model with random intercept was estimated, *second*, level-1 predictors and their random slopes were added, *third*, level-2 covariates and their related cross level interaction terms were added, and *fourth*, the level-2 variable, self-concept clarity and the related cross level interaction term, was added. Because the level-1 predictor, similarity, is a categorical variable with 3 levels, additional models in each series of multilevel models were conducted in which the reference group for similarity was recoded. This allowed us to obtain a simple effect of self-concept clarity for each type of unique target, which was the critical test of the study hypotheses.

Model Fit statistics

Deviance tests (likelihood ratio tests) were performed comparing a covariates-only model with a full model for the outcome variable *overall evaluations* for all re-coded versions of all three studies to assess model fit. In Studies 1 and 3 there was a significant improvement in model fit going from the covariates-only to the full model across re-coded version: $\chi 2$ difference tests, all *ps* < .05. In Study 2, however, the deviance test showed the final model was not a significant improvement on the covariates-only model across re-coded versions ($\chi 2$ difference tests, all *ps* > .05; but of note, when looking uniquely at the outcome measure *match judgements* in Study 2, the deviance test showed a significant improvement in model fit across re-coded versions (all *ps* < .05).

Pre-registered analyses

We disclose that we deviated from the analytic model on the pre-registration: https://osf.io/gpu97/?view_only=81443655dab74f359b7c351874f1cc5a. Originally, we did not include random slopes for level-1 predictors, and we had not planned to collapse across the two moderate similarity conditions. The equation below is the final and better specified model employed.

Level 1: $\text{Overall Evaluation}_{ti} = \beta_{oi} + \beta_{1i} D1_{ti} + \beta_{2i} D2_{ti} + R_{ti}$

Level 2:

$$\beta_{oi} = \gamma_{oo} + \gamma_{o1} SCC_{gmc} + \gamma_{02} SE_{gmc} + \gamma_{03} GENDER_{CON} + U_{oj}$$

$$\beta_{1i} = \gamma_{1o} + \gamma_{11} SCC_{gmc} + \gamma_{12} SE_{gmc} + \gamma_{13} GENDER_{CON} + U_{1j}$$

$$\beta_{2i} = \gamma_{2o} + \gamma_{21} SCC_{gmc} + \gamma_{22} SE_{gmc} + \gamma_{23} GENDER_{CON} + U_{2j}$$

Variables

D1 = Low vs Moderate Similarity; dummy
D2 = Low vs High Similarity; dummy
SCC = self-concept clarity (grand mean centered)
SE = self-esteem (grand mean centered)
GENDER (contrast coded)

γ_{o1} is the critical test – simple effect of SCC for a particular type of similarity target

Integrated Data Analysis controlling for Study

Table S5

Integrated Data Analysis controlling for Study

Parameter	*b* (*SE*)	*p*
Fixed effects		
Intercept	2.73 (.07)	< .001
D1: Low vs Mod Similarity	1.38 (.06)	< .001
D2: Low vs High Similarity	2.58 (.08)	< .001
Self-esteem	.30 (.15)	.047
Gender	-.11 (.13)	.395
Self-concept clarity	-.26 (.12)	.026
Study	.11 (08)	.193
D1 x Self-esteem	.002 (.14)	.986
D2 x Self-esteem	-.12 (.18)	.502
D1 x Gender	-.20 (.13)	.104
D2 x Gender	-.03 (.16)	.825
D1 x Self-concept clarity	.14 (.11)	.190
D2 x Self-concept clarity	.24 (.13)	.080
D1 x Study	-.20 .08)	.011
D2 x Study	-.21 (.09)	.029
D1 x Study x Self-esteem	.02 (.16)	.893
D2 x Study x Self-esteem	.14 (.20)	.500
D1 x Study x Gender	.22 (.15)	.141
D2 x Study x Gender	.36 (.19)	.053
D1 x Study x Self-concept clarity	-.09 (.13)	.482
D2 x Study x Self-concept clarity	.09 (.16)	.552
Random effects		
Intercept	.32 (.03)	< .001
Residual	1.14 (.02)	< .001
D1 – random slopes	.04 (.03)	.080
D2 – random slopes	.18 (.04)	< .001

Note. Low similarity = reference group; SE and SCC are grand-mean centered; gender is contrast coded (male = -.5, female = .5); D designates a dummy coded variable; Study is a dummy variable reflecting Study2 compared to Studies 1 and 3 combined (Study 2 = 0; Studies 1 and 3 = 1).

Study 4

To test the study hypotheses, two separate series of multilevel models were conducted, one series for the outcome variable *match judgement* and one series for the outcome variable *certainty*.

Predicting Match Judgements (Model A)

In model A, a 4-step model building sequence was followed: *first*, a null model with random intercept was estimated, *second*, level-1 predictors, their random slopes, and a level-1 interaction term were added, *third*, level-2 covariates and their related cross level interaction terms were added, and *fourth*, the level-2 variable, SCC and the related cross level interaction term, were added. Additional models in each series of multilevel models were conducted in which the reference group for similarity was recoded which allowed us to obtain a simple effect of self-concept clarity for each type of unique target -the critical test of the study hypotheses.

Level 1: $MATCH_{ti} = \beta_{oi} + \beta_{1i} Similarity_{ti} + R_{ti}$

Level 2: $\beta_{oi} = \gamma_{oo} + \gamma_{o1} SCC_{gmc} + \gamma_{02} SE_{gmc} + \gamma_{03} GENDER_{CON} + U_{oj}$

$\beta_{1i} = \gamma_{1o} + \gamma_{11} SCC_{gmc} + \gamma_{12} SE_{gmc} + \gamma_{13} GENDER_{CON} + U_{1j}$

$\boldsymbol{\gamma_{o1}}$ is the critical test – a simple effect of SCC on match judgements for a particular type of similarity target, controlling for self-esteem and gender

Variables

Similarity = continuous; recoded with zero as reference point depending a similarity level of interest
SCC = self-concept clarity (grand mean centered)
SE = self-esteem (grand mean centered)
GENDER (contrast coded, -.5 male, .5 female)

Model Fit statistics for Model A

Deviance tests (likelihood ratio tests) were performed comparing a covariates-only model (*third step;* 9 parameters) with a full model (*fourth step;* 11 parameters) for the outcome variable match judgments for all re-coded versions to assess model fit. There was a significant improvement in model fit going from the covariates-only to the full model across five of the six re-coded versions: $\chi 2$ difference tests showed that all *p*s < .05 across models *except* for the model in which High Similarity was coded zero. For this latter model, the observed deviance difference between step three and four (log likelihood based on maximum likelihood (ML) estimation was 5.233; it was not statistically significant, as $\chi 2$ critical for 2 degrees of freedom is 5.991. In sum, adding self-concept clarity as a predictor improved model fit in five of the six iterations of the model.

Predicting Certainty: Model B

In model B, a 4-step model building sequence was followed: *first*, a null model with random intercept was estimated, *second*, one level-1 predictor and its random slope were added, *third*, a level-2 covariate (SE) and the related cross level interaction term was added, and *fourth*, the level-2 variable (SCC) and the related cross level interaction term, were added. See table S5 for all estimates from the full model.

$$\text{Level 1: } \text{CERTAINTY}_{ti} = \beta_{oi} + \beta_{1i} Similarity_{ti} + +R_{ti}$$

$$\text{Level 2: } \beta_{oi} = \gamma_{oo} + \gamma_{o1} SCC_{gmc} + \gamma_{02} SE_{gmc} + U_{oj}$$

$$\beta_{1i} = \gamma_{1o} + \gamma_{11} SCC_{gmc} + \gamma_{12} SE_{gmc} + U_{1j}$$

$\boldsymbol{\gamma_{o1}}$ is the critical test – a simple effect of SCC on certainty for a particular type of similarity target

Model Fit statistics for Model B

Deviance tests (likelihood ratio tests) were performed comparing a covariates-only model (*third step;* 7 parameters) with a full model (*fourth step;* 9 parameters) for the outcome variable certainty for all re-coded versions to assess model fit. There was a significant improvement in model fit going from the covariates-only to the full model across all iterations: $\chi 2$ difference tests showed that all *p*s < .05 across models. In sum, adding self-concept clarity as a predictor improved model fit. We originally ran this model with gender and the related interaction term, however adding gender into the model did not improve model fit in any of the iterations (all *p*s of $\chi 2$ difference tests were less than .05. We therefore removed gender from the reported analyses.

Exploratory analysis: Model C

Predicting Match Judgements from Certainty for each type of similarity target

Level 1: $MATCH_{ti} = \beta_{oi} + \beta_{1i} Similarity_{ti} + \beta_{2i} Certainty_{ti} + \beta_{3i} SimilarityXCertainty_{ti} + R_{ti}$

Level 2: $\beta_{oi} = U_{oj}$

$\beta_{1i} = U_{1j}$

$\beta_{2i} = U_{2j}$

Similarity = continuous; recoded with zero as reference point depending a similarity level of interest
Certainty = centered within person

Post hoc comparison: Testing interaction of SCC by Low vs High Similarity on match judgments

The variable similarity was effect coded (-1, 0, 0, 0, 0, 1; going from low to higher levels of similarity such that -1 captures Low Similarity and 1 captures High Similarity) allowing us to run a comparison of Low vs High similarity levels X SCC on match judgments. Results revealed that the interaction was not significant (Low vs High Similarity X SCC (*b* = .04, *SE* = .07, *t*(228.87) = 0.56, *p* = .579, CI [-.10, .17]).

Testing Self-Esteem and Gender as Moderators

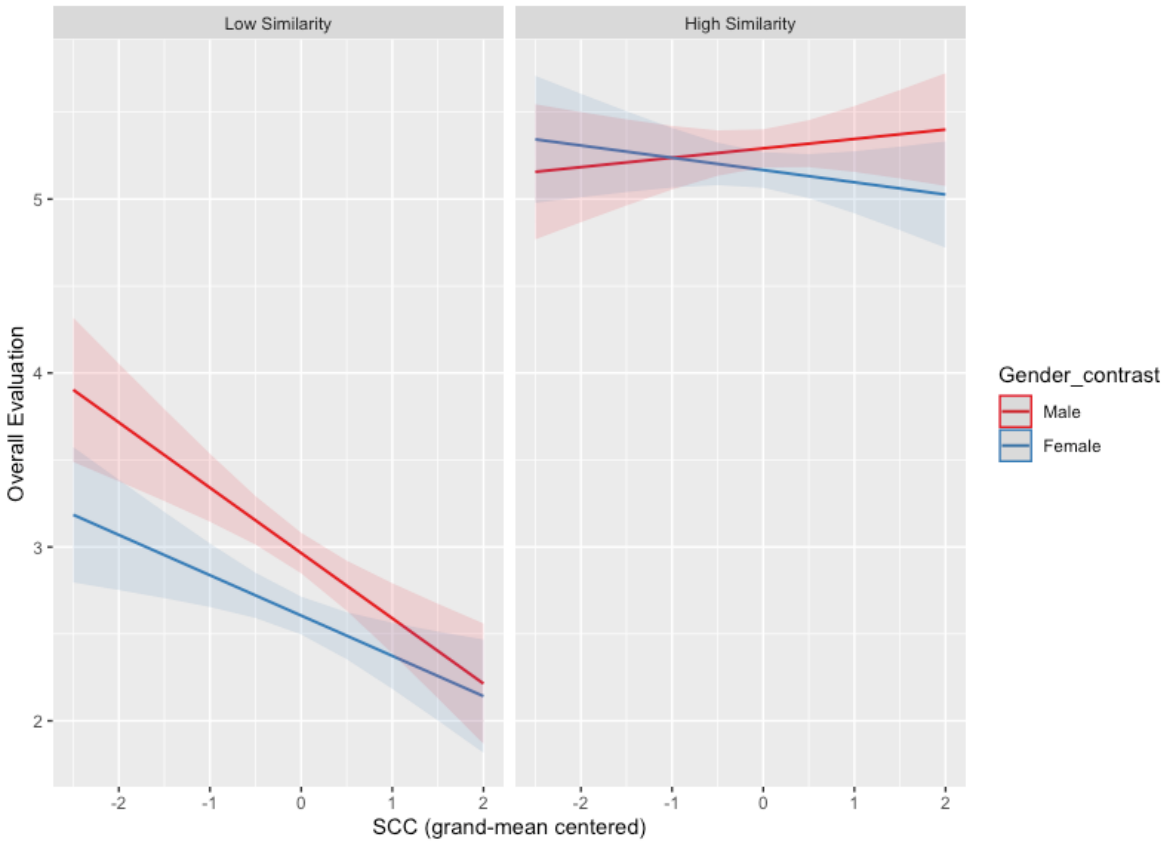
A reviewer raised the question of whether self-esteem and gender moderate our primary findings, specifically the SCC X Similarity interaction term in Study 4. We made no hypotheses about self-esteem or gender in the current research, therefore we did not report any results for self-esteem or gender in the manuscript. We decided to place this information here should it be informative for either the reader or researchers investigating self-esteem or gender.

Study 4. We tested a model (the same model used in our reported main analyses) in which self-esteem and gender were allowed to interact with the two-way interaction of SCC X Similarity term. Results showed that gender did not moderate the two-way interaction of SCC x Similarity across any iteration of the model in which similarity was recoded as zero designating the reference group (*p*'s between .570 and .667). However, across iterations of this model with different dummy codes for similarity, the interaction between SCC X Similarity as moderated by self-esteem hovered around a *p*-value of .05, ranging between .020 and .075. We thus probed this possible three-way interaction by conducting an analysis in which we used deviation coding which compares each level of similarity with the grand mean, resulting in one term for the three-way interaction (instead of multiple terms using dummy coding similarity). To test the self-esteem X SCC X similarity interaction, we compared the full model that included the interaction with a reduced model that did not include the interaction (but was otherwise identical to the full model) using a likelihood-ratio test. This test revealed that self-esteem was not a significant moderator of the SCC x Sim interaction ($p = .098$).

Integrated Data Analysis. For completion, we also examined whether self-esteem or gender moderated the SCC X Similarity interaction in the IDA. We found no significant three-way interaction with self-esteem (all *p*'s > .05). However, we did find a significant three-way interaction with gender. We probed this three-way interaction (visually depicted below) correcting for multiple comparisons. Our results indicate that the effect of SCC on overall evaluations for dissimilar targets (LEFT PANEL) is significant for both men ($b = -.31$, $SE = .07$, CI [-.486, -.124]) and women ($b = -.23$, $SE = .07$, CI [-.397, -.057]). Although descriptively the slope is steeper for men than women, the difference between the slopes is not significant ($b = -.08$, $SE = .09$, $p = .814$). The significant three-way interaction is due to the differences in gender slopes across dissimilar (left panel) vs similar targets (right panel).

Figure S4

Self-concept clarity predicting overall evaluations for dissimilar and highly similar targets as a function of gender in the integrated data set.



Effect Sizes for Select Random Effect in Study 3 and the Integrated Data Set

A reviewer noted that because some of the D1/D2 (Low vs High Similarity) random slopes variances are non-significant in Tables 2-4 of the manuscript, it was unclear whether this was because of the significant cross-level interaction fully explaining the random slope variance or because the random slope variance was not significant to begin with. To help clarity this issue, using Study 3 data we first estimated a model without the cross-level interaction term (D1/D2 Low vs High Similarity X SCC) which revealed that the random slope variance for the D1/D2 Low vs High Similarity random slopes was significant to begin with (b = .18, SE = .08, Wald z-test = 2.25, p = .025). We then estimated a second model with the interaction term included,

which showed that the random slope variance for the D1/D2 - Low vs High Similarity random slopes was no longer significant (b = .13, SE = .07, Wald z-test = 1.78, p = .075).

For completeness, we ran the same analyses using the merged dataset (IDA). The model without the cross-level interaction term (D1/D2 Low vs High Similarity X SCC) revealed that the random slope variance for the D1/D2 Low vs High Similarity random slopes was significant (b = .20, SE = .05, Wald z-test = 4.50, p <.001), and the second model with the interaction term included showed that the random slope variance for the D1/D2 - Low vs High Similarity random slopes remained significant (b = .19, SE = .04, Wald z-test = 4.29, p <.001).

Sensitivity Analyses in Studies 1 and 4

Table S6
Sensitivity analyses to detect the smallest effect size of self-concept clarity that could be detected in a replication study with 80% power for the outcome overall evaluations in Study 1 and 4.

	Sensitivity	
Study 1 **Predictor**	Smallest detectable effect sizes *(SE)*	Power
Self-concept clarity (using Model with Low Similarity as reference group)	-.11 (.11)	.80
Self-concept clarity (using Model with Moderate Similarity as reference group)	-.11 (.11)	.816
Self-concept clarity (using Model with High Similarity as reference group)	-.11 (.11)	.832

	Sensitivity	
Study 4 **Predictor**	Smallest detectable effect sizes *(SE)*	Power
Self-concept clarity (using Model with Low Similarity coded as zero)	.085	.826

Note. Regression coefficients are unstandardized.

Supplemental Material for Manuscript 2 (Chapter 3)

Table S1

Means, standard deviations, and correlations of main study variables in Study 1

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	*M* (*SD*) Single	*M* (*SD*) In Relationship
1. Self-concept clarity	-								3.63 (.95)	3.56 (.88)
2. Self-esteem	.59**	-							2.90 (.75)	3.14 (.58) †
3. Judgement difficulty	-.39**	-.31**	-						3.60 (1.06)	3.65 (1.25)
4. Dating indecision	-.42**	-.29**	.44**	-					3.49 (1.36)	3.78 (1.19)
5. Past choice appraisal	.26**	.37**	-.38**	-.19*	-				3.91 (1.23)	4.33 (1.18)
6. Past dating satisfaction	.13	.40**	-.21*	-.06	.71**	-			4.01 (1.35)	4.66 (1.21) *
7. Dating-related negative affect	-.38**	-.39**	.44**	.30**	-.62**	-.59**	-		2.16 (1.02)	2.01 (.77)
8. Past compatible partners (PC)	.08	.23*	-.18	-.15	.55**	.53**	-.27**	-	3.34 (.62)	3.47 (.59)
9. Past incompatible partners(PINC)	-.39**	-.42**	.34**	.34**	-.65**	-.56**	.62**	-.34**	2.76 (.75)	2.61 (.69)

Note. N = 115; 38 single, 77 in relationships; † $p < .07$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table S2

Regressions predicting frequency of having dated past compatible and incompatible others in Study 1 and Study 2

	Past Compatible Others (PC)					Past Incompatible Others (PINC)				
	b	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*95%CI*	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*95%CI*
Study 1										
Self-concept clarity	-.05	.08	-.66	.514	[-.20, .10]	-.17	.08	-2.12	.036	[-.34, -.01]
Self-esteem	.25	.11	2.36	.020	[.04, .46]	-.32	.11	-2.85	.005	[-.55, -.10]
Overall	R^2_{adj} = .04, F(2, 111) = 3.19, p = .045					R^2_{adj} = .20, F(2, 111) = 14.94, p < .001				
Study 2										
Self-concept clarity	.06	.06	.98	.328	[-.06, .18]	-.27	.06	-4.39	<.001	[-.39, -.15]
Self-esteem	.20	.09	2.37	.019	[.03, .37]	.07	.09	.78	.438	[-.10, .24]
Overall	R^2_{adj} = .06, F(2, 201) = 7.89, p < .001					R^2_{adj} = .11, F(2, 199) = 12.96, p < .001				

Note. Study 1, N = 127; Study 2, N = 213; self-concept clarity and self-esteem (covariate) are grand-mean centered.

Table S3

Regressions predicting judgement difficulty, dating indecision, and past choice appraisal in Study 1 and Study 2

	Judgement Difficulty					Dating Indecision					Past Choice Appraisal				
	b	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*95%CI*	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*95%CI*	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*95%CI*
Study 1															
Self-concept clarity	-.42	.14	-2.92	.004	[-.70, -.13]	-.54	.15	-3.64	<.001	[-.84, -.25]	.10	.15	0.66	.510	[-.20, .39]
Self-esteem	-.23	.20	-1.19	.236	[-.62, .16]	-.12	.20	-0.58	.564	[-.52, .29]	.60	.20	2.95	.004	[.20, .10]
Overall	R^2_{adj} = .15, F(2, 110) = 10.67, p < .001					R^2_{adj} = .17, F(2, 110) = 12.08, p < .001					R^2_{adj} = .12, F(2, 111) = 8.81, p < .001				
Study 2															
Self-concept clarity	-.52	.12	-4.43	<.001	[-.75, -.29]	-.70	.13	-5.39	<.001	[-.96, -.44]	.29	.12	2.52	.012	[.06, .51]
Self-esteem	-.07	.18	-.39	.697	[-.39, .26]	.30	.18	1.61	.109	[-.07, .66]	.26	.16	1.56	.120	[-.07, .58]
Overall	R^2_{adj} = .15, F(2, 201) = 18.17, p < .001					R^2_{adj} = .14, F(2, 201) = 17.18, p < .001					R^2_{adj} = .09, F(2, 199) = 11.41, p < .001				

Note. Study 1, N = 127; Study 2, N = 213; self-concept clarity and self-esteem (covariate) are grand-mean centered.

Table S4

Regressions predicting past dating satisfaction and dating-related negative affect in Study 1 and Study 2

	Past Dating Satisfaction					Dating-Related Negative Affect				
	b	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*95%CI*	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*95%CI*
Study 1										
Self-concept clarity	-.22	.15	-1.46	.147	[-.52, .08]	-.23	.10	-2.27	.025	[-.43, -.03]
Self-esteem	.98	.21	4.67	<.001	[.56, 1.39]	-.33	.14	-2.33	.021	[-.60, -.05]
Overall	R^2_{adj} = .16, F(2, 111) = 12.09, p < .001					R^2_{adj} = .17, F(2, 112) = 12.83, p < .001				
Study 2										
Self-concept clarity	-.01	.11	-.12	.91	[-.24, .21]	-.30	.07	-4.20	<.001	[-.44, -.16]
Self-esteem	.65	.16	4.04	<.001	[.33, .97]	-.21	.10	-2.06	.041	[-.41, -.01]
Overall	R^2_{adj} = .11, F(2, 201) = 13.05, p < .001					R^2_{adj} = .21 F(2, 199) = 27.21, p < .001				

Note. Study 1, N = 127; Study 2, N = 213; self-concept clarity and self-esteem (covariate) are grand-mean centered.

Mediation Analyses using Study 1 Data

We conducted mediation analysis using Hayes (2012) PROCESS macro for SPSS with Study 1 data. Results revealed that, controlling for self-esteem, the relationship between self-concept clarity and dating-related NA was mediated by PINC. The association between self-concept clarity and dating-related NA, the direct effect, was not significant (b = -.11, t = -1.29, p =.199). The association between self-concept clarity and PINC was significant (b = -0.17, t = -2.12, p = .036), as was the association between PINC and dating-related NA (b = .64, t = 6.43, p < .001). To test the significance of this indirect effect of PINC, we used bootstrapping procedures. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect of PINC was statistically significant (b = -.11; 95% CI [-.26, -.02]. Additionally, the unstandardized regression coefficient of the direct effect of PINC on dating-related NA before the mediator was entered into model was significant (b = -.23, t = -2.27, p =.025).

Parallel Mediation Analyses using Study 1 Data

Results from the parallel mediation analysis using Hayes (2012) PROCESS macro for SPSS, revealed that, controlling for self-esteem, the relationship between self-concept clarity and PINC was mediated by dating indecision but not by judgement difficulty. The association between self-concept clarity and PINC, the direct effect, was not significant (b = -.09, t = -1.08, p =.285). The association between self-concept clarity and judgement difficulty was statistically significant (b = -0.42, t = -2.94, p = .004), as was the association between self-concept clarity and dating indecision (b = -0.55, t = -3.73, p < .001). The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect of dating indecision on PINC was statistically significant (b = -.05; 95% CI [-.1433, -.0003], although the indirect effect of judgement difficulty on PINC was not significant (b = -.04; 95% CI [-.112, .003]. Additionally, the unstandardized regression coefficient of the

direct effect of self-concept clarity on PINC before the mediator was entered into model was significant (b = -.17, t = -2.12, p =.036).