How Does Self-Concept Clarity Influence Happiness in Social Settings?

The Role of Strangers versus Friends

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Abstract

Self-concept clarity (SCC), defined as the extent to which the content of an individual's self-beliefs is clearly and confidently defined and internally consistent, influences experiences in social relationships. This paper extends the previous literature on SCC by proposing and demonstrating that high-SCC individuals anticipate and experience more happiness than low-SCC individuals when they share a social setting with friends and anticipate and experience less happiness than low-SCC individuals when they share a social setting with strangers and that this is because of perceived interpersonal distance. A series of four studies, including both online studies and a field study, support these predictions. Alternative explanations of self-esteem and self-efficacy are also ruled out. The findings yield both theoretical contributions and practical implications.

Keywords: self-concept clarity; perceived interpersonal distance; experience with strangers; experience with friends; happiness

Self-concept clarity (SCC), or the extent to which the content of an individual's self-beliefs is clearly and confidently defined (Campbell, 1990) and internally consistent (Campbell et al., 1996), has been investigated extensively in previous literature. Research on SCC has demonstrated the relationship between SCC and mental health, well-being, and happiness (Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003; Campbell et al. 1996). Happiness bringing activities are those perceived as meaningful, socially connected and providing the feeling of being part of something better (Aaker and Smith, 2010). Research has demonstrated that SCC predicts life comprehension (George, & Park, 2017) and meaning in life (Shin, Steger, & Henry, 2016). Because meaningful relationships are important for individuals' happiness (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Reyes-García et al., 2009), previous literature has also examined how SCC can both affect and be affected by involvement in social relationships (Slotter & Emery, 2017; Slotter & Gardner, 2014; Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010; Slotter, Winger, & Soto, 2015). Research has shown that SCC predicts how people manage conflict (Bechtoldt, De Dreu, Nijstad, & Zapf, 2010) and how they respond to social influence attempts (Burger & Guadagno, 2003).

Most of the extant research has examined SCC in social settings in which people interact with their friends, romantic partners, or other close individuals (e.g., family members). In the current research, we extend this line of inquiry to include social settings shared with strangers. Collective tables in cafés are a typical example of such a social setting, where individuals who do not necessarily know one another share the same long table (Jonsson & Pipping Ekström, 2009). We specifically examine how these types of social settings influence the effect of SCC on both anticipated and experienced happiness. To the best of our knowledge, most of the extant research has operationalized happiness as subjective well-being in investigating SCC and happiness relationship (Ritchie, Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Gidron, 2011). Hence, by

demonstrating the effect of SCC on both anticipated and experienced happiness, we contribute to the literatures both on SCC and happiness.

SCC and Experiences with Friends

The literature on SCC and interpersonal relationships demonstrates certain advantages of having high SCC for general well-being and happiness. For example, high-SCC individuals are more committed to their relationships than low-SCC individuals (Lewandowski et al., 2010), have lower levels of social anxiety and loneliness (Valkenburg & Peter, 2008), and experience lower levels of aggression, anger, and hostility toward others (von Collani & Werner, 2005). SCC is positively associated with desirable relationship outcomes (McIntyre, Mattingly, Lewandowski Jr., 2017). In contrast, low SCC is associated with poor relationship quality, stress, and low self-esteem (Campbell et al., 2003; Lewandowski, Nardone, & Raines, 2010). Low-SCC individuals are more vulnerable in close relationships. They demonstrate insecure attachment styles (Wu, 2009) and show more sensitivity to signals of acceptance and rejection in social settings than high-SCC individuals (Ayduk, Gyurak, & Luerssen, 2009). In addition, low-SCC individuals have been shown to exhibit lower levels of agreeableness in social settings when they interact with other people (Campbell et al., 1996).

In relationships with close others (e.g., friends), people often expand their self-concepts by adopting aspects of those close others (Aron, Lewandowski, Mashek, & Aron, 2013; Emery, Walsh, & Slotter, 2015). Such expansion of the self has positive outcomes for individual well-being when people engage in close relationships (e.g., long-term romantic relationships; Slotter & Gardner, 2009). Research has shown that in close relationships, high-SCC individuals are

more likely than low-SCC individuals to expand their self-concepts (Emery et al., 2015). This finding is consistent with balance theory (Heider, 1958), which asserts that individuals strive to keep their cognitions in balance and that one way they might do this is by perceiving similarities with others (Amodio & Showers, 2005; Collisson & Howell, 2014). When individuals perceive similarity with others, they demonstrate greater liking (Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008), and when they like other individuals, they perceive greater similarity with them (Collisson & Howell, 2014). Research has shown that high-SCC individuals demonstrate a greater liking–similarity effect than low-SCC individuals (Collisson & Howell, 2014).

Related to this stream of research, in this paper, we predict that in experiential settings with friends, high-SCC (vs. low-SCC) individuals will anticipate and experience more happiness because they will perceive less interpersonal distance with people they consider friends (vs. not friends, or strangers). Specifically, they will perceive more familiarity, similarity, and closeness with their friends than with strangers, and this will lead to greater happiness when they share an experience with their friends.

SCC and Experiences with Strangers

Social experiences are essential parts of people’s daily lives, and they offer many benefits that promote general well-being and happiness. However, social experiences can differ in terms of the number or nature of the people present, and human behavior is influenced differentially according to the real, imagined, or implied presence of other people during an experience (Dahl, Manchanda, & Argo, 2001). Social impact theory (Latané, 1981) posits that the influence of others is a function of the interpersonal distance and the number and importance of the other

people present during the experience. When people recall experiences that occurred in their recent past, they tend to rate those shared with loved ones as engendering more happiness than those they engaged in alone (Caprariello & Reis, 2013). Because creating favorable impressions is a concern when engaging in a social experience (Leary, & Allen, 2011), it stands to reason that a person might anticipate and experience less happiness and satisfaction when in close proximity to strangers. However, Epley and Schroeder (2014) demonstrate that train commuters reported a more pleasant experience when they had an opportunity to interact with fellow commuters rather than spending the journey in relative solitude. With few exceptions, however, the literature is mostly silent regarding experiences that involve strangers together. Indeed, most people, at some point, have to share experiences with strangers without the presence of other people they know. Previous research demonstrates that the presence of other people who are strangers negatively influences the anticipated happiness and satisfaction one derives from an experience (Ratner, & Hamilton, 2015).

When individuals are in experiential settings that involve strangers (i.e., people they know little or nothing about), they form a variety of impressions by making social inferences (Ickes, 2003). For high-SCC individuals, perceived interpersonal distance is important for establishing cognitive balance (Collisson & Howell, 2014). High-SCC individuals tend to perceive people similar to themselves as more likeable, and vice versa (Collisson & Howell, 2014). To summarize our arguments thus far and to formalize our predications, we propose and test for the following: High-SCC (vs. low-SCC) individuals will perceive strangers as less similar to themselves and consequently will anticipate and experience less happiness in an experiential setting. Specifically, in experiential settings, high-SCC (vs. low-SCC) individuals will perceive greater interpersonal distance when they are with strangers. Consistently, we

predict that when the experiential setting includes strangers, high-SCC (vs. low-SCC) individuals will anticipate and experience less happiness.

We test our predictions using multiple empirical approaches across three online studies (Studies 1, 3, and 4) and a field study in a major European city (Study 2). We measure anticipated and experienced happiness with respect to experiences with strangers versus friends. We rule out alternative explanations of involvement level (Study 2), self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Study 4) and empirically test our theoretical mechanism of interpersonal distance perceptions (Studies 3 and 4).

Study 1

In Study 1, we test our main prediction that high-SCC individuals will anticipate more happiness than low-SCC individuals when viewing scenarios depicting experiences with friends and will anticipate less happiness when viewing scenarios depicting experiences with strangers. In this study, we also employ a solitary condition. Because our predicted effects are based on the individual's perceived degree of interpersonal distance with other people present in the experience, we do not expect any SCC-related difference in the solitary condition. We manipulate SCC and experience-type conditions using a 3 (SCC: high, low, control) x 3 (experience type: shared with friends, shared with strangers, solitary) between-subjects design.

Method

Participants

Three hundred fifteen adults (229 males) from the United States participated through the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workforce marketplace. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 67 years ($M = 28.1$ years, $SD = 8.44$ years). After completing the study online, participants were debriefed and compensated. Two participants did not properly complete the priming task (e.g., writing numbers). Therefore, we deleted their data and performed the analyses with a total sample of 313 adults.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three SCC conditions (Emery et al., 2015). Previous literature shows that self-reporting SCC is prone to several biases, such as positivity bias (Lewandowski & Nardone, 2012; Paulhus & Vazire, 2007), and may also lead to spurious results (Cabooter, Weijters, Geuens, & Vermeir, 2016). Therefore, in Study 1, we manipulated SCC. In all conditions, participants first considered various traits that made up who they were. In the low-SCC (threat) condition, they read the following instructions:

We want you to select two traits/characteristics of you that contradict each other. For example: being both lazy and ambitious or being both funny and serious. Please write about how these two aspects of who you are sometimes come into conflict with one another in your everyday life.

Participants in the high-SCC (confirmation) condition read the following instructions:

We want you to select two traits/characteristics of you that are consistent with each other. For example: being both intelligent and ambitious or being both thoughtful and serious. Please write about how these two aspects of who you are sometimes complement one another in your everyday life.

Participants in the control condition wrote about the activities they engaged in that particular day until the moment they participated in the study. Participants then completed the SCC measure (Campbell et al., 1996).

Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of the experience-type conditions. Specifically, they were randomly shown one of the three photographs depicting a coffee-drinking experience with friends, with strangers, or alone at the same table in the same place (see Appendix 1). Previous literature has also used photographs as stimuli to depict experiences or events (for mood induction, see Göritz and Moser, 2006; for slides accompanied by narratives, see Laney, Campbell, Heuer, & Reisberg, 2004).

These three photographs were prepared by professionals for the purposes of this research. Any logos or brands in the photographs were removed. For the experiences-with-friends condition, on the basis of pilot test results, we used a photograph that included three people. Pilot tests with open-ended responses to various potential stimuli suggested that people perceived the stimuli that included only two people as depicting a romantic relationship rather than an experience that is being shared with friends. Thus, we used photographs with three people to manipulate conditions depicting experiences with friends or with strangers. The same actors were used in both the friends and the strangers conditions. In the experiences-with-friends condition, all three people were talking to one another and drinking coffee. In the experiences-with-strangers condition, the same three people were drinking coffee but nobody was talking. We also prepared a solitary condition by depicting just one of the models in the same position with a similar posture and expression as in other two conditions (the other two individuals were not present). We pretested these stimuli with 142 adults to determine whether there were any differential effects on mood. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the experience conditions and then completed Watson, Clark, and Tellegen's (1988) Positive and Negative Affect Schedule as a measure of their mood. The results of the pretest revealed that experience type did not differentially influence positive affect, $F(2, 139) = .403, p = .669$, or negative affect,

$F(2, 139) = 2.335, p = .101$. Pairwise comparisons also demonstrated that participants in the experiences-with-friends condition, compared with those in the strangers condition, did not report significantly different positive affect ($M_{\text{friends}} = 3.528, SD = .113$ vs. $M_{\text{strangers}} = 3.384, SD = .115; p = .376$) or negative affect ($M_{\text{friends}} = 2.223, SD = .120$ vs. $M_{\text{strangers}} = 2.058, SD = .122; p = .335$). However, participants in the experiences-with-friends condition had less negative affect than participants in the solitary condition ($M_{\text{friends}} = 2.223, SD = .120$ vs. $M_{\text{solitary}} = 1.864, SD = .116; p = .033$), though these two groups did not differ in terms of positive affect ($M_{\text{friends}} = 3.528, SD = .113$ vs. $M_{\text{solitary}} = 3.440, SD = .109; p = .578$).

Next, participants answered the questions that measured anticipated happiness from the experience depicted in the assigned photograph. Finally, they answered the manipulation check questions and demographics questions.

Measures

SCC Manipulation Check. Participants completed the SCC scale (Campbell et al., 1996), which contains 12 items that tap into what constitutes a clear and consistent self-view, as a manipulation check for the SCC condition. Sample items include “My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another,” “On one day I might have one opinion of myself and on another day I might have a different opinion,” “I spend a lot of time wondering about what kind of person I really am,” and “Sometimes I feel that I am not really the person that I appear to be.” Participants rated these items on seven-point scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Of the 12 items, 10 were reverse-scored (i.e., we recoded these items so that higher scores indicated higher SCC). We then averaged all the items to derive an overall SCC score ($\alpha = .86; M = 4.58, SD = 1.14$).

Experience Type Manipulation Check. Participants in the experience-with-friends and experience-with-strangers conditions rated the nature of the relationship between the people depicted in the photographs on a scale from 1 (total strangers) to 10 (close friends) as a manipulation check for the experience-type condition. We did not present this question to participants in the solitary condition.

Anticipated Happiness. We assessed anticipated happiness from the experience with the question “How happy would this experience make you feel?” (nine-point semantic differential scale, where 1 = not happy and 9 = very happy).

Demographics. This measure included gender, income, and age measures. Previous literature shows that men tend to report higher SCC than women (Campbell et al., 1996; Pilarska, 2016). Thus, we wanted to determine whether gender had any effect on our predictions. We also measured income on a five-point scale ranging from low to high (low, low to medium, medium, medium to high, high). Participants self-reported their age in number of years.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks

We first checked whether the SCC manipulation worked in the desired manner and whether the essay-priming task successfully manipulated the cohesiveness and consistency of participants' self-beliefs. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant effect of the SCC manipulation on reported SCC, $F(2, 310) = 12.499, p < .001$. Planned contrasts revealed that

participants in the high-SCC (confirmation) condition reported a higher level of SCC ($M = 4.98$, $SD = .12$) than participants in both the low-SCC (threat) condition ($M = 4.20$, $SD = .11$; $p < .001$) and the control condition ($M = 4.66$, $SD = .10$; $p = .040$). In addition, participants in the low-SCC condition reported a lower level of SCC ($M = 4.20$, $SD = .11$) than those in the control condition ($M = 4.66$, $SD = .10$; $p = .002$).

We also tested whether participants in the different experience-type conditions, except for those in the solitary condition, perceived the experience as depicting a group of friends or a group of strangers. The results revealed that our manipulation worked: participants in the experience-with-friends condition indicated that the people depicted in the photograph were behaving more like friends ($M = 8.27$, $SD = 1.67$) and participants in the experience-with-strangers condition indicated that the people depicted in the photograph were behaving more like strangers ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.96$), $F(1, 198) = 407.20$, $p < .001$.

Anticipated Happiness

Next, we examined our primary prediction that SCC influences anticipated happiness from an experience depending on whether the experience is with friends or with strangers. The results supported our prediction. There was no main effect of SCC on anticipated happiness, $F(2, 309) = .002$, $p = .998$. However, there was a main effect of experience type on anticipated happiness, $F(2, 309) = 36.03$, $p < .001$. Specifically, participants indicated that they would be happier in the experience-with-friends condition ($M = 7.00$, $SD = .21$) than in the experience-with-strangers condition ($M = 4.66$, $SD = .18$) or the solitary experience condition ($M = 5.34$, $SD = .18$).

As we predicted, a between-subjects ANOVA revealed a significant interaction of experience type and SCC condition on anticipated happiness from the experience, $F(4, 303) =$

2.99, $p = .019$. Planned contrasts showed that high-SCC individuals ($M_{\text{highSCC}} = 7.67$, $SD = .42$) anticipated more happiness than low-SCC individuals ($M_{\text{lowSCC}} = 6.36$, $SD = .32$; $p = .015$) in the experience-with-friends condition. The control condition ($M_{\text{control}} = 7.30$, $SD = .35$) did not differ significantly from the high-SCC condition ($M_{\text{highSCC}} = 7.67$, $SD = .42$; $p = .507$) but differed significantly from the low-SCC condition ($M_{\text{lowSCC}} = 6.36$, $SD = .32$; $p = .051$) in terms of anticipated happiness in the experience-with-friends condition.

In the experience-with-strangers condition, low-SCC individuals ($M_{\text{lowSCC}} = 5.17$, $SD = .33$) reported more anticipated happiness than high-SCC individuals ($M_{\text{highSCC}} = 4.23$, $SD = .33$; $p = .043$). Individuals in the control condition ($M_{\text{control}} = 4.59$, $SD = .30$) did not differ from those in the low-SCC condition ($M_{\text{lowSCC}} = 5.17$, $SD = .33$; $p = .195$) or from those in the high-SCC condition ($M_{\text{highSCC}} = 4.23$, $SD = .33$; $p = .409$) in terms of anticipated happiness in the experience-with-strangers condition. In the third condition, the solitary experience, there were no statistically significant differences in anticipated happiness based on the SCC condition ($M_{\text{lowSCC}} = 5.13$, $SD = .32$ vs. $M_{\text{highSCC}} = 5.66$, $SD = 0.34$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 5.27$, $SD = .29$), $F(2, 303) = .659$, $p = .518$.¹

Supplementary analyses demonstrated that the direction and significance of the effects did not change when we added demographics as covariates in an analysis of covariance, $F(4, 299) = 2.92$; $p = .022$. Moreover, age ($p = .867$), gender ($p = .241$), and income ($p = .502$) did not interact with the experimental conditions to influence anticipated happiness.

Study 1 provides initial evidence that the effect of SCC on happiness derived from an experience depends on whether the experience is shared with friends or with strangers. The results demonstrate that while high-SCC individuals anticipated more happiness than low-SCC individuals when considering a shared experience with friends, low-SCC individuals anticipated

more happiness than high-SCC individuals when considering a shared experience with strangers. In addition, the results show that high-SCC individuals even reported higher anticipated happiness when considering experiences with friends than participants in a control condition (i.e., at baseline SCC levels).

Moreover, the results of Study 1 demonstrate no effect of SCC on anticipated happiness if an experience is solitary. In real life, however, most consumption-related experiences do not occur in isolated spaces, because service people and/or other consumers are typically present, at least in the surrounding area (Argo, Dahl, & Manchanda, 2005). We wanted to expand the findings of this study by examining real-life experiences and measuring experienced happiness. In Study 2, therefore, we focus on an actual dining experience occurring in a café at a large communal table. In such settings, people occupy a single table together while eating and drinking, whether they know one another or not.

Study 2

In Study 2, we wanted to replicate the results of Study 1 in a real-world setting. We conducted our study in a cafeteria and measured the SCC and experienced happiness of people who were sharing the same table either with their friends or with strangers. Moreover, we tested whether involvement with the experience category influences the interactive effect of SCC and experience on happiness, such that those with low levels of involvement might be more influenced than those with high levels of involvement.

Method

Participants

One hundred sixty-four adults (68 males, 2 preferred not to disclose their gender) in a campus café called Wonderland in a major European city participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 40 years ($M = 22.59$ years, $SD = 2.99$ years). The major reason for choosing this café was its interior design, which consisted of a single long table that seated approximately 10 customers at a time for the purposes of eating and drinking and/or socializing (see Appendix 2). Participation was voluntary, and there was no monetary compensation. There were no incomplete questionnaires, so we were able to include all the participants in our analyses.

Procedure

A research assistant who had marketing research experience but was naive to the predictions of the study was placed in the aforementioned café to conduct the study on weekdays. The experimenter approached people who were dining at the communal table and asked them to confirm whether they were sitting at the table alone or with friends. The experimenter then coded the situation accordingly either as “with friends” or as “with strangers.” During the data collection, there was no time during which there was only one person at the table. At the end of data collection period, the number of participants who reported that they were sitting among strangers was 68, whereas the number of participants who reported that they were sitting with friends was 96.

The research assistant asked potential participants if they would be willing to complete a questionnaire as part of an academic study. Upon agreement, participants responded to questions regarding their state of happiness in the immediate experience, completed the SCC scale, and answered demographics questions. Finally, they were thanked.

Measures

The SCC Scale. Participants completed the SCC scale (Campbell et al., 1996), as in Study 1.

After reverse-coding some of the items (again, as in Study 1), we averaged all the items to form an overall SCC score ($\alpha = .81$; $M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.25$).

Experienced Happiness. We assessed experienced happiness using three items adapted from Millar and Thomas (2009): “How happy is this experience making you feel?” (nine-point semantic differential scale anchored by 1 = not happy and 9 = very happy), “How much is this experience contributing to your current happiness?” (nine-point scale, anchored by 1 = very little and 9 = very much), and “Would you be happier doing something else instead of this experience?” (nine-point scale anchored by 1 = not happier and 9 = much happier; reverse item) ($\alpha = .74$; $M = 17.07$, $SD = 5.36$).

Involvement and Demographics. We predicted that level of involvement might be a factor that influences the relationship of SCC and experience type and its subsequent effect on experienced happiness. More specifically, we predicted that the interactive effect of SCC and experience type on experienced happiness might be stronger for those with low involvement in the experiential category, while for those with high involvement, sitting with strangers or with friends might not be as much of a concern. Thus, we measured behavioral involvement by asking participants an open-ended question about the number of times per week they eat or drink in cafés. Participants also indicated their age, their gender, and their income level, as in Study 1.

Results and Discussion

Experienced Happiness

We first tested our primary prediction about the effect of SCC and experience type on experienced happiness. We used SPSS's PROCESS Macro v.2.16.3 Model 1 (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) to test the interactive effect of SCC and experience type on experienced happiness. The analysis provided an SCC–experienced happiness relationship for each of the experience-type conditions.

As we expected, there was a significant two-way interaction between SCC and experience type, $b = .99$, $p < .001$; 95% CI [.5762, 1.4100], on experienced happiness. Furthermore, there was a significant main effect of SCC, $b = -.36$, $p = .03$; 95% CI [−.6878, −.0329] and experience-type condition, $b = -5.47$, $p < .001$; 95% CI [−7.5360, −3.4067]. Planned contrasts revealed that when the experience was shared with strangers, individuals' SCC level had a significant, negative influence on their experienced happiness, $b = -2.17$, $p = .03$; 95% CI [−.6878, −.0329]. However, when the experience was shared with friends, individuals' SCC level had a significant, positive influence on their experienced happiness, $b = 4.84$, $p = .00$; 95% CI [.3747, .8908].²

Supplementary analyses demonstrated that the direction and significance of the effects did not change when we added demographic items as covariates in the PROCESS analysis, $b = 1.2143$, $p = .000$; 95% CI [.6885, 1.7401]. In addition, age ($p = .12$), gender ($p = .21$), and income ($p = .13$) did not interact with the experimental conditions to influence experienced happiness.

Involvement

Level of involvement had a marginally significant interactive effect with the experimental conditions to influence experienced happiness ($p = .051$). When the interaction was decomposed via spotlight analysis, the results revealed that SCC influenced experienced happiness for involvement levels one standard deviation below the mean if the experience was shared with strangers, $b = -.66$, $p = .01$; 95% CI $[-1.1791, -.1498]$, or with friends, $b = 1.07$, $p < .001$; 95% CI $[.6272, 1.4939]$). Thus, SCC negatively influenced reported happiness in experiences among strangers but positively influenced reported happiness in experiences among friends for participants with lower-than-average involvement but not for participants with higher-than-average involvement. SCC did not influence experienced happiness for involvement levels one standard deviation above the mean if the experience was shared with strangers, $b = .07$, $p = .90$; 95% CI $[-1.1425, 1.2972]$, or with friends, $b = .34$, $p = .75$; 95% CI $[-.5645, .7828]$).

Taken together, the results of Study 2 demonstrate that data from a real experiential consumption setting support our main prediction that the content and clarity of individuals' self-concept (i.e., SCC) influences experienced happiness in experiential settings depending on whether the experience is shared with strangers or with friends. When people were sitting at a communal table in a café, those who were with friends experienced more happiness if they were high in SCC compared with those who were low in SCC. However, among those who shared the experiential consumption with unknown consumers, those who were low in SCC experienced more happiness than those who were high in SCC.

Study 3

In Study 3, we tested the theoretical mechanism underlying the effect of SCC and experience type on anticipated happiness. In this study, we measured SCC and manipulated the experience-type conditions. We then measured perceived interpersonal distance and anticipated happiness. We predict that high-SCC (vs. low-SCC) individuals will perceive greater interpersonal distance with people they consider strangers and consequently will anticipate less happiness when considering an experience with strangers. Conversely, we predict that high-SCC (vs. low-SCC) individuals will perceive less interpersonal distance with people they consider friends and consequently will anticipate more happiness when considering an experience with friends.

Method

Participants

One hundred eight (69 males) adults from the United States participated through MTurk in return for payment. Their ages ranged from 18 to 70 years ($M = 28.34$ years, $SD = 9.05$ years). After completing the study online, participants were debriefed and compensated. No participants were removed from the analyses.

Procedure

Participants were informed that they would be subjected to several unrelated tasks during the study. First, they completed the SCC measure. Participants responded to a version of the Twenty-Statement Task, adapted from Cabooter, Millet, Weijters, and Pandelaere (2016), as a measure of SCC. Participants provided as many self-descriptive traits as possible (with a maximum of 10), while we measured the time it took them to complete this task in seconds. Research has shown that shorter latency when providing self-descriptive traits is an indicator of

higher levels of SCC (Cabooter, Millet, et al., 2016; Campbell et al., 1996). This type of measure for SCC also eliminates biases (e.g., social desirability, reactivity) in self-reported measures (Cabooter, Weijters, et al., 2016; Campbell, 1990).

After completing this task, participants were randomly shown one of two photographs depicting a coffee-drinking experience either with friends or with strangers at the same table for the experience-type conditions (see Appendix 1). Next, participants responded to questions that measured their perceived interpersonal distance among the people depicted in the experience. Finally, they responded to questions related to anticipated happiness and provided their demographic information.

Measures

SCC. We used response latency for a maximum of 10 self-descriptive traits as an alternative measure of SCC, reasoning that the longer the response latency, the higher the effort to produce self-relevant traits. Therefore, longer response times indicate lower SCC levels. We transformed the timing data using a natural logarithmic function ($\ln[\text{response time} + 1]$) to correct for nonnormality and used this transformed variable in the analyses.

Experience Type Manipulation Check. Participants in the experiences-with-friends and experiences-with-strangers conditions rated the nature of the relationship of the people depicted in the photographs on a scale from 1 (total strangers) to 10 (close friends) as a manipulation check for the experience-type condition.

Perceived Interpersonal Distance. We measured perceived interpersonal distance between the individuals in the depicted experience with three items taken from Liviatan, Trope, and Liberman (2008) and Stephan, Liberman, and Trope (2011): “How close do you think these people are?” (seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = very distant to 7 = very close), “How well do you think these people know each other?” (1 = they do not know each other at all, 7 = they know each other extremely well), and “How many commonalities do these people share?” (1 = nothing in common, 7 = many things in common). These three items comprised an index of perceived interpersonal distance ($\alpha = .85$; $M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.33$).

Anticipated Happiness. We assessed anticipated happiness from the experience, as in Study 1, by asking participants “How happy would this experience make you feel?” (nine-point semantic differential scale, where 1 = not happy and 9 = very happy).

Demographics. Demographic items included gender, income, and age. We measured income on a five-point scale ranging from low to high (low, low to medium, medium, medium to high, high). Participants self-reported their age in number of years.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check

An ANOVA revealed that our manipulation worked: participants in the experience-with-friends condition were more prone to indicate that the people depicted in the photograph were behaving like friends ($M = 7.35$, $SD = .29$) than those in the experience-with-strangers condition ($M = 3.47$, $SD = .27$), $t(106) = -9.748$, $p = .025$.

Anticipated Happiness

We sought to replicate our primary prediction that high-SCC individuals will report greater anticipated happiness than low-SCC individuals when they consider an experience that is being shared among friends, while low-SCC individuals will report greater anticipated happiness than high-SCC individuals when they consider an experience that is being shared with strangers. We used SPSS's PROCESS Macro v.2.16.3 Model 1 (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) with anticipated happiness as the dependent variable, inverse SCC as the independent variable, and experience type as the moderator. The results revealed a marginally significant interaction of SCC and experience-type conditions on anticipated happiness, $b = -.8431$, $p = .057$; 95% CI $[-1.7137, -.1522]$.³ Furthermore, there was a significant main effect of response time (inverse SCC), $b = 1.5107$, $p = .030$; 95% CI $[.1496, 2.8717]$, and experience-type condition, $b = 5.7809$, $p = .011$; 95% CI $[1.3622, 10.1996]$, on anticipated happiness. Contrast results revealed that when the depiction was of an experience that is being shared among friends, individuals' SCC level did not influence their anticipated happiness, $b = -.1756$, $p = .580$; 95% CI $[-.8026, .4514]$. However, when the depiction was of an experience that is being shared with strangers, individuals' SCC level had a significant and negative influence on their anticipated happiness, $b = .6675$, $p = .031$; 95% CI $[.0635, 1.2716]$.

Supplementary analyses demonstrated that the significance of the interactive effect and the main effects did not change when we added demographics as covariates in PROCESS, $b = -1.0235$, $p = .022$; 95% CI $[-1.8949, -.1522]$). In addition, age ($p = .627$), gender ($p = .715$), and income ($p = .829$) did not interact with the experimental conditions to influence anticipated happiness.

Perceived Interpersonal Distance as the Theoretical Mechanism

Next, we tested whether there is an interactive relationship between SCC and experience type on perceived interpersonal distance. We predict that when considering a shared experience with strangers, high-SCC individuals will perceive greater interpersonal distance, and when considering a shared experience with friends, high-SCC individuals will perceive less interpersonal distance. The analysis revealed a significant interaction of SCC and experience-type conditions on perceived interpersonal distance, $b = -.7289$, $p = .005$; 95% CI $[-1.2281, -.2297]$. Furthermore, there was a significant main effect of response time (inverse SCC), $b = 1.0804$, $p = .007$; 95% CI $[.2999, 1.8608]$, and experience type, $b = 5.2255$, $p = .000$; 95% CI $[2.6918, 7.7591]$, on perceived interpersonal distance. When viewing a depiction of an experience that is being shared with strangers, individuals' SCC level had a significant, negative influence on their assessment of perceived interpersonal distance, $b = .3514$, $p = .047$; 95% CI $[.0051, .6978]$. This finding suggests that high-SCC individuals perceive greater interpersonal distance in experiences with strangers. However, when viewing a depiction of an experience that is being shared among friends, individuals' SCC level had a significant, positive influence on their assessment of perceived interpersonal distance, $b = -.3775$, $p = .040$; 95% CI: $[-.7370, -.0180]$), meaning that they perceived friends as more similar, familiar, and closer.

Supplementary analyses demonstrated that the significance of the interactive effect and the main effects did not change when we added demographics as covariates in PROCESS, $b = -.8438$, $p = .00$; 95% CI $[-1.3362, -.3514]$). In addition, age ($p = .911$), gender ($p = .712$), and income ($p = .464$) did not interact with the experimental conditions to influence anticipated happiness.

We then used SPSS's PROCESS Macro v.2.16.3 Model 8 (Hayes, 2015) to test for moderated mediation with anticipated happiness as the dependent variable, inverse SCC as the independent variable, experience type as the moderator, and perceived interpersonal distance as the mediator. The results showed that while experience type had a moderating effect, perceived interpersonal distance acted as a mediator for the interactive effect. The moderated mediation index was significant ($-.7234$) based on 5,000 resamples, and the confidence intervals did not contain zero ($-1.4066, -.2397$) at a 95% significance level. Supplementary analyses demonstrated that the moderated mediation index was still significant when we added demographics as covariates, $-.8409$, CI $[-1.4940, -.3356]$.

Additional Analyses

Previous literature suggests that high SCC leads to an extreme response bias, especially for highly self-relevant items (Cabooter, Millet, et al., 2016). Campbell (1990) also argues that SCC manifests in terms of the extremity of self-beliefs. Thus, it can be argued that the ratings used when responding to the questions reflect not what they intend to measure but rather demonstrate the moderacy bias of low-SCC individuals and the extremity bias of high-SCC individuals. To rule out this explanation, we formed an extremity index to check for an SCC extreme response bias. Consistent with previous literature (Downing, Judd, & Brauer, 1992), we measured the absolute value of the distance between the responses and the midpoint (i.e., 4 on a seven-point Likert scale, 5 on a nine-point Likert scale) for four questions assessing interpersonal distance perceptions and anticipated happiness.

The results showed no direct effect of SCC on extreme response index, $b = -.5474$, $p = .113$; 95% CI $[-1.2265, .1317]$. The results also did not show any SCC–experience type

interaction effect on the extreme response index, $b = .8005$, $p = .245$; 95% CI $[-.5585, 2.1595]$).

When we analyzed each continuous variable separately for extremism, the results showed an insignificant SCC–experience type interaction on extreme response to the distance item, $b = .1402$, $p = .533$; 95% CI $[-.3046, .5849]$; the familiarity item, $b = .2553$, $p = .238$; 95% CI $[-.1714, .6820]$; the commonality item, $b = .1136$, $p = .571$; 95% CI: $[-.2833, .5104]$; and the anticipated happiness item, $b = .2914$, $p = .326$; 95% CI $[-.2942, .8770]$). These results eliminate extreme response bias as an alternative explanation for the effect of SCC and experience type on anticipated happiness.

The results of Study 3 replicate the results of Studies 1 and 2. Furthermore, Study 3 demonstrates the mechanism that explains the interactive effect of SCC and experience type on anticipated happiness. Specifically, we demonstrate that high-SCC individuals perceive greater interpersonal distance with strangers and consequently anticipate less happiness from experiences shared with strangers. Conversely, they perceive less interpersonal distance with friends and consequently anticipate more happiness from experiences shared with friends.

Previous literature demonstrates that SCC is distinct from but related to self-esteem and self-efficacy (Campbell, 1990; Slotter & Gardner, 2014). However, previous literature suggests that SCC-related effects have to better control for self-esteem as a predictor or outcome (deMarree, & Bobrowski, 2017). Similarly, previous research has demonstrated that trait SCC is generally associated with self-efficacy (Bobrowski, deMarree, Lodi-Smith, & Naragon-Gainey, 2018). Thus, one might argue that self-esteem and self-efficacy are two potential constructs that may confound the interactive effect of SCC and experience type on anticipated and experienced happiness. To rule out the potential effects of self-esteem and self-efficacy, we conducted a

separate study and tested the relationship of self-esteem and self-efficacy on anticipated happiness when an experience is being shared with strangers or with friends.

Study 4

In Study 4, we tested the possible effects of self-esteem and self-efficacy on anticipated happiness when the experiential setting depicts friends (vs. strangers). We measured SCC, self-esteem and self-efficacy of the participants. We manipulated experience-type conditions and measured perceived social distance and anticipated happiness.

Method

Participants

Ninety-seven adults (71 males) from the United States participated through MTurk. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 52 years ($M = 30.31$ years, $SD = 7.87$ years). After completing the study online, participants were debriefed and compensated. We did not remove any participants from the analyses.

Procedure

Participants first completed the self-concept clarity, self-efficacy and self-esteem measures. Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two experiential-type conditions, as in Study 3 (see Appendix 1). Finally, we measured perceived social distance and anticipated happiness, and participants answered questions related to demographics.

Measures

The SCC Scale. Participants completed the SCC scale (Campbell et al., 1996), as in Study 2 ($\alpha = .88$; $M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.21$).

Self-Esteem. Participants completed the self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965), which contains 10 items (sample item: “I feel that I’m a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others”). Participants rated self-esteem items on four-point scales (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree). Five of the items were reverse-scored (i.e. At times I think I am no good at all., we recoded these items so that higher numbers indicated higher self-esteem). We averaged all the items to form an overall self-esteem score ($\alpha = .68$; $M = 2.42$, $SD = .21$).

Self-Efficacy. Participants completed the self-efficacy scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995), which contains 10 items. A sample item includes “I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.” Participants rated self-efficacy items on four-point scales (1 = not at all true, and 4 = exactly true). Higher numbers indicated higher self-efficacy. We averaged all the items to form an overall self-efficacy score ($\alpha = .90$; $M = 2.92$, $SD = .54$).

Experience Type Manipulation Check. Participants in the experiences-with-friends and experiences-with-strangers conditions rated the nature of the relationship of the people depicted in the photographs on a scale from 1 (total strangers) to 10 (close friends) as a manipulation check for the experience-type condition.

Perceived Interpersonal Distance. We measured perceived interpersonal distance with three items as in Study 3 ($\alpha = .88$; $M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.47$).

Anticipated Happiness. We assessed anticipated happiness from the experiential depiction by asking “How happy would this experience make you feel?” (nine-point semantic differential scale, where 1 = not happy and 9 = very happy) as in Study 3.

Demographics. Demographic items included were the same as in previous studies.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check

We first checked whether the experience type manipulation worked in the desired manner. An ANOVA revealed a significant effect of the experience type manipulation. Specifically, participants in the experience-with-friends condition indicated that people depicted in the photograph were behaving more like friends ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.08$) than those in the experience-with-strangers condition ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.96$), $t(95) = 5.259$, $p = .000$.

Anticipated Happiness

We first examined our primary prediction that SCC influences anticipated happiness from an experience depending on whether the experience is with friends or with strangers. We used SPSS’s PROCESS Macro v.2.16.3 Model 1 (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) with anticipated happiness as the dependent variable, SCC as the independent variable, and experience type as the moderator. The results revealed a marginally significant interaction of SCC and experience-type

conditions on anticipated happiness, $b = -.5051$, $p = .067$; 95% CI $[-1.0461, .0360]$ without any main effect of SCC, $b = .5901$, $p = .196$; 95% CI $[-.3091, 1.4890]$, and experience-type condition, $b = .7005$, $p = .589$; 95% CI $[1.8668, 3.2679]$, on anticipated happiness. Planned contrasts showed that when viewing a depiction of an experience that is being shared with friends, individuals' SCC level did not influence their anticipated happiness, $b = .0850$, $p = .685$; 95% CI $[-.3296, .4996]$. However, when viewing a depiction of an experience that is being shared with strangers, individuals' SCC level had a significant and negative influence on their anticipated happiness, $b = -.4201$, $p = .018$; 95% CI $[-.7677, -.0725]$. Supplementary analyses demonstrated that the marginal significance of the interactive effect did not change when we added demographics as covariates in PROCESS analyses, $b = .0291$, $p = .061$; 95% CI $[-1.0700, .0250]$.

We then sought to analyze the interactive effect of SCC and experience-type condition while controlling for the self-esteem of the individuals. Results revealed that the interactive effect of SCC and experience type condition on anticipated happiness was still marginally significant when we controlled for self-esteem in PROCESS analyses, $b = -.5054$, $p = .068$; 95% CI $[-1.0486, .0378]$. Planned contrast results did also not change. In experiences among friends condition, individuals' SCC level did not influence their anticipated happiness, $b = .1093$, $p = .611$; 95% CI $[-.3161, .5347]$. In experiences shared with strangers condition, individuals' SCC level had a significant and negative influence on their anticipated happiness, $b = -.3961$, $p = .031$; 95% CI $[-.7557, -.0365]$, controlling for self-esteem. Moreover, we failed to find a three-way interaction between experience type, SCC and self-esteem on anticipated happiness, $b = -.0742$, $p = .956$; 95% CI $[-2.7656, 2.6172]$.

We then controlled for the self-efficacy to test for the interactive effect of SCC and experience-type condition on anticipated happiness. Results revealed that the interactive effect of SCC and experience type on anticipated happiness was still marginally significant when we controlled for self-efficacy in PROCESS analyses, $b = -.4549$, $p = .096$; 95% CI $[-.9922, .0823]$). Planned contrast results did also not change. In experiences among friends condition, individuals' SCC level did not influence their anticipated happiness, $b = -.0306$, $p = .888$; 95% CI $[-.4589, .3978]$ and in experiences shared with strangers condition, individuals' SCC level had a significant and negative influence on their anticipated happiness, $b = -.4855$, $p = .007$; 95% CI $[-.8362, -.1349]$, controlling for self-efficacy. We failed to find a three-way interaction between experience type, SCC and self-efficacy on anticipated happiness, $b = -.3058$, $p = .580$; 95% CI $[-1.3992, .7877]$.

We then tested the interaction of experience type condition with two variables: self-esteem and self-efficacy, separately. The interaction of self-efficacy and experience type condition was insignificant on anticipated happiness, $b = .3358$, $p = .604$; 95% CI $[-.9446, 1.6163]$, without any main effects of self-efficacy, $b = -.1462$, $p = .895$; 95% CI $[-2.3400, 2.0477]$, or experience-type conditions, $b = -2.5481$, $p = .187$; 95% CI $[-6.3574, 1.2611]$.

Our next analysis, however, revealed a marginally significant interaction of self-esteem and experience-type conditions on anticipated happiness, $b = 2.7661$, $p = .084$; 95% CI $[-.3842, 5.9164]$ without any main effect of self-esteem, $b = -3.3100$, $p = .186$; 95% CI $[-8.2410, 1.6211]$ but with a main effect of experience type, favoring experience with friends, $b = -8.2469$, $p = .035$; 95% CI $[-15.8943, -.5995]$. Planned contrasts revealed that when viewing a depiction of an experience that is being shared with friends,, individuals' self-esteem did not influence their anticipated happiness, $b = -.5439$, $p = .623$; 95% CI $[-2.7341, 1.6463]$. However, when viewing

a depiction of an experience that is being shared with strangers, individuals' self-esteem had a marginally significant but positive influence on their anticipated happiness, $b = 2.2222$, $p = .054$; 95% CI $[-.0421, 4.4866]$.

Perceived Interpersonal Distance

Next, we tested the interactive effect of SCC, and experience type on perceived interpersonal distance. The analysis revealed a marginally significant interaction of SCC and experience-type conditions on perceived interpersonal distance, $b = -.3960$, $p = .057$; 95% CI $[-.8033, .0114]$ without any main effects of SCC, $b = .3958$, $p = .249$; 95% CI $[-.2812, 1.0728]$, and experience type, $b = .1953$, $p = .841$; 95% CI $[-1.7378, 2.1284]$, on perceived interpersonal distance. When viewing a depiction of an experience that is being shared with strangers, individuals' SCC level had a significant negative influence on their assessment of perceived interpersonal distance, $b = -.3961$, $p = .003$; 95% CI $[-.6578, -.1343]$. This finding suggests that high-SCC individuals perceive greater interpersonal distance in experiences with strangers, finding them less similar, less familiar and more distant to themselves, compared to low-SCC individuals. However, when viewing a depiction of an experience that is being shared among friends, individuals' SCC level did not influence their assessment of perceived interpersonal distance, $b = -.0001$, $p = .999$; 95% CI: $[-.3123, .3121]$). Supplementary analyses demonstrated that the marginal significance of the interactive effect and the main effects did not change when we added demographics as covariates in PROCESS, $b = -.3882$, $p = .064$; 95% CI $[-0.7992, -.0228]$).

We then used SPSS's PROCESS Macro v.2.16.3 Model 8 (Hayes, 2015) to test for moderated mediation prediction as in Study 3. The results showed that while experience type had a moderating effect, perceived interpersonal distance acted as a mediator for the interactive

effect. The moderated mediation index was significant ($-.2900$) based on 5,000 resamples, and the confidence intervals did not contain zero ($-.6625, -.0268$) at a 95% significance level.

Supplementary analyses demonstrated that the moderated mediation index was still significant when we added demographics as covariates, $-.2912$, CI $[-.6965, -.0086]$.

Similar to our previous analyses, we tested the interactive effect of SCC and experience-type on perceived interpersonal distance, while controlling for the self-esteem of the individuals. Results revealed that the interactive effect of SCC and experience type on perceived interpersonal distance was still marginally significant when we controlled for self-esteem in PROCESS analyses, $b = -.3957$, $p = .058$; 95% CI $[-.8048, .0133]$). Planned contrast results did not change as well. In experiences among friends condition, individuals' SCC level did not influence their perceived interpersonal distance, $b = -.0170$, $p = .916$; 95% CI $[-.3374, .3034]$ and in experiences shared with strangers condition, individuals' SCC level had a significant and negative influence on their perceived interpersonal distance, $b = -.4128$, $p = .003$; 95% CI $[-.6836, -.1419]$, controlling for self-esteem. Moreover, we failed to find a three-way interaction between experience type, SCC and self-esteem on perceived interpersonal distance, $b = -.0271$, $p = .979$; 95% CI $[-2.0641, 2.0099]$.

We then controlled for the effect of self-efficacy to test our prediction about the interactive effect of SCC and experience type on perceived interpersonal distance. Results revealed that the interactive effect of SCC and experience type on perceived interpersonal distance was still marginally significant when we controlled for self-efficacy in PROCESS, $b = -.3579$, $p = .082$; 95% CI $[-.7623, .0465]$). Contrast results did not change as well. In experiences among friends condition, individuals' SCC level did not influence their perceived interpersonal distance, $b = -.0879$, $p = .589$; 95% CI $[-.4103, .2345]$ and in experiences shared with strangers

condition, individuals' SCC level had a significant and negative influence on their perceived interpersonal distance, $b = -.4458$, $p = .001$; 95% CI $[-.7097, -.1818]$, controlling for self-efficacy. We failed to find a three-way interaction between experience type, SCC and self-efficacy on perceived interpersonal distance, $b = -.1331$, $p = .754$; 95% CI $[-.9751, .7090]$.

We then checked the interaction of experience type condition with two variables: self-esteem and self-efficacy, separately, on perceived social distance. There was an insignificant two-way interaction between self-esteem and experience type, $b = .9798$, $p = .429$; 95% CI $[-1.4721, 3.4317]$, without any main effects of self-esteem, $b = -1.3199$, $p = .496$; 95% CI $[-5.1578, 2.5180]$, or experience-type conditions, $b = -3.9526$, $p = .190$; 95% CI $[-9.9046, 1.9994]$. There was an insignificant two-way interaction between self-efficacy and experience type, $b = -.0584$, $p = .906$; 95% CI $[-1.0419, .9250]$, without any main effects of self-efficacy, $b = .3520$, $p = .679$; 95% CI $[-1.3330, 2.0370]$, or experience-type conditions, $b = -1.4019$, $p = .344$; 95% CI $[-4.3276, 1.5237]$.

The results of Study 4 provided support for the moderated mediation pathway of SCC and experience type on interpersonal distance and happiness. In addition to replicating Study 3 results with an alternative measure of SCC, we also controlled for the effects of self-esteem and self-efficacy while showing the theoretical mechanism behind our results. The results demonstrated that self-efficacy is not related with perceived interpersonal distance or anticipated happiness from different social settings that are shared with strangers or friends. Furthermore, we demonstrated that SCC-anticipated happiness relationship in social settings shared with friends or strangers is not influenced by self-esteem of individuals. Although self-esteem did not interact with experience type to influence interpersonal distance, we found a marginally significant interaction effect of self-esteem and experience type on anticipated happiness. The direction of

the interaction is not contrary to the findings of previous literature on self-esteem that demonstrate high self-esteem leads to the reporting of happier outcomes regardless of the circumstances (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Specifically, consistent with previous literature, in experiences with strangers, those with higher self-esteem anticipated more happiness compared to those with low self-esteem. Considering the positive valence of self-esteem, our findings show that self-esteem provides a happiness advantage when an experience is shared with previously unknown people. However, the reverse of this effect is not observed in experiences with friends and self-esteem is not related with interpersonal distance perceptions in shared experiences.

General Discussion

In a series of studies that include both online studies and a field study, this paper demonstrates how experience type, whether it is shared with strangers or shared with friends, influences the effect of SCC on anticipated and experienced happiness. More specifically, we demonstrate that high-SCC individuals anticipate and experience more happiness than low-SCC individuals in the context of a shared experience with friends, while low-SCC individuals anticipate and experience more happiness than high-SCC individuals in the contexts of a shared experience with strangers. Furthermore, we provide evidence that high-SCC individuals anticipate and experience less happiness in the context of a shared experience with strangers because they perceive greater interpersonal distance between strangers (vs. friends) than low-SCC individuals and the found results are not confounded by the self-esteem or self-efficacy of the individual.

This research contributes to the existing literature on SCC and experiential consumption in different ways. First, to the best of our knowledge, this is one of only a few empirical papers to demonstrate how having high SCC might result in less happiness from an experience. To the best of our knowledge, previous research demonstrates mainly the positive consequences of having high SCC and the negative consequences of having low SCC (Mittal, 2015). Boucher, Bloch, and Pelletier (2016) argue that clear, stable, and internally consistent self-beliefs are vital for creating meaning out of life's experiences. These findings are consistent with the long-standing belief that self-consistency manifests in effective social adaptation, positive mental health, and interpersonal relational success (Pilarska, 2016). One of the few works to explore moderation of the SCC–happiness relationship demonstrates that high SCC leads to better mental health in a middle-class context, but this relationship is attenuated for working-class individuals (Na, Chan, Lodi-Smith, & Park, 2016). In the current paper, we extend the qualification of this relationship by demonstrating that high-SCC individuals anticipate and experience less happiness in the context of a shared experience with strangers.

This research contributes to the literature by distinguishing between experiences with friends and experiences with strangers and by demonstrating that high-SCC individuals perceive greater interpersonal distance between strangers (vs. friends) than low-SCC individuals. While previous research demonstrates that high-SCC individuals have stricter and clearer definitions of who they are, to the best of our knowledge, this study is among the first to show that they also have more strict and clear definitions of who is a friend and who is a stranger, which ultimately influences the happiness they derive from an experience shared with friends or with strangers.

The current findings contribute to our understanding of experiential consumption. Previous research demonstrates that experiential purchases provide greater satisfaction and

happiness because they form a larger part of a person's identity, enhance social relationships more readily than material goods, and evoke fewer social comparisons than material purchases (Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015). There is ample evidence that experiences shared with close others result in more happiness than solitary experiences (Argo, Dahl, & Manchanda, 2005; Ariely & Levav, 2000). This research, however, is the first to posit that the happiness derived from experiences shared with a variety of other people depend on an individual's level of SCC. As such, the current findings provide new insights within this class of research, showing that an individual's SCC can influence differential levels of happiness in different experiential contexts.

Implications and Future Directions

There is an increased variety in the types of collective experiences people can share with their friends and/or with strangers, such as communal table dining experiences (Braun, 2014). Understanding the influence of SCC in social experiences has implications for the service sector. For example, our findings suggest that low SCC levels would lead to more perceived interpersonal closeness among strangers who engage in experiences together. If an individual consistently experiences episodes with strangers, such as regularly commuting or dining with unknown people, low SCC levels would make it easier to adjust to these circumstances and increase happiness levels.

Intentionally lowering the certainty of one's SCC would obviously be problematic, both practically and ethically. However, there are contexts in which individuals might experience a decrease in their self-concept certainty, and thus might be more likely to appreciate experiences among strangers at such times. In the literature, self-concept disturbances, such as low self-

esteem or low clarity, are among the predictors of alcohol problems (Corte & Zucker, 2008). The account proposed in this paper suggests that providing alcohol therapy in a group of others not known beforehand (i.e., strangers) might work better for such low-SCC individuals.

In this research, we used the real-life context of communal dining experiences in a café. A key direction for future research would be to replicate the effects we found in other communal experiences as well as online, virtual contexts. Bailenson, Blascovich, and Guadagno (2008) previously examined social distance and the self in online platforms but recommended further research involving SCC. Valkenburg and Peter (2008) examined the relationship between SCC and pretending to be someone else online but demonstrated mixed findings. Future research might also examine how SCC influences anticipated and experienced happiness with webcast experiences or attending virtual meetings among known and unknown participants.

In addition, our findings indirectly touch on the vague question of what exactly constitutes a stranger. We show that previously unknown people are not construed in the minds of low-SCC individuals as people with greater interpersonal distance, as they are in the minds of high-SCC individuals. While more research is clearly needed to determine how individuals construe the concept of strangers versus friends and how they define their boundaries of experience sharing, we believe that the present findings represent important steps in understanding the ways in which SCC influences social relationships, social judgements, and anticipated and experienced emotions such as happiness.

Notes

1. In Study 1, the results also show that participants in both SCC manipulation conditions and the control condition reported higher levels of happiness when they were with friends (vs. with strangers or alone). However, for parsimony, we planned the contrasts and formed the moderation models in all studies to examine within-experience conditions.
2. In Study 2, we also asked how much time the participants in the café spent at the communal table and how much money they spent in the café for control purposes.

Separate analyses revealed no main effect of SCC, $b = .4250$, $p = .42$; 95% CI $[-.6106, 1.4607]$; experience condition, $b = 3.5183$, $p = .29$; 95% CI $[-3.0115, 10.0480]$; or their interaction, $b = -.8372$, $p = .21$; 95% CI $[-2.1558, .4814]$) on the amount of money people spent (as an individual) in the café. We also failed to find significant results for the main effect of SCC, $b = -2.0630$, $p = .48$; 95% CI $[-7.8447, 3.7188]$; the experience condition, $b = 11.9564$, $p = .52$; 95% CI $[-24.4993, 48.4122]$; or their interaction, $b = -1.2094$, $p = .75$; 95% CI $[-8.5711, 6.1523]$ on the time participants spent in the café experience.

3. In Study 3, because response time to self-descriptive traits is inversely related to SCC level, we report the “-” sign in the b -value considering response time, which signifies a positive effect of SCC; the “+” sign in the b -value signifies a negative effect of SCC.

Disclosure statement

Ethical approval for all the studies examining the self-related variables and social experience context was obtained prior to conducting the studies from the Institutional Review Board at Boğaziçi University (İNAREK) on December 17, 2012, registered as #2012/68.

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Appendix 1: Experience Type Manipulation Stimuli

Experience-with-Friends Condition (Study 1, Study 3, and Study 4)

Experience-with-Strangers Condition (Study 1, Study 3, and Study 4)

Solitary Experience Condition (Study 1)

Appendix 2

Café Communal Table in Study 2