The social grounds of personal self: Interactions that build a sense of ‘we’ help clarify who ‘I’ am

Namkje Koudenburg1 | Jolanda Jetten2 | Karalyn F. Enz3 | S. Alexander Haslam2

1Department of Psychology, The University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands
2School of Psychology, The University of Queensland, St Lucia, Australia
3Department of Psychology, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, USA

Abstract

Many lay people believe that the best way to develop a clear sense of ‘who you are’ is to shut yourself off from others and engage in introspection. Increasingly, however, empirical evidence points to the social aspects of identities and identity development. Building on this, we argue that a strong sense of personal identity is more likely to be derived from meaningful social interaction. More specifically, we argue that when communication allows people to develop a sense of shared identity, it can also promote a sense of personal self. Consistent with this hypothesis, evidence from three experiments indicates that social interaction indirectly enhances people’s self-concept clarity and personal identity strength, through an increased experience of shared identity and social validation. This suggests that a sense of ‘me’ is not formed independently of others but also through the experience of ‘we’ in interaction.

KEYWORDS

introspection, personal identity strength, self-concept, shared identity, social interaction

1 | INTRODUCTION

Through others we become ourselves. Vygotsky (1987)

Many people keep a personal journal. This solitary, introspective act of writing down private thoughts is often assumed to help individuals come to know themselves better. But is this really the most effective way of getting to know the self? Early research with high school and college students revealed no differences in personal identity development between those who kept a diary and those who did not (Waterman & Archer, 1979). Relatedly, many studies show that self-knowledge acquired through introspection is often inaccurate (see Wilson, 2009, for a review). Nonetheless, people over-value introspective views of themselves relative to social sources of information, a phenomenon known as the ‘introspection illusion’ (Pronin, 2009).

The present paper builds on research demonstrating that in addition to introspection, we need other people to help us develop a sense of our personal self – that is, a subjective sense of our individuality (Jetten & Postmes, 2006). Indeed, by communicating with others we may be able to develop and validate important self-views (Sedikides, 1993; Swann, 1983). Moreover, communication with others may give us a sense of identity, helping us to define where we stand in the world and in relation to other people (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). The current research compares the impact of introspection and communication on the strengthening of a personal self and specifically explores the role of developing a shared identity with others in this process.

1.1 | Sense of self

Today’s Western society increasingly focuses on the self as a determinant of well-being and personal autonomy. In this regard, the literature on self-actualization and individuation points to the importance of developing a distinctive and multifaceted self as a way to maximize well-being across the life span (Brewer, 1991; Maslow, 1962;
Sheldon & Bettencourt, 2002). People are motivated to develop a sense of self that is positive, coherent and continuous (see Sedikides et al., 2023, for a review). Moreover, a diminished sense of self is often experienced as betokening an ‘identity-crisis’ that is associated with a drastic reduction in well-being (Charmaz, 1983).

The self can be thought of as both subject – the ‘I’ that acts – and object – the ‘me’ that is perceived. These two aspects of self have been characterized in the literature as personal identity and self-concept, respectively (Schwartz et al., 2018). Through processes such as identity exploration and commitment, the ‘I’ tries out different ways of being and thinking that affect the content of the ‘me’. For example, ‘I’ might start playing sports, making ‘me’ athletic. Someone with a strong personal identity knows what they like, think, believe, feel and do (Haslam et al., 2012). Someone with a clear self-concept feels that their various preferences, beliefs, traits, actions and roles are not in conflict with one another (Campbell et al., 1996). In daily life, these aspects of self have a reciprocal relationship - a stronger personal identity leads to a clearer self-concept and vice versa (Schwartz et al., 2011). Importantly, personal self thus involves a collection and successful integration of traits, preferences and beliefs and can be informed by a multitude of social identities (Haslam et al., 2021), social roles (Stryker, 1980) and unique personal attributes.

In Western societies, the ‘true’ self is traditionally seen as the unchanging essence of a person: a self that is relatively independent of context or relationships (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For centuries, Western philosophy has emphasized inner processes such as reflection, insight and will in the formation of the self (Seigel, 2005). Scientists have increasingly criticized this individualistic approach, pointing out that many aspects of identity (such as social identities) are informed by interaction with others and by social relations (Burkitt, 1991; Stryker, 1980; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Extending these insights, we explore the idea that communication with others – which serves to facilitate the development of a shared identity with others – may also promote a sense of personal identity and self-concept clarity (Postmes & Jetten, 2006).

1.2 Social processes fostering a sense of self

Starting with the work of Mead (1913), the social psychological literature has identified a number of processes through which social interaction can foster a sense of self. For instance, research shows (a) that people add new characteristics to their personal self by perceiving themselves through the eyes of others (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Tice, 1992) and (b) that, by comparing the views of others to their own view of themselves, a person can establish the validity of their sense of self (Sedikides, 1993; Swann, 1983). We emphasize that these processes are both negotiable and dynamic: communicators actively seek consensus with others about core self-aspects. While these insights are not new, we extend them by showing that each of these processes is contingent upon that interaction leading to the development of a shared identity – that is, a sense of ‘we’-ness, characterized by feelings of social unity and shared reality (Koudenburg et al., 2017).

Our reasoning here is consistent with general theorizing which suggests that a person’s sense of social validation is strongly dependent on whether they achieve a consensually shared self-understanding through their social interaction with others (e.g., Higgins et al., 2021; Turner et al., 1987). Whereas shared identity refers to the socio-emotional sense of belonging and unity with others, social validation involves the socio-cognitive understanding that one’s thoughts, views and ideas about the self are shared by others (Swaab et al., 2007). Such a shared view of the self can be formed, but also maintained and transformed, by means of communication (Clark, 1996; Giddens, 1979; Kashima et al., 2007). Importantly, the literature on both shared reality and self-categorization suggests that the experience of social validation implicitly points to the existence of a ‘we’: those people who share relevant views (including those relating to the self; Haslam, 1997; Kashima et al., 2007; Turner, 1991). In other words, in order to feel socially validated in a particular social interaction, a person needs to experience a shared identity with the people involved in this interaction.

Yet a sense of self is not only acquired by comparing viewpoints; individuals may also obtain meaning from their role in the group and the mutual dependencies that exist between themselves and others (Bettencourt & Sheldon, 2001; Koudenburg et al., 2015; Burke & Stryker, 2016; see also Durkheim, 1893/1984). Here, the emergent relationship between other group members and oneself can give rise to characteristics that did not previously exist. The emergence of these new characteristics occurs when a relationship deepens and when social dynamics develop. Indeed, there are certain aspects of the self (e.g., being gentle, being a leader) that have little meaning outside of these social relations. Consistent with this idea, social role transitions, such as beginning or ending a romantic relationship, often change a person’s sense of self (Slotter & Emery, 2018). This suggests that the development of (at least parts of) a personal self is contingent upon the experience of a shared identity.

Research shows that a sense of we-ness can arise from top-down or bottom-up processes (Jans et al., 2011, 2012; Prentice et al., 1994). Shared identity can be inferred deductively from similarities between members (e.g., Lott & Lott, 1965; Byrne, 1961) or by distinguishing one’s own group from a relevant outgroup (Turner et al., 1987). Recent studies suggest that shared identity can also develop inductively within social interaction itself, through the act of communicating (Koudenburg et al., 2013, 2017). This is especially the case in small and interactive groups, where the individual inputs of different group members are used to construct a shared identity (Postmes et al., 2005). A shared identity can thus be activated when making salient one’s group membership, but it can also develop over the course of an interaction. It is the latter process that we focus on in the present studies. Note too that shared identities that develop over the course of an interaction do not necessarily relate to existing social categories but

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1 We do not equate personal identities with role identities described by Burke and Stryker (2016) as we depart from societally defined (and interactionally refined) prescriptions for behaviour, to include the dynamic evolution of basically any belief, preference, trait or behaviour to become meaningful within the shared reality with the other person.
can also concern shared identities that are specific to the interaction group or dyad (Postmes et al., 2005).

Combining these ideas, we theorize that, through social interaction, people develop a shared understanding about the various parties involved in the interaction, including themselves. Whereas engaging in introspection may allow a person to focus on themselves – and possibly even their relation to others – in isolation, we argue that this reflection will not necessarily result in a socially grounded, and therefore strengthened, sense of self. In fact, when it results in self-rumination, introspection may even have negative consequences for psychological health and personal self (e.g., Luycx et al., 2007; Takano & Tanno, 2009). Complementary to the suggestion that solitary reflection is the best source of personal self-understanding, we argue that social sources of understanding enable a person to collaboratively acquire knowledge about themselves and to transform self-knowledge (e.g., by incorporating new behaviours and roles into pre-existing views about the self; cf. Bem, 1967). In this way, we see a person’s knowledge of the self not as fixed, but as something that develops through social interactions (see also Burke & Reitzes, 1981). Moreover, we expect that the experience of a shared identity between interaction partners provides solid ground for the validation of self-views.

### 1.3 The present research

In three studies, we examine whether a sense of self can be fostered through social interaction by comparing the effects of introspection with those of one-way (Study 1) or two-way communication (Studies 2 and 3). Before studying actual interactions, we first test the validity of our assumptions about lay theories of self-knowledge. More specifically, we seek to establish whether participants expect to be more likely to strengthen their sense of self through introspection than through social interaction (lay hypothesis; Study 1).

Following this, we turn to the actual effects of social interaction. Here we expect that participants who engage in communication will develop a stronger sense of personal self in terms of self-concept clarity and personal identity strength than those who engage in introspection or those who are assigned to a control condition. Furthermore, we predict that the strengthening of a sense of self within social interaction is contingent upon a person’s ability to develop a shared identity within that interaction. Accordingly, we predict that a sense of self within social interaction will be strengthened via the experience of a shared identity and social validation. We, therefore, anticipate a serial indirect effect in which communication serves to clarify a person’s self-concept and strengthen their personal identity via shared identity and social validation (social validation hypothesis, Studies 1–3).

The three studies are set up to test the social validation hypothesis through three different forms of communication, that vary both in their level of presence and in the degree of a priori shared identity between conversation partners. Specifically, in Study 1 we use one-way communication, in which participants write a letter to someone important to them (low presence/high a priori shared identity). In Study 2, participants engage in a text-based chat with a stranger (medium presence/low a priori shared identity). Finally, in Study 3, participants engage in a face-to-face interaction with either a friend of a stranger (high presence/low vs. high a priori shared identity). We always contrast these conditions with an introspection condition, in which participants are asked to reflect on themselves individually. Data and materials of all three studies are available at [https://osf.io/mg2yp](https://osf.io/mg2yp).

### 2 STUDY 1

In Study 1, we compared three conditions in an experimental laboratory setting: participants either engaged in introspection (writing a diary entry), in a one-way communication (writing a letter) or were assigned to a control condition (writing about last month’s weather). To increase the face validity of the experiment, we provided participants in the letter condition with the option to post the letter during the experiment. About half of the participants in the letter condition directly posted or intended to post the letter. Based on the decision of the participants, we created two subgroups. While the self-selective nature of forming these subgroups calls for caution in drawing causal inferences, the distinction allowed us to examine a potentially interesting question: how would people who actually engaged in communication (i.e., those who posted the letter) differ from those who intended to communicate, but for some reason failed to do so (those who did not post the letter)?

First, we examined the lay hypothesis that participants would expect that diary writing would lead to a stronger sense of self than writing a letter. As a first exploration of the social validation hypothesis we compared the self-reported personal identity strength and self-concept clarity of participants in the letter-posted, letter-unposted and diary entry conditions with the control condition. We also explored whether a potential increase in the sense of self in the letter-posted condition would be mediated by an increased sense of shared identity and social validation.

### 2.1 Method

The sample consisted of 78 Australian undergraduate students ($M_{age} = 19.82$, $SD = 4.01$, 79.5% female, 20.5% male). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (introspection vs. one-way communication vs. control). Note that because we post hoc separated the letter condition into two naturally occurring groups, the study only yielded power to detect differences between groups with a reasonably large effect size ($f = .38$, with a power of 80%).

Procedure. After providing informed consent, participants were instructed to write either a page in a diary (introspection condition) or a letter to a member of a group that was important to them, for instance, a member of their family, sports team or friendship group (one-way communication condition) or to write about the weather (control condition). In the introspection and communication condi-
tions, participants were instructed to focus their writing on ‘finding themselves’ – for instance, by describing things they liked or thought were important in life or their expectations or wishes for the future. To strengthen the manipulation, participants in the letter condition were given a prepaid envelope that they could post after the experiment. In addition, participants were asked to write down the initials of the person to whom they would send the letter and the group to which this person belonged. In the diary condition, participants were informed that they could take what they had written home after the experiment. In the control condition, participants were asked to describe the weather in the previous month and their expectations for the next month’s weather. In all conditions, it was emphasized that what participants wrote would be entirely confidential and would remain concealed from the researchers. After the writing task, participants completed a questionnaire assessing their sense of shared identity with the recipient of the letter. To test whether the lower levels of self-concept clarity and personal identity strength could be explained by the experience of a shared identity and social validation, we estimated the indirect effects. For this purpose we defined three weighted contrasts: ψ1 distinguished between the control and the experimental conditions [control (0); diary (0); letter-posted (.50); letter-unposted (.33); letter-unposted (−.50)] and ψ2 distinguished between the diary and the letter condition [control (0); diary (−.50); letter-posted (.50); letter-unposted (.50)] and ψ3 distinguished between the participants who (intended to) post the letter and those who did not [control (0); diary (0); letter-posted (50); letter-unposted (−.50)]. Two bootstrapping analyses were performed to probe the serial indirect effects of ψ3 on self-concept clarity [or personal identity strength] via shared identity and through social validation (Hayes, 2013; process, Model 6). ψ1 and ψ2 were added as covariates in the model.

2.2 Results

Participants in the diary and the letter condition reported writing an equal number of sentences (Mdiary = 14.48, SDdiary = 7.07, Mletter = 14.64, SDLetter = 5.45), but more than those in the control condition (M = 8.85, SD = 3.75). Of the 27 participants in the letter condition, four posted the letter in the mailbox provided in the lab, five participants reported that they intended to give it to the receiver directly, five participants reported that they had not yet decided whether they would post the letter, 11 participants reported that they would not post the letter and two participants said that they had written the letter to a member of a group that is important to you (7). We expected that responses on this measure would be especially interesting in the control condition, where they would provide insight into the nature of lay beliefs about this issue in general.

Analytic strategy. We conducted analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to test for between-group differences, followed by pairwise comparisons to examine whether participants in each of the three experimental groups (letter-posted, letter-unposted, diary entry) differed from the control condition. Inter-variable correlations and condition means for the key dependent variables are displayed in Table 1.

It is possible that participants who did not post the letter did not benefit from writing the letter because they did not experience a shared identity with the recipient of the letter. To test whether the lower levels of self-concept clarity and personal identity strength could be explained by the experience of a shared identity and social validation, we estimated the indirect effects. For this purpose we defined three weighted contrasts: ψ1 distinguished between the control and the experimental conditions [control (0); diary (0); letter-posted (.50); letter-unposted (.33); letter-unposted (−.50)] and ψ2 distinguished between the diary and the letter condition [control (0); diary (−.50); letter-posted (.50); letter-unposted (.50)] and ψ3 distinguished between the participants who (intended to) post the letter and those who did not [control (0); diary (0); letter-posted (50); letter-unposted (−.50)]. Two bootstrapping analyses were performed to probe the serial indirect effects of ψ3 on self-concept clarity [or personal identity strength] via shared identity and through social validation (Hayes, 2013; process, Model 6). ψ1 and ψ2 were added as covariates in the model.

2 In Studies 1 and 3, we also measured outcomes that were less directly related to our hypotheses, such as loneliness, social support, personal distinctiveness, emotions, satisfaction with life and self-efficacy. In the interests of conciseness, the present analysis focuses on the more proximal outcomes.
either themselves or to 'no one in particular.' The participants were divided into two groups, those who posted the letter or indicated that they might (n = 14), and those who did not intend to post the letter (n = 13). Most participants indicated that they wrote the letter either to a member of a friendship group (n = 6) or to a family member (n = 17).

Lay beliefs. First, we examined participants’ lay beliefs about what would be the best way to find themselves, by testing whether the mean score on the bipolar scale (diary [1] vs. letter [7]) deviated significantly from the midpoint (4). Supporting the lay hypothesis, results showed that across conditions, participants expected writing a diary entry to be a better way of finding themselves than writing a letter (M = 3.22, SD = 2.03, t(76) = 3.25, p < .002, 95% CI [2.76, 3.68], which does not include the midpoint (4). This effect was most pronounced in the control condition (M = 2.65, SD = 1.92), but means in both other conditions also suggested a slight preference for the diary method as a way of finding oneself (M_diyary = 3.60, SD_diyary = 2.00, M_letter = 3.50, SD_letter = 2.11).

Disclosure. Writing a letter or diary entry led to increased levels of disclosure compared to the control condition (M = 3.38, SD = 1.63), contrast estimate = 1.87, 95% CI[1.20, 2.53], p < .001. However, the amount of disclosure did not vary as a function of whether participants wrote a letter (M = 5.42, SD = 1.26) or a diary entry (M = 5.08, SD = 1.15), contrast estimate = 0.34, 95% CI[−0.43, 1.11], ns.

Sense of self. The ANOVAs revealed significant between-condition differences for personal identity strength, F(3,74) = 3.08, p = .03, η² = .11 and marginally significant differences for self-concept clarity, F(3,74) = 2.57, p = .06, η² = .09. In line with the social validation hypothesis, pairwise comparisons with the control condition revealed that only participants who intended to post or did actually post the letter experienced higher levels of personal identity strength (M_diff = 0.62, SE = 0.29, p = .04, d = .75, a large effect; Cohen, 1992). There was no difference in the reported personal identity strength between participants in the control condition and participants who did not intend to post the letter (M_diff = 0.36, SE = 0.30, p = .23) or who wrote a diary entry (M_diff = 0.10, SE = 0.25, p = .68). However, those in the unposted condition had lower self-concept clarity than those in the control condition (M_diff = −1.09, SE = 0.51, p = .04, d = .73, a large effect). Participants in the letter-posted group did not significantly differ from those in the control condition on self-concept clarity (M_diff = 0.40, SE = 0.50, p = .42, d = .26) nor did those who wrote a diary entry (M_diff = −0.43, SE = 0.42, p = .31).

Process variables. Significant between-condition differences were found for social validation, F(3,74) = 3.31, p = .02, η² = .12, and shared identity, F(3,74) = 3.33, p = .02, η² = .12. Pairwise comparisons of each group with the control condition revealed that only participants in the letter-posted group experienced higher levels of social validation (M_diff = 0.97, SE = 0.38, p = .01, d = .96, i.e., large effect) and marginally higher shared identity (M_diff = .92, SE = .52, p = .08, d = .63, a medium to large effect). The sense of social validation among participants who did not intend to post the letter (M_diff = −0.27, SE = 0.38, p = .49) or wrote a diary entry (M_diff = 0.37, SE = 0.31, p = .25) was no different from that of participants in the control condition. However, a marginally significant effect indicated that participants in the unposted group may have experienced lower levels of shared identity than those in the control condition (M_diff = −1.00, SE = 0.54, p = .07, d = .74, a large effect). In the diary condition, shared identity was not different from control (M_diff = −0.07, SE = 0.44, p = .87).

Mediation analyses. In line with the social validation hypothesis, bootstrapping analyses revealed reliable serial indirect effects of posting (vs. not posting) the letter via shared identity and social validation on self-concept clarity, β = .20, bootstrapped 95% CI [0.07, 0.45] and personal identity strength, β = .16, bootstrapped 95% CI [0.03, 0.44] (see Figure 1).

2.3 Discussion

The results of Study 1 provide partial support for the social validation hypothesis, that writing a letter is likely to be beneficial for personal identity strength relative to a neutral control condition (writing about the weather), but only when this letter is (or might be) actually posted. Interestingly, self-concept clarity was not improved by writing a letter (compared to control) and was lower among participants who wrote a letter to someone but decided not to post it. This raises the question of how participants who did not post the letter differ from those who did (intend to) post the letter. We predicted that those who kept the letter to themselves may not have had a shared understanding with their addressees and, consistent with this suggestion, participants (intending to) post the letter experienced higher levels of shared identity and social validation than those who did not post the letter.

Moreover, mediation analyses showed that the experience of a shared identity and social validation indirectly predicted enhanced self-concept clarity and personal identity strength among the participants who (intended to) post the letter relative to those who did not intend to post the letter. It is likely that the absence of (or failure to develop) a shared identity with their addressees explains why non-posters’ sense of self did not benefit from writing the letter, and why they preferred to keep the letter and their personal information to themselves. We note, however, that caution should be taken when explaining the direction of these effects. For instance, keeping the letter to themselves also removed an opportunity for social validation that sending the letter would have provided.

Interestingly, the finding that writing and posting a letter to a close other strengthens a sense of self runs counter to people’s beliefs about what would be the best possible strategy for finding oneself. Indeed, confirming the lay hypothesis, when participants were asked to indicate directly what they thought would be a better way to find themselves, they expected that writing a page in their diary would be more beneficial than writing a letter to someone who was important to them. However, when comparing participants who wrote a diary entry to a control condition in which participants were asked to write about the weather, their sense of self was not improved.

3 Removing these two participants from the analyses did not change the statistical significance of any of the reported effects.
FIGURE 1  Serial mediation model in Study 1. Standardized coefficients are displayed, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. ψ1 and ψ2 are included as covariates in the analyses.

One methodological concern in this study is that participants were not randomly assigned to posted and unposted groups. Conclusions about causality, therefore, need to be drawn with caution, as we cannot be sure that sending a letter was responsible for the observed differences between conditions. In particular, it could be the case that participants who posted the letters had a stronger sense of self to start with. Nevertheless, mediations by shared identity and social validation suggest that the formation of shared identity is implicated in the development of a strong personal self.

Another limitation of Study 1 was that it concerned unidirectional communication. In line with research on the saying-is-believing effect (Echterhoff et al., 2005), this suggests that the mere act of expressing a certain belief to another party (especially when one experiences a shared identity) promotes the experience of validation. In Study 2, we take this a step further and examine actual dyadic communication in which we allow for shared identities to develop during the conversation.

3 | STUDY 2

Study 2 aimed to replicate Study 1 with five major improvements. First, to provide a more conclusive test of the social validation hypothesis, Study 2 had more power. Second, Study 2 compared the effects of dyadic interaction (in a text-based chat) to a condition in which participants reflected on themselves in solitude. Third, the text-based online format captured the content of participants' conversations and introspections, allowing us to conduct qualitative analyses of the data. Fourth, participants were randomly assigned to a social interaction or introspection condition, minimizing the role of self-selection bias between groups. A fifth important difference was that while an a priori shared social identity could be assumed between the communication partners in Study 1, dyads in Study 2 were composed of strangers. Thus, if a shared identity were to develop, this could only happen during the conversation. For power considerations, we did not include a control condition in Study 2. The hypotheses, method and analyses for Study 2 were preregistered at AsPredicted #48152 (publicly available on AsPredicted at https://aspredicted.org/3h3hf.pdf and OSF at https://osf.io/6zu5r).

3.1 | Method

Participants and design. A power analysis based on a previous sample yielded a target sample size of 398 to detect an effect of .25 at .80 power at an alpha level of .05 for the mean difference between groups.5 Participants were 467 Prolific workers from the USA. After excluding participants who did not pass the attention check (n = 9), did not have a responsive partner (n = 42) or were not paired (n = 10) according to the preregistered criteria, we arrived at a total of 406 participants (Mage = 35.52, SDage = 12.05, 202 female, 197 male, five non-binary, two prefer not to reveal gender, with ethnicity: 294 White, 57 Asian, 41 Hispanic/Latino, 25 mixed-race, seven other). Participants were assigned to one of two conditions: social interaction versus introspection. In the social interaction condition, they were paired with another participant who was taking part at the same time.

Procedure. Participants were invited to take part in a study about ‘the self’ in which they were asked to reflect upon their responses to three personal questions (What is important in your life?; What are you satisfied with?; What are your wishes for the future?) in one of two ways: individually, by writing in a text box about their responses (introspection condition), or together with another participant, in a text-based chat conversation (social interaction condition).

After reading the general instructions, participants in the social interaction condition were entered into a chat box (provided by Chatplat.com). Once they were paired with the next available participant, they had 5 min to reflect on themselves, together with the other participant. They were given the three questions to help them think about themselves. Both participants received the same instructions.

When assigned to the introspection condition, participants were instructed to reflect on their answers to the personal questions for 5 min. They were provided with a blank open-ended text box allowing them to write down any thoughts. To avoid any communication goals

4 Chronologically, Study 2 was conducted after Study 3.

5 We did not correct for interdependency of the data between dyads in the power analyses because we expected ICCs to be rather low. Indeed, the ICC for shared identity was 0.08, for social validation 0.00, for identity strength 0.00, for self-concept clarity .17.
in their writing, they were informed that the writing did not need to be understandable to anyone but themselves.

**Measures.** After the conversation, we exploratively assessed participants’ experience of flow during the task using three items (e.g., ‘How smooth/engaging/effortful was the [introspection/conversation] task?’) as well as their positive and negative feelings during the task using two separate items, on a scale ranging from 1 ‘Not at all’ to 7 ‘Very much’.

We then administered the same validated scales as in Study 1 to assess our predicted mediators of shared identity (α = .98) and social validation (α = .95) then our primary dependent variables of personal identity strength (α = .86) and self-concept clarity (α = .92).

Lastly, we asked whether participants understood the instructions, how much they revealed about themselves during the task (from 1 ‘Not at all’ to 7 ‘Very much’), how many other people were present with them while completing the study, and whether they had talked to anyone while completing the experiment. In the social interaction condition, we further asked whether they were paired with another participant (with an option to indicate that their partner was not responsive) and how connected they felt to their partner (from 1 ‘Not at all’ to 7 ‘Very much’).

**Analytic strategy.** In the first part of our pre-registered analysis, we compared the introspection and social interaction conditions on all four primary variables separately. We used mixed model analyses with individuals (Level 1) nested in dyads (Level 2) to examine the effects of the social interaction on the dependent variables. Means for the introspection and social interaction conditions and between variable correlations are displayed in Table 2.

In the second part of our pre-registered analysis, we tested the hypothesized social validation process, by probing the indirect effects of social interaction via shared identity through social validation on self-concept clarity [or personal identity strength], using guidelines for serial mediation analysis (Hayes, 2013; Process, Model 6, 5000 bootstrapped samples).

### 3.2 | Results

**Overall effects.** As expected, a significant condition effect indicated that participants in the social interaction condition experienced a stronger shared identity than those in the introspection condition, \( \gamma = .39 \) (.17), \( t(211) = 2.26, p = .025, d = .24.6 \) We did not find, however, that participants in the social interaction condition (vs. introspection condition) experienced an overall greater sense of social validation, \( \gamma = -.06(.12), t(404) = .491, p = .624, d = .05 \). Furthermore, the effect of condition was not significant for either personal identity strength, \( \gamma = -.17 (.10), t(212) = 1.65, p = .100, d = .17 \) or self-concept clarity, \( \gamma = -.03 (.16), t(210) = 0.18, p = .860, d = .02 \).

**Indirect effects.** While we observed no evidence for direct effects of interaction on the sense of self, we find that, in line with the social validation hypothesis, reliable indirect effects were found on self-concept clarity, \( \beta = .063 \), bootstrapped 95% CI [0.008, 0.128] and personal identity strength, \( \beta = .060 \), bootstrapped 95% CI [0.009, 0.117] (see Figure 2).

**Exploratory analyses.** To understand why the overall condition effects may have not appeared, we took a closer look at the quality of social interactions within this study. A significant condition effect indicated that, compared to the introspection task, participants experienced the conversation task as less smooth \( (M_{\text{intr}} = 5.62 \) vs. \( M_{\text{conv}} = 5.16 \), \( \gamma = .44 (.11), t(205) = 2.92, p = .004 \), and less engaging \( (M_{\text{intr}} = 5.72 \) vs. \( M_{\text{conv}} = 5.02 \), \( \gamma = .70 (.15), t(213) = 4.57, p < .001 \). Participants in the social interaction condition also disclosed less personal information than those engaging in introspection \( (M_{\text{intr}} = 5.24 \) vs. \( M_{\text{conv}} = 4.52 \), \( \gamma = .71 (.13), t(404) = 5.49, p < .001 \).

To conceptually clarify the meaning of our shared identity measure, we correlated this with a single item assessing the extent to which participants felt connected to their chat partner in the social interaction condition. The correlation was \( r = .70 \), suggesting that experiencing shared identity aligns closely with the sense of social unity that participants experienced with their partner.

**Qualitative analyses.** To get a sense of what participants wrote and chatted about, we explored the content of participants’ introspections and conversations using word co-occurrence networks and concept maps (see online Appendix for a more detailed description of these analyses and visualizations). The co-occurrence networks showed that the most frequent and most connected words in both conditions were ‘family’, ‘friends’ and ‘good’, indicating that participants...
reflected on similar content in both conditions (see Figures S1 and S2). Notably, this similar content focused on social relationships, suggesting that the social validation process is unlikely to be the result of the social interaction context selectively activating social-identity-related content.

The text analyses also showed evidence of assent language specific to the social interaction condition that was not apparent in the introspection condition. The theme ‘sure’ was one of the largest and most central themes in the concept map for the social interaction condition (see Figure S4), but no equivalent was found in the introspection condition (see Figure S3). Similarly, the words ‘agree,’ ‘yes’ and ‘yeah’ appear in the social interaction co-occurrence network but not the introspection network (see Figures S1 and S2). Consistent with the social validation hypothesis, these observations suggest that reflecting with another person provides opportunities for agreement that are not afforded by reflecting on one’s own. Although these analyses are descriptive at best, assent language might be one linguistic mechanism by which people form shared identity and validate one another’s self-views during social interactions.

### 3.3 Discussion

Study 2 provides partial support for the social validation hypothesis. First, we did not find support for an overall stronger personal identity or clearer self-concept after participants had a conversation compared to when they were engaged in introspection. This could be interpreted as both introspection and interaction having no effect on the sense of self, we consider it more likely that both affect the sense of self, but via different processes. In line with this idea, we found evidence for an indirect effect of social interaction (vs. introspection) through development of a shared identity and social validation, on both self-concept clarity and personal identity strength. Our findings suggest that, while other processes might limit the development of a sense of self in text-based chat conversations, the results are consistent with the hypothesized social validation process. That is, participants experienced a stronger sense of shared identity after conversation compared to introspection, which predicted a feeling of social validation, and in turn, a sense of self in terms of personal identity strength and self-concept clarity.

Explorative analyses on the quality of conversations in this study provided some insight into why having a chat-based conversation with a stranger about personal topics did not help strengthen one’s sense of self. Participants felt the social interaction task did not progress smoothly, that it was not all that engaging (less so than in the introspection condition), and indicated that they disclosed much less about themselves than in the introspection task. This may have complicated the formation of a shared identity with their chat partner (Koudenburg et al., 2013, 2017).

Indeed, although the conversations in this study may have fostered some sense of shared identity compared to introspection, their social identity was less strong than, for instance, among participants posting a letter in Study 1. Arguably, then, the conversation context (online and text-based), the time limit (5 min) and the anonymity of the partner may not have provided a conversation climate that encouraged participants to freely explore and express themselves.

### 4 Study 3

Study 3 aimed to replicate findings of Studies 1 and 2 in a setting in which the development of a shared identity was more likely. To this end, we improved the quality of conversation, by having participants engage in a face-to-face interaction and by giving them slightly more time to complete the task. Importantly, Study 3 made use of a repeated-measures design to be able to test whether actual changes in the experience of shared identity and sense of self could be attributed to the social interaction. This design allowed for a more conclusive test of the social validation hypothesis because we could test whether changes in a sense of self would be mediated by the experience of shared identity and social validation.

A second aim of Study 3 was to examine potential differences between the development of a sense of self after interacting with a friend rather than with a stranger. In Study 1, the majority of participants indicated that they had written their letter to a friend or family member. Accordingly, it could be the case that close connections are especially likely to lead to a strong sense of self because the social identity that people share with their close others provides a basis for the social validation of self-views. In a conversation with a stranger, on the other hand, there may be fewer opportunities to develop or uncover...
a shared identity, and therefore the self is less likely to be validated. Indeed, in Study 2, where people only interacted with strangers, we observed no direct impact on the sense of self. The design of Study 3 allowed us to examine whether having a priori shared identity would have an impact on the strengthening of a sense of self.

4.1 Method

Participants and design. Participants were 179 undergraduate students in the Netherlands (M_age = 20.52, SD_age = 1.82, 128 females, 51 males). The study had a 3 (Partner: friend vs. stranger vs. alone/introspection) × 2 (Phase: prospective vs. actual conversation) design with repeated measures on the second factor. Personal identity strength, self-concept clarity, shared identity and social validation were measured after participants prepared for a conversation (Phase 1) and then again after they had engaged in the conversation (Phase 2). The sample size afforded 89% power to detect medium-to-large differences between conditions (d = .65).7

Procedure. Participants were invited to come to the laboratory together with a friend. Two friend-pairs were invited for each timeslot. Upon arrival, all participants in the same timeslot were randomly assigned to one of the three between-subject conditions. Participants were asked to reflect on themselves in one of three ways: individually (introspection condition), in a conversation with their friend (friend condition) or in a conversation with someone from another friend-couple (stranger condition). This procedure allowed us to minimize between-condition differences (e.g., based on self-selection) as people in all conditions had to come with a friend, and assignment to conditions was random.

In Phase 1 of the experiment, participants were given 5 min to individually answer the same three personal questions from Study 2 (e.g., What is most important in your life?). They were instructed that they would first answer these questions with reference to themselves and to prepare – depending on the condition – to later discuss their answers with their friend, a stranger or to reflect on their answers individually.

In Phase 2 of the experiment, participants in the friend and stranger condition were left with their conversation partners in a room where they had 8 min to discuss their answers to these questions. The conversations were recorded with a digital recorder. When assigned to the introspection (control) condition, participants were instructed to reflect on their answers to the personal questions for 8 min allowing them to add more ideas.

Measures. After both Phase 1 and Phase 2, we administered the same validated scales as in Studies 1 and 2 to assess self-concept clarity (ψ_phase1 = .87, ψ_phase2 = .89), personal identity strength (α_phase1 = .81, α_phase2 = .85), shared identity (α_phase1 = .85, α_phase2 = .93) and social validation (α_phase1 = .81, α_phase2 = .85).

Analytic strategy. We used hierarchical linear modelling to examine the effects of the (expected) social interaction on the dependent variables. This multilevel model takes into account the interdependent structure of the data by nesting phases (Level 1) within individuals (Level 2), which are nested within dyads (Level 3). We defined a Helmert contrast to test our hypotheses. To test the social validation hypothesis, ψ1 compared the introspection condition with the two expected social interaction conditions (friend and stranger). To distinguish between the different types of conversation partners, ψ2 compared the friend condition with the stranger-condition.

Our preliminary analyses first examined between-condition differences at Phase 1 (anticipated interaction). Then, we report the main effects of the condition and the phase of the experiment. Finally, we test the social validation hypothesis by examining the between-condition differences in changes from Phase 1 to Phase 2.

As in Study 2, we tested the social validation process by probing the indirect effects of social interaction (ψ1) via shared identity Phase 2, through social validation Phase 2, on self-concept clarity Phase 2 [or personal identity strength Phase 2], using guidelines for serial mediation analysis (Hayes, 2013; Process, Model 6).8 To predict changes in the outcome variable rather than absolute levels, we added self-concept clarity [or personal identity strength] as a covariate at Phase 1.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 Preliminary analyses

Three multilevel outliers (standardized multilevel residuals on self-concept clarity, social validation, shared identity > 3) were removed from the analyses. Because ψ2 revealed only a single marginal effect, with this exception we do not report results for ψ2. However, all analyses include ψ2 as a control variable. Means for the introspection (vs. anticipated engaging in introspection) did not affect any of the dependent variables.

Between-condition differences. All dependent variables were regressed onto ψ1 and ψ2. We found no effects of either of the contrasts in Phase 1, t < 1.59, p > .12. Thus, anticipating a social interaction with a friend or stranger (vs. anticipating engaging in introspection) did not affect any of the dependent variables.

Change across the different phases of the experiment. A significant main effect of phase indicated that participants reported a clearer self-
FIGURE 3  Means for the introspection condition and the social interaction conditions per phase of Study 3.

TABLE 3  Study 3. Correlations in Phase 1 are displayed above the diagonal, correlations in Phase 2 are displayed below the diagonal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Self-concept clarity</th>
<th>Personal identity strength</th>
<th>Shared identity</th>
<th>Social validation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-concept clarity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.28**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal identity strength</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td></td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.55**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared identity</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social validation</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>.61**</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .01, **p < .05.

In line with the social validation hypothesis, a marginally significant ψ1 by phase interaction suggested that participants in the social interaction conditions might have experienced a larger increase in personal identity strength than those in the introspection condition, γ = .16 (09), t(85) = 1.87, p = .06, d = .47. Clearer effects were obtained regarding the process: we found that participants in the social interaction conditions (vs. the introspection condition) also experienced a greater increase in both (a) experienced shared identity, γ = .30 (14), t(288) = 2.23, p = .03, d = .57 and (b) feelings of social validation, γ = .32 (12), t(288) = 2.73, p < .01, d = .70 (medium to large effects). We

9 Effect sizes (d) are calculated using the recommendations of Tymms et al. (1997) for multilevel models.
found no evidence of a $\psi_1$ by phase interaction on self-concept clarity, $t < 1$, ns.

Indirect effects. In line with the social validation hypothesis, reliable indirect effects predicted changes in self-concept clarity, $\beta = .06$, bootstrapped 95% CI [0.02, 0.13], and personal identity strength, $\beta = .06$, bootstrapped 95% CI [0.02, 0.13] (see Figure 4).

4.3 | Discussion

Study 3 examined whether engaging in face-to-face social interaction with a friend or a stranger would help participants develop their personal sense of self more so than reflecting alone and whether shared identity would play a role in this process. Little evidence was found for an overall effect of social interaction on the development of a personal self: A medium-sized, but only marginally significant effect suggested that participants who discussed personal topics with a friend or a stranger may have experienced increased personal identity strength relative to those who only thought about these personal topics in solitude. There was no effect of social interaction on self-concept clarity with results indicating that participants in all conditions developed a clearer self-concept over the course of the experiment.

Importantly, however, Study 3 replicated the social validation process found in Study 2. The indirect effects demonstrated that having a social interaction with a friend or stranger positively predicted changes in personal identity strength and self-concept clarity indirectly, through the experience of shared identity and social validation. This indirect effect is in line with the social validation hypothesis, which suggests that social interaction stimulates the strengthening of a sense of self to the extent that people are able to ground their self-views in a socially shared reality. It is not that social interaction is necessarily more effective than introspection in solidifying a sense of self, but conversation does offer people the opportunity to form a shared identity that socially validates the self in a way that introspection does not.

In this study, we also explored whether participants would develop a stronger sense of self when they talked to friends rather than strangers. We found limited support for this hypothesis – there was only marginally significant evidence that those who (expected to) interact with friends might have clearer self-concepts than those who (expected to) interact with strangers. This difference did not become more pronounced after the interaction but was equally present when participants only prepared for the interaction. This suggests that having an a priori shared identity with someone may influence one’s self-concept clarity, but that this effect does not necessarily result from social interaction. For the measure of personal identity strength, social validation, or shared identity, no differences between (expectations of) interaction with friends or strangers were found.

As an explanation for the lack of differences between the two types of conversation partners (friend vs. stranger), it is possible that participants in the stranger condition may also have experienced a shared identity derived from their shared category membership as undergraduate students at the same university. Another possibility is that – regardless of condition – participants developed a shared identity over the course of the interaction (e.g., see Koudenburg et al., 2013, 2017) and, therefore, experienced similar benefits for their personal self. Importantly, both these explanations suggest that the development of shared identity played a role in the effects of communication on the sense of self. Supporting this suggestion, mediation analysis indeed revealed an indirect effect via the experience of a shared identity and social validation predicting changes in both self-concept clarity and personal identity strength.

5 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Although lay theorizing may lead us to turn inwards when searching for our ‘true’ selves, the present paper identifies a process for effectively deriving a sense of self by turning to others. In Studies 1 and 3, we provide suggestive evidence that participants who communicated to others – via a letter or in a face-to-face conversation – increased their personal identity strength and self-concept clarity, compared to those who engaged in introspection, for example, by writing a diary entry or reflecting on their own. In text-based chat conversations, the strengthening of a personal identity is not directly related to communication but indirectly predicted through the development of a shared identity which allows for the validation of self-views. Importantly, all three studies support the social validation hypothesis, which proposes that social interaction stimulates the strengthening of a sense of self to...
the extent that people are able to ground their self-views in a socially shared reality. These findings are somewhat paradoxical in the face of lay theorizing about introspection and diary writing and, as we suggest below, can also be contrasted with some of the classical ideas found in the literature on the social psychology of groups (e.g., Asch, 1956; Le Bon, 1895; Zimbardo, 1969).

To start with views on introspection, Study 1 confirmed that many people believe that diary writing would lead them to acquire a stronger and better sense of self than writing a letter to someone important to them (lay hypothesis). However, this study also provided initial evidence that when people were actually asked to write a diary entry, they ended up with lower self-concept clarity and a weaker sense of personal identity than when they wrote a letter to someone important to them (supporting the social validation hypothesis). Importantly, in this study, support for our hypothesis was contingent upon participants actually sending the letter – or at least intending to send it – to the addressed person. For those who did not send the letter, self-concept clarity was decreased in comparison to a control condition. This could indicate that participants’ sense of self only benefited from writing the letter when they had the sense that the addressed person could relate to their feelings, by virtue of their experiencing a shared understanding or a shared identity with this other person. In line with this theorizing, mediation analyses demonstrated that a strengthened sense of self emerged through the experience of a shared identity and feelings of social validation (for those who did not post or did not intend to post the letter these experiences were not higher than in a neutral control condition). Thus, in contrast to lay beliefs, reaching out to others appeared more beneficial for developing a sense of self than engaging in introspection. Note, however, that the self-selective nature of the distinction between participants who posted and did not post the letter, combined with the relatively small sample size, calls for caution in drawing strong inferences from Study 1.

In Study 2, participants were asked to reflect on themselves with strangers via text-based chat, which, on average, did not result in an increased sense of self compared to when they reflected on their own. Participants who had a conversation experienced the conversation as less smooth and engaging than those who engaged in introspection, and they also reported that they revealed less of themselves. This points to a potential limitation of the effect; conversations that do not provide the preconditions for the development of a shared identity may not benefit the strengthening of a personal self in a way that we reported in Studies 1 and 3, due to limited room or motivation to discover similarities between interactants (e.g., because they are strangers to one another) or due to disruptions in conversational flow (see, e.g., Koudenburg et al., 2017).10 Indeed, the mean levels of shared identity after posting a letter in Study 1, and after having a conversation in Study 3 were substantially higher than those after the text-based conversations in Study 2, suggesting that the online environment in Study 2 did not allow for the optimal development of a shared identity. Importantly, however, even in these arguably leaner social environments, we still find support for the hypothesized social validation process: when shared identity does develop within these conversations, it allows for the validation of self-views and a subsequently stronger, clearer sense of self.

The strongest test of this social validation process was provided by Study 3, which used a pre–post-test design in which participants engaged in actual interaction or introspection. While we found only marginally statistically significant evidence for a difference in personal identity strength between the two conditions, the process explaining the development of personal identity was different. Compared to engaging in introspection, communicating – with a friend or stranger alike – increased people’s shared identity, which fostered a sense of social validation, which in turn predicted changes in personal identity strength and self-concept clarity.

Interestingly, while the average experienced level of shared identity differed vastly across the broad variety of settings examined in the present paper, there is a remarkable similarity in the social process that fostered the development of self. Whether people wrote a letter to a group or family member, engaged in text-based chat with a stranger, or had a conversation with a friend or stranger, the extent to which these contexts allowed them to experience a shared identity with their partner predicted their experience of personal self.

On the one hand, these findings may be perceived as somewhat paradoxical in light of classic social psychological theorizing on conformity pressure and deindividuation (Asch, 1956; Le Bon, 1895; Zimbardo, 1969). In these literature, social influence is typically seen as costly when it comes to protecting individual freedom and personal identities (e.g., Codol, 1975). In line with these ideas, scholars have also defined the relation between the social and the personal as a zero-sum trade-off, in which one needs to find a balance between these two inputs to achieve a positive sense of identity (Brewer, 1991). Indeed, self-categorization theory posits that people come to see themselves in terms of more social or more personal identities, depending on the level of comparison that is relevant (integroup vs. interpersonal; Turner et al., 1987).

The results from the current research, however, support a different view of group dynamics in which social influence and individuality are seen to be mutually reinforcing. Indeed, recent insights from the literature on small group processes suggest that sociality does not necessarily come at the expense of individuality, but that these processes may in fact go hand in hand. In particular, it has been shown that in small and interactive groups, the distinctness of individual inputs may be especially valuable for group solidarity and group functioning (Jans et al., 2011; Koudenburg et al., 2015; see also Hornsey & Jetten, 2016).

Extending this logic, the present paper suggests not only that groups can benefit from individuality but also that individuals may profit from experiencing a sense of shared identity with others. In this way, our findings position social interactions as a platform for self-development and personal autonomy (see also Koudenburg et al., 2017).

10 Based on self-categorization theory, one could argue that an interaction with someone who holds an outgroup identity (e.g., a racist) might similarly increase the salience of one’s own social identity (e.g., endorsing strong egalitarian values). While this may be true in general, we note that this is unlikely to cause the effects in the conversations in our studies, because our effects were mediated by the experience of a shared identity, and the content analysis of the conversations revealed a high frequency of the words “yes” and “agree.”
5.1 | Processes strengthening the sense of self

Taken together, the above three studies demonstrate that the process of developing and validating self-views through social interaction works to strengthen people’s personal identity and to clarify their self-concept. This supports our claim that the process of creating a sense of personal self is not something we can (and need to) do entirely on our own but rather something we do in collaboration with other people. Indeed, benefits for people’s sense of personal self resulted from the experience that their self-views were grounded in a shared identity. It appears that by communicating with another person about themselves, people have the opportunity to construct, negotiate and validate a sense of personal self that they feel is shared and accepted by others. In line with this social validation hypothesis, our results show that to the extent that people are able to ground their self-views in a shared identity, they experience a sense of social validation that predicts a stronger sense of self.

Important inter-related frameworks for understanding the role that others play in the development of self have previously been provided by self-verification and self-enhancement theories (e.g., Sedikides, 1993; Swann, 1983). Supporting these, an extensive body of literature suggests that people try to maintain (through verification) or improve (through enhancement) their self-views by selectively incorporating information from others. In this theorizing, individuals are viewed as the primary agents deciding which information to seek out and incorporate into their self-concept. In the present research, however, we sought to integrate this perspective with a closer consideration of the social dynamics involved in communication about the self. Here our findings support the idea that the personal self is socially negotiated and constructed through social validation, rather than merely an individual-level cognitive representation that is updated based on the sensibilities of the solitary individual. Rather than seeing other people as a static source for the validation of self-information, we see a pivotal role for social dynamics in personal identity development. More particularly, it is critical that people experience a sense of we-ness, or shared identity, in their social interactions in order for others to validate individuals’ self-views and thereby contribute to their development of personal self.

The current paper focuses on the social processes underlying people’s sense of self, and we regarded the introspection condition mainly as a ‘control’ condition, in which personal reflections were not socially grounded. While our conclusions, therefore, (should) focus on the social processes, we can share some observations about the consequences of introspection. The first observation is that results are very mixed. In Study 1, introspection had no positive effects compared to a control condition in which participants were asked to write about the weather (if anything, the sense of self was lower in the introspection condition). In Study 3, by contrast, we find an improved sense of personal self over time across both the introspection and interaction conditions. In Study 2, where we similarly saw no difference in the overall sense of self between the interaction and introspection condition, we ran a preliminary qualitative analysis of the conversation text (see the Appendix). This analysis found that the content was highly social in both conditions, with ‘family’ being a top word and a top theme for both, suggesting that people reflect on their relations with others even in the absence of others.

Theoretically, then, both social interaction and introspection likely work together to promote a strong sense of self. In daily life, people can reflect individually on their social interactions and extract meaning from those interactions, including their implications for the self. Conversely, introspection can also prompt interaction, for instance, when someone reflects on a particular challenge and seeks the consult of friends and family to validate their decision-making (Berzonsky, 2011). These examples suggest a reciprocal relationship between introspection and interaction that we did not test here. Future research could focus on how interaction and introspection may work in tandem to promote a sense of personal self and under what conditions a sense of self may be negatively affected by introspection and/or interaction.

5.2 | Conclusion

In three studies, we show that the strengthening of a sense of self is ultimately a social process. In Studies 1 and 3, we provide suggestive evidence that participants who communicated to others increased their personal self compared to those who engaged in introspection or wrote a diary entry. This accords with Vygotsky’s (1987) observation that it is only through our interactions with other people that we ‘become’ our individual selves. Beyond this, though, we see that it is not ‘any old’ people or ‘any old’ interactions that serve this function. Rather, all three studies show that our social interactions need to afford opportunities to experience a shared identity in order for them to contribute to the cultivation of our personal self. In these terms, the experience of ‘me’ is predicated not just on engagement with others but also on this allowing for an emergent sense of ‘us’.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of the three studies reported in this paper are openly available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at https://osf.io/mg2yp/

ETHICS STATEMENT

Study 1 has been cleared in accordance with the ethical review process of the University of Queensland (13-PSYC-PhD-25-TS). Study 2 and 3 were cleared by the ethics committee of psychology of the University of Groningen (13106-N, PSY-1920-S-0493). Informed consent was provided by all participants participating in these studies.

ORCID

Namkje Koudenburg https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0725-9683
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